A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLES AND PRACTICES OF ACADEMIC ADVISING IN FACILITATING STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF GENERAL EDUCATION

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Dr. Sara Ewell, Advisor

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the roles and practices of academic advising in general education through the lens of the academic advising practitioners. General education in this study was defined as the degree component that is shared by all students, regardless of their majors pursued, in an undergraduate program. Participants in this study were all academic advising practitioners who provided students with academic advising and guidance on general education requirements. This study captured the voices and explored the perspectives of the advising practitioners regarding their role in helping students understand general education through individual interviews. This study uncovered three key findings: 1) academic advisors serve in multiple and robust roles in general education advising; 2) academic advisors face challenges that preclude them from conducting in-depth and academically-centered advising discussions; and 3) general education-focused advising professional development is needed to help advisors engage students in more intentional advising conversations. The rich, descriptive data collected from interviewing with academic advising practitioners provided insights into the roles, challenges, and opportunities of academic advising in facilitating students’ understanding of general education.

Keywords: academic advising, general education, learning-centered advising
Dedication

For my parents, family, and friends, in Hong Kong and the US, who provide me with unconditional love and support throughout this journey and beyond.

In loving memory of my Gong-Gong (grandpa), Uncle Simon, and Uncle Kuen.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Academic advising plays a vital role in the efforts of supporting student success in American colleges and universities (Gordon, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993); it serves an indispensable function in improving student persistence and facilitating timely degree completion (AASC&U, 2005; Braxton et al., 2014; Crockett, 1978; Drake, 2011; Kramer 2007; Habley et al., 2012; Nutt, 2000). Higher education leaders are drawing more attention to academic advising, in recognition of the powerful role that academic advising plays in improving retention and graduation rates, as well as supporting student learning (Darling, 2015). Academic advising in colleges and universities has been traditionally viewed as a function of disseminating curricular and institutional information, as well as assisting students with course registration (Crookston, 1994; Cohen et al., 2014; Grites, 1979; Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Habley & Bloom, 2007; Kramer, 2007; Lowenstein, 1999, 2005; Smith & Allen, 2006). However, academic advisors are urged to see themselves as teachers (Campbell & Nutt, 2006; Crookston, 1972; Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Lowenstein, 2000, 2005; Melander, 2005; NACADA, 2006; O’Banion, 1972; Ryan, 1992; Wade & Yoder, 1995) and academics (Darling, 2015; Hagen, 2008; Hagen & Jordan, 2008), whose responsibilities should go beyond providing students with information and assisting students with course registration, to ensure appropriate course taking for timely graduation. Instead of viewing academic advisors as merely agents of degree completion, the academic advising community and higher education leaders are urged to consider academic advisors as agents of learning, whose practices should aim at enhancing and supporting student learning (Winham, 2015). Lowenstein (1999, 2005, 2013, 2015) advocated advisors to help students develop a logical understanding of their curriculum, construct meanings and connections among the courses, and create a more cohesive learning experience.
One of the key responsibilities of professional academic advisors is to provide undergraduate students with guidance on their course taking within their general education curriculum (Tuttle, 2000). Given their unique role in providing students with academic guidance, academic advisors could play a central and influential role in helping students make sense and meaning of their general education (Darling, 2015; Egan, 2015; Takahashi, 1982; Yoduf, 2003).

Statement of Problem

General education is a distinctive feature in the American undergraduate curriculum and college students’ experience (AAC&U, 2015; Boyer, 1988; Hachtmann, 2012). Regardless of the majors pursued, general education is the portion of the undergraduate degree and experience that is shared by all students within an institution of higher learning (Leskes & Wright, 2005). General education curriculum often represents approximately thirty-percent of an undergraduate degree (Brint, Proctor, Lattuca & Stark, 2014; Murphy, Turk-Biacakci, & Hanneman, 2009; White & Cohen, 2004) and contributes to the students’ academic experience. Faculty and college leaders contend that students struggle with making sense of and identifying connections among their general education coursework, as well as applying knowledge and skills to other coursework (Benander & Lightner, 2005). Facilitating and promoting students’ understanding of general education has been and remains to be a challenge at many higher education institutions (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015; Lowenstein, 2015).

Students do not appear to recognize the purpose and value of general education, thus perceiving general education requirements as an unnecessary component of their undergraduate education, which they need to get “out of the way” (Boyer, 1988; Johnston, et al., 1991; Gump, 2007; Laff, 2006; Twombly, 1992; White, 2013; White & Cohen, 2004; Yarmolinsky, 1996).
Rather than embracing general education as an academic endeavor and opportunity for intellectual growth, students perceive general education as a roadblock or merely a set of courses listed on a graduation checklist (Guertin, 2015; Johnston, et al., 1991).

Students struggle to see the relationships among courses in their general education curriculum and the connectivity between general education and the other parts of their undergraduate studies (Lowenstein, 2005; Nelson Laird, Niskodé-Dossett & Kuh, 2009). Students have the tendency of placing more value on coursework in their major and seldom realize the value in taking general education coursework; consequently, students are not as likely to put the same amount of efforts they put into general education coursework, comparative to their coursework in their major (AAC&U, 2008; Twombly, 1992).

Moreover, the concern over curricular cohesiveness in undergraduate education, particularly in general education and breadth studies, is shared among college educators and students (Brint et al., 2009). Although general education has been touted as a way to expose students to a variety of academic disciplines and develop the requisite skills for upper-level coursework, this American higher education tradition has been critiqued as fragmented and incoherent (AAC, 1994), which may contribute to students’ lack of appreciation for and understanding of general education (Shoenberg, 2000). Academic advising is especially important when the curriculum appears disjointed, irrelevant, and incoherent to the students (Levine, 2000).

Kuh (1997) found it challenging to think of a more essential academic support function than academic advising, where academic advisors serve as students’ teacher, coach, mentor, and cheerleader (Kuhn, 2008). Academic advisors work with students to provide informational guidance and intellectual mentorship, and they are often the institutional representatives with
whom students work to navigate a dizzying maze of curricular options and to make informed academic decisions (Drake, 2011; Yoduf, 2003). However, students and administrators often see academic advisors as agents of degree completion (Winham, 2015), whose primary responsibility is to ensure that students select the appropriate coursework to fulfill their requirements for graduation.

Understanding the totality of the curriculum, academic advisors are uniquely positioned to help students see the big picture within the curricular maze (Reynolds, 2010) and think globally about the purpose of their educational pursuits (White & Schulenberg, 2012). Academic advisors are urged to optimize the impact of academic advising by employing learning-centered advising, an advising approach that centers on academic learning and focuses on helping students develop a logic of their education (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Lowenstein, 2005). Lowenstein (2005) maintained, “learning transpires when a student makes sense of his or her overall curriculum just as it does when a person understands an individual course, and the former is every bit as important as the latter” (p. 69). Some academic advisors, however, continue to see their role as agents of degree completion, whose primary responsibility is to disseminate curricular information and assist students with course scheduling to ensure timely graduation (Musser & Yoder, 2013).

The Association of American Colleges’ Task Group on General Education (1988) recommends the use of academic advising in addressing issues surrounding general education, suggesting that, “perhaps the most urgent reform on most campuses in improving general education involves academic advising. To have programs and courses become coherent and significant to students requires adequate advising” (p. 43). Although the task group’s report was published quite some time ago, the challenge of general education coherence remains, and so is
the challenge in engaging students in general education (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015; Lowenstein, 2015). Guertin (2015) argued that we have failed and missed an opportunity to help students find the true purpose and meaning of a college education if students are unable to thoughtfully articulate the ways in which their general education contributed to their academic goals and connected to the other parts of their overall undergraduate experience. While academic advising plays an integral role in improving retention and graduation rates, the goal of advising in helping students understand the meaning and purpose of a college education cannot be neglected and overlooked.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the roles and practices of academic advising, through the lens of academic advisors, in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate learning experience. Academic advisors in this study were full-time, professional academic advisors; their primary responsibility was to provide academic advising to students on general education or the liberal arts portion of the undergraduate degree that is shared among all students at their respective institution. General education in this study was defined as the portion of the undergraduate curriculum that is shared and completed by all undergraduate students, regardless of the field of study, at a college or university (Leskes & Wright, 2005).

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Academic advising has a great potential in helping students understand the meaning of their curriculum and the ways in which various components fit into a logical undergraduate experience. The instruction and learning in a course are the domains of the faculty; however, the facilitation of students’ understanding of the overall curriculum, and the ways in which
individual courses coalesce into a coherent whole are the domains of the academic advisors (Egan, 2015; Lowenstein, 2005; Reynold, 2010). The provision of accurate information is essential to facilitating timely degree completion; nevertheless, academic advisors could maximize their impact on students’ academic success by centering their advising dialogues on learning and guiding students in developing a deeper and logical understanding of the curriculum (Lowenstein, 2005). Through purposeful and intellectually-engaging advising interactions, advisors assist students in the development of a logic of curriculum, an intellectual process by which students learn to make sense and meaning of their curriculum and realize the interrelationships within general education and among other components of their undergraduate degree (Laff, 2006; Lowenstein, 2014, 2015; White, 2015).

While there has been an increase in discussions surrounding learning-centered advising (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Lowenstein 2005, 2015), there is paucity in the literature that explores academic advisors’ perspectives on the learning-centered advising approach and its potential in helping students construct a fuller and logical understanding of general education as a key component of their undergraduate studies. The academic advising literature has become more robust over the years, investigating academic advising and its impact on retention and student success (e.g. AASC&U, 2005; Braxton et al., 2014; Crockett, 1978; Kramer 2007; Habley et al., 2012; Nutt, 2000). However, expansion on scholarly inquiry into academic advising practices, especially through the lens of the advising practitioners, is much needed (McGillin, 2000).

The identity, nature, and practice of academic advising in higher education will become clearer and more defined as we continue to examine academic advising through scholarly inquiry (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). It has been suggested that some advisors resist the idea of
conceptualizing their role as teachers (White, 2015a) and continue to see their primary position as agents of degree completion (Musser & Yoder, 2013). Approaching and delivering academic advising that is guided by learning-centered advising theory will require a shift in mindset and paradigm by the advising practitioners, as well as the institutions (Kelley, 2008; Lowenstein, 2005, 2015; Reynolds, 2010). Himes (2014) indicated that the nature and purpose of academic advising is likely to be defined differently by people, including practicing academic advisors. Without capturing advising practitioners’ voices and examining their perspectives regarding their work surrounding general education, the challenge of guiding students toward a deeper understanding of general education and its connectivity to the other parts of their undergraduate experience will persist.

Academic advising will not be the panacea for the challenge of engaging students in general education learning. However, the voices and the perspectives from the advising field are key to gaining insights into the challenges and opportunities in helping students realize the importance, purpose, and meaning of general education (White, 2015b). Wilcox (2016) asserted that learning-centered advising is an exciting direction toward which the field of academic advising is moving. Understanding advising practitioners’ perspectives on their role in supporting learning is an important step towards refining advising practices that engage and reinforce student learning in general education, developing advisor training and learning opportunities, and reaffirming the purpose and stature of academic advising within the academy.

Academic advising is purported to have great potential in supporting the learning in and understanding of general education; nevertheless, there has been limited investigation into the ways in which academic advising contributes to students’ understanding of general education and the ways in which advisors can help students see general education as a meaningful learning
component in their undergraduate curriculum (Egan, 2015). While it remains the responsibility of
the students to make sense of their education, Lowenstein (2015) declared that it is the
responsibility of the academic advisors to facilitate students’ learning and to help them make
sense of their education through educative advising dialogues. As such, a study examining
academic advisors’ perspectives on the roles of academic advising in helping students understand
general education was warranted.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the roles and practices of academic
advising, through the lens of academic advisors, in helping students understand general education
as an integral part of their undergraduate learning experience. In order to gain insights into the
academic advisors’ perspectives, this study was guided by this overarching research question:

How do academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students
understand their general education?

Theoretical Framework

Integrative learning theory, as explicated by Lowenstein (2014), was used to frame this
study and employed as a lens through which to understand academic advisors’ perspectives on
their role in helping students understand and make meaning of general education. The
integrative learning theory as applied to academic advising aligns with the learning-centered
advising paradigm, which scholars (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Kuh, 1997; Laff, 2006;
Lowenstein, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2014) have advocated as an alternative to the prescriptive and
developmental advising models.

Toward a theory of advising. Prescriptive and developmental advising models are two
of the most frequently discussed approaches in the advising literature and practices (Hemwall &
Trachte, 1999; Pardee, 2000). The seminal articles on prescriptive and developmental advising by Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) have provided the academic advising community with valuable lenses through which to understand and guide academic advising practices and research.

The prescriptive advising model describes the advising function as clerical and record-keeping, and providing students with information on the courses needed to complete a degree (Crookston, 1979, 1994; Lowenstein, 2005; McCabe, 2002; O’Banion, 1972); the Developmental Advising Approach propels that academic advisors to view their students holistically and build an “interactive partnership aimed at enhancing the student’s self-awareness and fulfillment” (O’Banion, 1972, p. 63). Since the publishing of Crookston’s (1972) seminal work, prescriptive and developmental advising approaches have been frequently discussed in the advising community and literature (Kuh, 2008; Williams, 2007; Smith & Allen 2006).

While the developmental advising approach (Crookston, 1972; O’Banion, 1972) has been given the unofficial standard status in the academic advising community, scholars (Darling, 2015; Hamwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Lowenstein, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2014) argue that prescriptive and developmental advising overlook the learning imperatives of academic advising and the academic mission of institutions of higher learning. The academic advising community and higher education leaders are urged to structure and provide advising that centers on learning, aligning with the teaching and learning mission of colleges and universities (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Kuh, 1997; Lowenstein, 2005, 2014, 2015; Smith & Allen, 2006). In essence, the cardinal goal of academic advising is learning.

**Integrative learning theory of advising.** Lowenstein (1999) proposed a new perspective, as an alternative to the developmental model, through which to promote and guide academic advising as an academic activity; such an academically-centered or a learning-centered
advising theory help guide academic advising practices, define the purpose of academic advising and its role in supporting student learning, and solidify academic advising as a vital academic function at colleges and universities. Scholars (Darling, 2015; Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Kuh, 1997; Laff, 1994; Lowenstein, 1999, 2005) who support the learning-centered advising theory posit that academic advisors carry out academic and teaching functions, whose role ought to go beyond course selection and disseminating curricular information. Building on the published works (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Lowenstein, 2005, 2009, 2011; Ryan, 1992) on learning-centered advising, Lowenstein (2014) introduced the Integrative Learning Theory as a lens through which to view academic advising.

The underpinning of the Integrative Learning Theory is the notion that academic advising is, “a learning activity in which students intentionally and reflectively integrate their academic learning into an education that is a coherent whole” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 1). According to Lowenstein (2014), integrative learning theory is a normative theory, illuminating the fundamental purpose and ideals of academic advising. Furthermore, Lowenstein (2014) stated that a normative theory of advising ought to be a statement that describes academic advising, as well as a perspective that drives advising practices and frames the ways in which academic advisors, students, and institutions view and embrace the role of academic advising. Lowenstein (2014) argued that developmental advising was, indeed, a normative theory when it was initially proposed and advocated by Crookston (1972), citing that developmental advising was not widely practiced. Crookston (1972) was proposing an ideal of advising that he encouraged the advising community to adopt and toward which to stride.

Learning in advising does not occur in the process of identifying courses that students have to complete for their degree; rather, the learning occurs when students engage in dialogues
about the ways in which their courses fit into their degree curriculum (Lowenstein, 2000, 2005, 2013, 2014, 2015; Sopper, 2015). Moreover, learning occurs when academic advisors guide students in making sense and meaning out of their educational experience (Darling, 2015, Lowenstein, 2005, 2014; Sopper, 2015). In order to help students make sense and meaning, academic advisors ask thought-provoking and probing questions about their choices; in turn, students construct an overall understanding of how their courses and experiences emerge into a coherent education through intentional and reflective thinking (Laff, 2006; Lowenstein, 2014). Learning in advising can only be achieved when students are active participants in advising sessions during which advisors serve as learning facilitators (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005; Lowenstein 1999, 2005, 2014; Reynolds, 2010); this type of learning is nearly impossible when advising is only provided prescriptively and when the notion of learning is ignored during the advising interactions. Lowenstein (1999, 2000, 2005, 2015) asserted that academic advisors have the responsibility to help students create a logic of curriculum; the logic refers to the students’ understanding of the underlying relationships among courses and the interplay among other degree components, including general education, major, electives, and other co-curricular and experiential learning.

Lowenstein (2014) contended that academic advising should be transformative, not transactional. Academic advising is often seen as a service, which implies that students visit academic advisors to be served or to get something done for them (Lowenstein, 2013, 2014; White 2015). When advising is indeed centered on learning, and student and advisor work in tandem to help students make sense of their education, academic advising certainly ought to be qualified as a transformative and educative experience, not a simple advisor-advisee transaction. Finally, the integrative learning theory of advising proclaims that academic advising plays a
central role to facilitating and supporting the learning goals of any institution of higher learning (Hunter-Stuart & White, 2004; Lowenstein, 2014). In order to reap the optimal value of the education and curricula as intended and designed by their institution, students need support and guidance from academic advisors to make meaning of the logical connection among courses and components of their degree (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Lowenstein, 2014).

Integrative learning theory (Lowenstein, 2014) is a helpful lens with which to frame the study and explore academic advisors’ practices, as well as their perspectives on their role in facilitating students’ understanding of general education and development of a logical sequence of their curriculum. The tenets of the integrative learning theory illuminate the ideals and purpose of advising, putting learning at the core of advising, and positioning advising as an academic activity. Academic advising is far from a transactional process and should be an interactive and intellectually rigorous activity that is centered on learning, with the objective of helping students see the big picture of their education. The integrative learning theory will provide a lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of the role of advising in promoting general education understanding. A normative theory, as suggested by Himes (2014), will help further the research agenda and scholarship in academic advising. Moreover, Lowenstein (2014) suggests that such a normative theory of advising should inspire the academic advising community to reflect on existing practices and explore new approaches to actualize the teaching and learning functions of academic advising.

**Statement of Positionality**

As a classically trained pianist who began playing piano since the age of five, I never imagined that I would be working in the field of higher education. With the intention of pursuing a career in music education, I decided to attend a college with a reputable music conservatory in
hopes of eventually pursuing a career in music conducting and education. When the tragic terrorist attack happened in New York City shortly after I began my undergraduate studies, my views about the world and future changed very suddenly; it changed the ways in which I looked at my academic and professional pursuits.

In college, utterly confused about my academic and professional trajectories, I was fortunate to have met some supportive advisors and faculty mentors who made a positive impact on me during my undergraduate years. Realizing that I very much enjoyed the academic and collegiate environment, I decided to pursue a career in higher education after completing my undergraduate degree; this led to my pursuing a graduate degree in higher education administration. I have been working in higher education for nearly fifteen years now, and I have worked in a variety of areas in higher education—admissions, recruitment and marketing, student orientation, cultural diversity programs, and academic advising. While I no longer officially hold the title of academic advisor, the essence and spirit of academic advising continues to help me define myself as a scholar-practitioner of higher education. The field of advising has changed my thinking about the purpose and goal of higher education, and the role of academic advising in supporting student learning and success. My passion for academic advising has not subsided, and this research continued to engage and propel me in thinking about the central role of advising in facilitating and achieving the mission of learning in higher education.

My perspectives on the purpose, intent, and value of general education have evolved over time. As an immigrant who moved to the United States from another country, where tertiary education focuses on a specific academic discipline or field of study upon entry, my knowledge of general education was extremely limited. When I began my undergraduate studies, I was informed by the college that I needed to complete a series of “core” classes. As a compliant
student, I was not resistant to the idea of taking these core classes as I realized that those “core”
requirements had to be completed in order for me to receive a degree. Admittedly, I did not fully
understand the rationale behind taking those core courses during my college years. It was not
until after I graduated from college and began working in the field of education that, by
happenstance, prompted me to think more about those core courses in relation to my degree in
sociology and anthropology and the work that I was doing as a college recruiter. Today, my
definition of general education is more refined, certainly much more than just “a series of core
classes.” I see general education as a prelude to in-depth academic learning, a transition to
college learning, and an opportunity to develop new perspectives and critical lenses through
which to see the world and academic disciplines.

While my experience in academic advising has provided me with helpful insights into the
field of advising and its influential role in promoting student success, my experience, too, brings
with it my personal biases. Himes (2014) suggests people see and describe academic advising
differently depending upon the advising philosophy and theory to which they subscribe. As the
key instrument in this qualitative research, it is important that I recognize my own personal
biases throughout the entire study to ensure that study participants’ perspectives are justly
interpreted and reported.

**Intellectual and Practical Goals**

The primary intellectual goal of this study was to better understand how academic
advisors saw their role in helping students make sense and meaning of their general education.
Over the years, the researcher’s perspectives on academic advising and general education
evolved a great deal as a result of his professional experience in higher education administration
and ongoing scholarly interest in liberal arts education. In reflecting on his experience with
advising, the researcher recognized that he reaped the benefit of academic advising, which led to his timely graduation; however, the researcher recognized that the type of advising he received on general education while in college did not facilitate his understanding of the purpose and meaning of general education. The researcher began to think more intentionally about the purpose and meaning of general education when he began working in the field of academic advising. After engaging in informal discussions with fellow advising professionals and academics, it had been the researcher’s intellectual goal to engage other advising practitioners in thoughtful dialogues about the ways in which academic advising may play a vital role in helping students make sense of their general education course, while ensuring that they completed the appropriate coursework for their degree. In particular, the researcher believed in the scholarly value in capturing advising practitioners’ outlooks on their current practices and potential new strategies for facilitating students’ timely degree completion while supporting their learning. The practical goal of this study was to utilize advising practitioners’ perspectives on general education and academic advising to consider ways to encourage meaningful and learning-centered advising, develop and mentor academic advisors, and promote advising as an academic activity that aligns with the mission of higher education.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Academic advising has been praised as one of the vital functions in higher education that improves student retention and degree completion rates (Gordon, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While facilitating timely degree completion is a key responsibility of academic advisors, academic advising scholars are encouraging academic advisors to see themselves as facilitators and agents of learning, rather than merely agents of degree completion (Winham, 2015). Most college students complete general education as part of their undergraduate degree; however, many students fail to realize general education as an essential learning component of their undergraduate experience (Benander & Lightner, 2005; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015; Lowenstein, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which academic advisors perceive and conduct their role in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate curriculum. The advisors’ perspectives are key to understanding challenges and exploring promising practices in advising students on general education in American higher education.

This literature review examined general education, the development of academic advising, approaches to academic advising, and the application of learning-centered advising to general education. As the purpose of this study was to explore academic advisors’ perspective on general education advising, it was pertinent to explore some of the issues surrounding general education. In order to understand the role of academic advising in contemporary American higher education, it would be important to understand how academic advising has evolved. The development of academic advising section examines the history, evolvement, and formalization of academic advising, from the American colonial period through the establishment of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). The approaches of advising section
reviewed three prominent approaches to academic advising, providing a foundational understanding of the ways in which these approaches frame and guide academic advising practices. Finally, the literature review explored the interplay between general education and academic advising.

**General Education**

This study was intended to explore the ways in which academic advisors conduct and perceive their role in helping students understand general education as part of students’ undergraduate experience. This section of the literature review examined pertinent issues surrounding general education, and later in the literature review, academic advising within the context of general education.

**Liberal arts and general education.** Liberal arts and general education plays a unique and significant role in American higher education. At most colleges and universities, general education is the largest academic program and considered the institutional major as it is required and shared among all undergraduate students (Gaff & Wasecha, 1991; Summerfield, 2007). Summerfield (2007) asserted that scholars and practitioners call liberal arts and general education by different names and terms. While general education is a common feature in the American college curriculum, it is considered the, “neglected stepchild of the undergraduate experience” (Boyer, 1988, p. 83), in American higher education. One of the purposes and founding principles of American higher education is to produce responsible and liberally educated citizens. To that end, general education curricula at colleges and universities were created as an attempt to carry out the mission of liberally educating citizens (Rudolph, 1977). The topic on whether liberal arts education is appropriate as a part of the college curriculum has been discussed and debated. In particular, Rundle (1975) questioned whether it is worth teaching liberal arts to young college
students as they often lack the level of maturity to appreciate the values and purposes of well-rounded liberal arts studies.

General education is often neglected or organized haphazardly due to a lack of identity within institutions of higher learning. Faculty members are committed to conducting research within their respective academic discipline, while general education is often seen as a peripheral component of the undergraduate curriculum (Gaff, 1991). Moreover, faculty members realize that their productivity in research and scholarship is the primary benchmark by which they will be evaluated for tenure and promotion; it is perceived by faculty that being involved in general education does not lead to the ultimate rewards, which are the attainment of tenure status and promotion in professorial rank (Nelson Laird, Niskodé-Dossett & Kuh, 2009; Ratcliff, 1997; White, 2015a).

Boyer and Levine (1981) and Toombs, Amey, and Chen (1991) found that the number of liberal arts and general education requirements in college curricula have been gradually reduced over time. In particular, specialized programs that are accredited by professional associations and accrediting bodies reduce the number of liberal arts and general education requirements in order to comply with accreditation guidelines (Stearns, 2002).

**Curricular coherence.** Liberal arts and general education reformers believe that addressing the issue of curricular coherence is crucial in the efforts of improving the quality American college students’ learning (Ratcliff, 1997). However, Johnson and Ratcliff (2004) asserted that coherence in general education in American higher education remains as an “unfinished agenda” (p.85).

Lack of curricular coherence and professional relevance leaves students viewing their undergraduate experience as "disjointed, fractured, and totally unstructured" (Diamond, 1998, p.
2). According to survey data collected from college chief academic officers in 2000, nearly seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that their institutions had undergone significant general education reforms (Johnson, Ratcliff, & Gaff, 2004). Despite efforts to revise general education programs as a way to improve curricular coherence, only thirty-eight percent of the same academic leaders believed that their programs illustrate a substantial degree of curricular coherence (Johnson, Ratcliff, & Gaff, 2004).

Association of American Colleges (AAC, 1994) indicated program coherence in liberal arts and general education is essential to helping students draw connections among academic disciplines and integrate academic knowledge. Ratcliff (1997) postulated that students learn more effectively when they complete a liberal arts curriculum that provides a significant level of coherence; moreover, students have a greater level of appreciation for general education when coursework presents academic coherence and professional relevance (Gaff & Davis, 1981; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). While faculty and leaders recognize the need to create a strong and cohesive curriculum (Boyer, 1988), effective academic support systems, such as academic advising, are critical in improving the ways in which students perceive curricular coherence (Astin, 1993).

**Linking general education to major.** Students are encouraged to take general education courses in conjunction with professional or major courses so as to allow for connecting content taught in the liberal arts and professional studies (Stearns, 2002). Many institutions see the need to emphasize the importance of general education in students’ skills and intellectual development and conveying to students that such progression is an essential component in their professional preparation (Schneider, 2004). In order to improve students’ perception and understanding of general education, higher education leaders see the need to define and convey their philosophy
and rationale for including general education as part of a well-rounded undergraduate education (Gaff, 1991; Schneider, 2004; White & Cohen, 2004).

Students are not motivated in liberal arts and general education courses because they see very little relevance (Gaff, 1981; Kirp, 2003; Stearn, 2002). Students studying in different majors have different perspectives on liberal arts and general education. In comparison to non-humanities majors, students specializing in the humanities disciplines tend to have a better understanding and appreciation for liberal arts and general education; on the contrary, students entering higher education with a particular professional or vocational interest in mind tend to express less interest and enthusiasm in their general education coursework (Boyer, 1988; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Nelson Laird, Niskodé-Dossett, and Kuh (2009) critiqued that clear articulation about the connection between general education and non-general education courses is often lacking in higher education; furthermore, there ought to be better coordination between the two areas so as to ensure that essential outcomes in both general education and non-general education coursework are achieved over the course of the students’ undergraduate career.

**Conveying general education.** College students are usually introduced to their general education curriculum at new student orientation; however, the presentation on general education oftentimes focus on the practical mechanics, such as registration process and which courses to take to fulfill general education requirements; unfortunately, the value, purpose, and intent of general education programs are often neither thoughtfully articulated by the institutions, nor understood or retained by the students (Egan, 2015; Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015).

**Conclusion.** General education is a signature feature within American college curriculum. This unique American tradition is intended to expose college students to a variety of academic disciplines and to develop their requisite skills to pursue upper-level coursework and
future careers. While the general education imperatives are well intentioned, the lack of curricular coherence in general education, inadequate explication of the value and purpose of general education, and ambiguous linkage between general education and non-major learning, appear to affect students’ ability to fully grasp and appreciate general education as a critical learning experience in their undergraduate education.

Development of Academic Advising

Academic advising has evolved over time. Although the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has only been in existence since 1979, academic advising, in one form or another, has been present in American higher education since the colonial period. Frost (2000) divided academic advising in American higher education into three periods: higher education before academic advising was defined; academic advising defined and unexamined; and academic advising defined and examined. In order to develop a foundational understanding of the vital role academic advising plays and envision its future in American higher education, it is appropriate to review the key factors that have contributed to the development of academic advising (Gillispie, 2003).

Colonial period through late 1800s. In the early years of American higher education, there was not a significant need of academic advising since students had limited curricular options from which to choose (Gordon, 1992; Kuhn, 2008). The notion of academic advising, however, has been in existence at institutions of higher learning since the founding of American higher education (Frost, 2000; Gillispie, 2003; Nutt, 2000; White, 2015a). While there were no academic advisors during this period, college presidents and members of the college faculty assumed the responsibility of providing students with advice; practicing the principles of in loco parentis, the college presidents and faculty members served as their students’ parents and
provided students with guidance and mentorship (Bush, 1969; Goodchild & Weschler, 1997; Kuhn, 2008; Rudolph, 1990). As Frost (2000) noted, academic advising during the colonial period through the late 1800s was undefined; the development of academic advising remained relatively stagnant through the 1870s, when advising had a more defined role in American colleges and universities.

**Advising defined, yet unexamined.** College students did not need much assistance with selecting coursework prior to the 1800s, given the limited choices in academic offerings. Up until the late 1800s, members of the faculty continued to serve as the primary source of academic guidance and intellectual mentorship (Frost, 2000). The elective system was introduced to the American college curricula in the 1870s (Thelin, 2003), thus giving students more autonomy in selecting their elective coursework (Kuhn, 2008). With the introduction of the elective system, institutions recognized an increasing need in providing students with guidance to ensure that students were equipped with necessary information to make sound academic decisions that align with their interests, goals, and aspirations (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2008). Johns Hopkins University created the first formalized faculty-based advising system as a vehicle to encourage thoughtful dialogues between the students and faculty about their selection of coursework in the late 1800s; by the early 1900s, most American colleges and universities introduced formalized advising systems to support their students’ studies and selection of coursework (Frost, 2000).

Societal events and changes also contributed to the ways in which social institutions, including colleges and universities, adjust and evolve to meet the needs of our society and citizens. For example, the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill, supported veterans returning to the United States after World War II (Thelin, 2004); the federal funding made available as part of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act led to a significant
increase in student enrollment at American colleges and universities (Frost, 2000). Moreover, the 1965 Higher Education Act was another federal legislation that provided financial assistance to students in need of aid to pursue higher education (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Thelin, 2003, 2004). As a result of these federal legislations, many citizens from various backgrounds and social classes were afforded the opportunity to access and pursue higher education (Thelin, 2003, 2004).

With a surge in student enrollment, faculty members who were ordinarily responsible for mentoring and advising students were not able to meet the growing demand, in addition to the increased focus on teaching and scholarship (Gordon, 1992). While enjoying an influx in student enrollment, college leaders recognized the challenges in transitioning and supporting an increased student body, many of whom had varying levels of needs and academic preparedness; consequently, college leaders saw the growing needs to include trained student personnel professionals to supplement faculty advising and provide these students with adequate academic counseling and student support services (Frost, 2000). During this period, institutions of higher learning further formalized academic advising systems and integrated student personnel professionals as advisors into the colleges and universities to support the increased needs in providing coordinated academic services and advising.

**Advising defined, examined, and formalized.** The increase in student enrollment, diversified academic offerings, and the faculty’s shifting focus on scholarly research and teaching further drove the formalization of academic advising at colleges and universities (Frost, 2000). In the early 1970s, Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) published their articles on academic advising, which provided an impetus for dialogues regarding the definition and the role of academic advising. In these seminal articles, Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) defined...
academic advising, coined the terms such as prescriptive and development advising, and discussed the impact of advising on students’ academic experience; most importantly, Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) advocated for the notion of advising as teaching and the need for advisors to employ a developmental advising approach in their work with students.

Academic advising finally became a defined and an examined activity when advising practitioners began studying and comparatively examining the ways in which academic advising was conducted at different institutions (Frost, 2000; Kuhn, 2008). A professional conference on academic advising was convened in Burlington, Vermont, in 1977 (Cook, 2001); the establishing of National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 1979, with the purpose and goals of supporting the academic advising community and practitioners, was a concrete indicator that academic advising was recognized as a legitimate and vital function in higher education. Since the founding of NACADA, scholar-practitioners of academic advising continue to conduct professional development and scholarly activities to further professionalize advising as a field, support academic advising practitioners and leaders, and solidify the mission and goal of academic advising in higher education. The field of academic advising continues to flourish, and since the publishing of the seminal articles on developmental advising, scholar-practitioners continue to study and develop academic advising practices.

**Conclusion.** The concept of academic advising indeed has been present in American higher education since its inception. College presidents and members of the faculty have a long history of providing students with academic guidance and intellectual mentorship. Non-faculty advising practitioners joined the academy to meet the increasing and varying student needs, which led to the formalization of the academic advising and the establishment of a professional organization, NACADA, to support scholar-practitioners of advising. As the literature shows,
academic advising has been in continuous development in response to the needs of the society, institutions, and most importantly, the students. The next section of the literature review examines prominent approaches to advising utilized by academic advisors.

**Approaches to Academic Advising**

In order to understand the ways in which academic advisors work with their students, it seems logically imperative to examine the various approaches that are employed by practicing advisors. This section explores three prominent academic advising approaches that are widely used in the advising field and discussed in the literature: prescriptive, developmental, and learning-centered approaches.

**Prescriptive.** Prior to the publishing of the seminal work on developmental advising by Crookston (1972) and O’Banion’s (1972), prescriptive advising was extensively practiced by academic advisors. In the prescriptive advising model, academic advisors primarily serve in the role of information provider (Crookston, 1994); academic advisors disseminate information pertaining to the curriculum, as well as course scheduling and description to students. The chief purpose in providing prescriptive advising is to ensure that students select and complete the appropriate coursework for their degree (Crookston, 1972).

The relationship between the advisor and advisee in prescriptive advising is principally characterized as hierarchical, and the flow of information is one-directional in that advisors provide the information to the students; academic advisors are the active providers of information, whereas students are the passive recipients of information in the advising relationship (Fielstein, 1994; Lowenstein, 1999, 2005). Furthermore, prescriptive advising is an authoritative approach to providing students with guidance, where students are responsible for
following and effecting the advice given to them by their advisor (Crookston, 1994; Habley et al., 2012; Hagen & Jordan, 2008; Smith & Allen, 2006).

The prescriptive advisors do not actively engage students in dialogues about the challenges and issues they encounter while completing their courses (Habley et al., 2012); rather, students visit their advisors when they are in need of advising support, and their advisors offer their advice and students are expected to accept and follow through with their advice or remedy offered (King, 2005). The advisor-advisee relationship in prescriptive advising is similar to that of a physician-patient relationship. In a physician-patient context, patients visit a physician when they are unwell or in need of medical attention; to remedy their patient's’ ailment, the physician writes a prescription of medication (Crookston, 1972); similarly, in the academic advising context, students visit an advisor when challenges and concerns arise, and advisors provide students with a “prescription of advice” (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 67) to address those challenges and concerns.

Prescriptive advising is not necessarily a bad model or approach, and some advising scholar-practitioners may even argue that “advising starts with basic prescriptive advising” (Crocker et al., 2014, p. 7). In providing prescriptive advising, academic advisors often use other tools, such as degree checklist, to help students with identifying unmet academic requirements (Wilcox, 2016). While a degree checklist is a helpful visual tool to facilitate understanding of degree requirements, the checklist mentality, however, is linear and does not illustrate the connectivity among various degree components and the student’s learning in relation to their academic and personal goals (Wilcox, 2016). Lowenstein (2015) argued that there is little intentionality in the advising interaction between the student and the advisor when the sole purpose is to utilize a checklist for identifying unmet requirements for degree completion.
Winham (2015) posited that academic advising only partially and indirectly contributes to mission of higher education if the sole purpose and goal of academic advising is degree progress monitoring and tracking. Lowenstein (2005) critiqued that the learning is overlooked in the prescriptive approach of advising.

Advising practitioners agree that prescriptive advising does not cultivate meaningful advising relationships and very few advising practitioners and scholars nowadays would retort that pure prescriptive advising ought to be the model of advising employed in advising programs (Lowenstein, 2005). Besides, Lowenstein (2005) suggested that those who practice pure prescriptive advising may be getting occupational burnout or may not have been properly trained and professionally developed in academic advising.

**Developmental.** A new era of academic advising began in the early 1970s when Crookston (1972) published his article on developmental academic advising (White, 2015a). According to Grites (2013), “developmental advising continues to be one of the most fundamental and comprehensive approaches to academic advising” (p. 5). As described by Crookston (1972), developmental advising is “concerned not only with specific personal or vocational decision, but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental, and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem solving, decision making, and evaluation skills” (p. 5). Moreover, Crookston (1972) declared that advising is not simply telling; rather, advising is teaching. The developmental advising model gained momentous status and became a dominant paradigm in the academic advising community since the publishing of Crookston’s seminal article on developmental advising (Lowenstein, 2005).

The developmental advising model has roots in numerous disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, including psychology, sociology, and education; student development,
psychosocial, and cognitive development theories in particular contribute to the formulation of the developmental advising model (Creamer, 2000; King, 2005). According to Smith and Allen (2006), “Developmental advising is a student-centered process that: acknowledges the individuality of students; help them integrate life, career, and educational goals; connects curricular and co-curricular aspects of their educational experiences; and provides scaffolding that gives them opportunities to practice decision-making and problem-solving skills” (p. 5).

Developmental advising is a process in which students work in tandem with their advisor to clarify their academic, personal and professional goals, and devise educational plans that will facilitate the achievement of those personal and professional goals (Crockett, 1978; Grites, 2013; Smith & Allen, 2006). Under the developmental advising perspective, academic advisors are encouraged to develop a trusting advising relationship in which advisors will continue to learn about and understand their students, as well as their needs; in order to cultivate an advising relationship that fosters personal growth, developmental advisors oftentimes use interactive dialogues to build meaningful advising relationships (Himes, 2014).

Crookston (1972) emphasized the need for advisors to consider the student’s academic, personal, and professional goals when working with their students. According to O’Banion (1972), the developmental advising process includes the following dimensions: exploration of life goals; exploration of vocational goals; exploration of vocational goals; program choice; course choice; and scheduling courses. Developmental advising requires the advisors to view the students’ needs and goals holistically; instead of concentrating on a particular goal or aspect, advisors incorporate students’ educational, professional, and personal goals into the advising conversations (Grites, 2000; Jordan, 2000).
The locus of developmental academic advising is the individual contact and relationship between the advisor and the advisee (Crookston, 1972; Gordon, 1988, 2008; Hollis, 2009). Instead of serving primarily as information providers, developmental advisors serve as facilitators of student learning and development (Gordon et al., 2008). The developmental advising relationship is interactive and dynamic, in which the developmental advisors are respectful of the students’ goals and concerns (O’Banion, 1972). Crockett (1978) emphasized that developmental advising is intended to cultivate a continuous and collaborative relationship between the advisor and the advisee. The key feature in developmental advising practice is “guiding—not directing—students toward which personal goals to set and how to achieve them” (Kadar, 2001, p. 174). Contrary to prescriptive advising, Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) asserted that students are responsible for their decisions in a developmental advising relationship.

Developmental advising is generally viewed as a more superior approach in comparison to prescriptive advising. However, Fielstein (1994) asserted that prescriptive and developmental advising need not be mutually exclusive; rather, academic advisors can utilize both approaches in concert to provide students with advising that meets their students’ individual needs. According to Hale, Graham, and Johnson (2009), students who prefer to have a more developmental advising relationship with their advisors, and whose advisors employ a developmental advising approach, indicate a markedly higher level of satisfaction with their advising experience.

Both Crookston (1972) and O’Banion (1972) greatly contributed to the framework by which advising scholar-practitioners practice and examine academic advising. While recognizing the merits of developmental advising as proposed by Crookston (1972) and further expanded upon by O’Banion (1972), advising scholar-practitioners (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Kelley, 2008; Laff, 2006; Lowenstein, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2014, 2015; Smith & Allen, 2006)
question whether the theories contributing to the developmental advising model are the most relevant and applicable to the practice of academic advising; the developmental advising approach is critiqued for its heavy focus on student development and growth.

Crookston (1994) advocated that advising is more than simply telling students which courses to take in order to complete their degree; moreover, he suggests that advising ought to be considered teaching if the advising interaction in any learning or educational environment “contributes to individual, group, or community growth and development” (p. 5). However, Hemwall and Trachte (1999) pointed out that the developmental advising approach focuses on the student’s personal growth and development and overlooks students’ academic learning. While acknowledging Crookston’s (1972) perspective of advising as teaching, Lowenstein (2005) critiqued Crookston’s failure to elaborate on what advising as teaching truly entails.

Hemwall and Trachte (2005) argued that relying on the developmental model, which does not tightly align with the core academic and curricular mission, distances academic advising from the key mission of higher education.

Crookston’s (1972) seminal work on developmental advising provided the academic advisors with “the language to proclaim that their work was certainly much more than schedule planning and that the outcomes of their work could, indeed, be significant” (White, 2015a, p. 270). In critically examining the developmental advising approach, Lowenstein (1999, 2000) proposed that there be an alternative approach to academic advising, which he coined the term “academically-centered advising,” an approach that aligns with mission of teaching and learning in higher education.

Learning-centered. Hemwall and Trachte (1999) asserted that the mission of higher education is to, “introduce students to liberal learning, to the world of ideas, to the life of the
mind, and to cultivate in them the habit of lifelong learning (p. 7).” Hemwall and Trachte (1999, 2005) stated that the main purpose of academic advising is to facilitate student learning. Lowenstein (1999, 2000, 2005, 2014) agreed with Hemwall and Trachte’s perspective, adding that the learning-centered approach to advising, in comparison to the developmental approach, is more academically-oriented and in line with the teaching and learning mission of higher education. While recognizing that college students need support from developmental counselors, Lowenstein (1999) insisted that college students are in need of support from academic advisors, who facilitate and support their learning.

Under the learning-centered advising perspective, academic advising should be viewed as an academic activity in which academic advisors serve as teachers and help students find meaning and purpose in their education (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Lowenstein, 2005, 2011, 2014); furthermore, academic advisors guide students in thinking intentionally and reflectively about the knowledge they gained and skills they developed through their coursework. Lowenstein (2005) emphasized that academic advising ought to be helping students develop a logic of curriculum, which involves making sense of and coalescing the various parts of their degree components, such as general education, major, and co-curricular experiences, into a coherent whole; the guidance from advisor in navigating the curricular ambiguities is especially vital when the curriculum appears to be incoherent and disjointed to the students.

Lowenstein (2005) posited, “learning transpires when a student makes sense of his or her overall curriculum just as it does when a person understands an individual course, and the former is every bit as important as the latter” (p. 69). Students tend to learn more in each of the courses when they understand the role of each of the courses and the underlying relationships among courses within the curriculum (Lowenstein, 2000, 2005). Lowenstein (2005) believed that
academic advisors are uniquely positioned to facilitate student learning and their search for meaning and connections across the curriculum. When academic advisors engage students in their search for meaning and connections in their curriculum, Lowenstein (2005, 2011) concluded that advising is indeed an academic activity, which affirms the notion of advising as teaching.

The learning-centered advising paradigm draws from constructivist and social constructivist theories (Himes, 2014). Based on the constructivist perspective of learning, Lowenstein (2005) introduced the concept of logic of curriculum, which is the understanding of the rationale, purpose, and value of the curriculum; academic advisors help students develop a fuller understanding of their curriculum and create a cohesive learning experience through educative and dialogic advising conversations. Framed within the constructivist paradigm, learning-centered advising inspires students to construct meaning out of their experiences in coursework and co-curricular experiences (Lowenstein, 2014); similar to the developmental advising approach, the learning-centered approach situates the students as the active constructor of their knowledge and the advisors as the facilitator of learning (Lowenstein, 2014).

Lowenstein (2014) suggested that the learning-centered advising model helps frame academic advising as an indispensable function in fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education. The learning-centered paradigm provides a compelling justification for making sure that academic advising is structured and adequately staffed; furthermore, the learning-centered advising theory illustrates the teaching function of advisors, which suggests that non-faculty professional advisors ought to have the stature akin to that of teaching faculty (Lowenstein, 2014; 2015).
Lowenstein (2005) critiqued Crookston’s (1972) inadequate explication on the notion of advising as teaching as he suggested and his failure in discussing what exactly advisors teach within the academic advising context. In order to situate advising as a vital academic function within higher education, Lowenstein (2005) proclaimed that academic advising needs to be focusing on enhancing and supporting student learning and viewed differently from the student developmental perspective. The developmental paradigm has given the advising community the language with which to define and frame academic advising; however, Lowenstein (2005) argued that developmental paradigm, which focuses on student development, fails to provide clarity on its relationship to teaching, learning, and the academic curriculum, which are at the core of higher education.

Lowenstein (2005) suggested that academic advisors help students develop a logical understanding of their curriculum and coursework by asking challenging questions and supportively facilitating discussions that engage students in thinking about curricular connections, strategic course-sequencing, and developing transferrable skills across the curriculum. Accepting advising as teaching and learning, it is imperative that advisees are seen as learners and they must be active learners in the advising process (Reynolds, 2010). Since students are not generally accustomed to intentional and engaging conversations about learning, Lowenstein (2015) suggested that academic advisors use more pointed questions; for example, instead of asking a vague question about how they are doing in their coursework, advisors can facilitate and frame the discussion using the courses in which students are enrolled. The pointed and intentional questions are intended to prompt students to think critically about what they are learning in their courses and the possible connections in these courses and their chosen disciplines.
In addition to fostering an environment conducive to meaningful advising dialogues, Reynolds (2010) suggested that advisors use reflective writing as one of the ways to engage students in advising and responding to questions pertaining to what they learned during the advising interaction. Electronic portfolio can be used as one of the ways to facilitate students’ reflective thinking and for students to thoughtfully document the justification for their academic choices (Egan, 2015; Lowenstein, 2011, 2015).

During advising sessions, students are often involved in conducting academic and educational planning to ensure timely degree completion (Reynolds, 2010). While the academic and educational plan may be tentative in nature and revised regularly, the purposeful activity in developing their own plan not only encourages them in thinking about coursework and strategic course-sequencing, it also prompts them to consider other co-curricular activities, such as study abroad and undergraduate research, to integrate these experiences into a meaningful and coherent undergraduate experience (Reynolds, 2010).

The learning-centered paradigm provides the academic advisors a lens through which to see themselves as having a central role in supporting the academic and learning mission of higher education (Lowenstein, 2005). Academic advisors can be much more than information providers and caring mentors; advisors can serve in a richer and impactful role by becoming “full-fledged educators directly involved in facilitating student learning” (Lowenstein, 2015, p. 120). In comparing the advisor to the course instructor, “the excellent advisor plays a role with respect to a student’s entire curriculum that is analogous to the role that the excellent teacher plays with respect to the content of a single course” (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 65). Academic advisors who see themselves as teachers within the advising context enhance student learning by helping them see the connections in knowledge (Lowenstein, 2005).
Conclusion. The prescriptive, developmental, and learning-center advising approaches illuminate differences and similarities to supporting student success. While prescriptive advising focuses on information dissemination and ensuring appropriate course selections, developmental advising focuses on advisor-advisee relationship building and personal growth. The learning-centered advising approach emerged as an alternative to the developmental advising model, focusing on student learning and helping students make sense and meaning of their education. The learning-centered advising paradigm aligns academic advising with the teaching and learning mission of higher education, which declares learning as a chief purpose and goal of advising and situates academic advising at the center of student learning.

Situating Learning-Centered Advising in General Education

Students who are not able to see the connection and relevance of general education tend to see it as a pestering obstacle in their college experience (Boyer, 1988; Johnston, et al., 1991; Gump, 2007; Laff 2006; Twombly, 1992; White, 2015b; White & Cohen, 2004; Yarmolinsky, 1996). Students who are unable to understand the value and rationale of the general education curriculum often confront their advisors as to why they have to complete a series of coursework that bears no relevance to their personal and professional goals (Shoenberg, 2000). Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015) suggested that even students in structured and narrow professional programs with limited electives can be assisted by their advisors in selecting their general education courses and ensuring such courses give meaning and purpose to their academic and professional pursuits.

The responsibility of guiding students through the general education requirements often falls under the purview of academic advising, and academic advisors are tasked with providing students with guidance on their general education requirements (Egan, 2015; Tuttle, 2000).
Guertin (2015) asserted that academic advisors must teach students the importance of making informed and intentional choices in general education if we want to ensure that students take full advantage of a well-rounded and meaningful undergraduate education. Academic advisors can play an influential role in helping students see the meaning, purpose, and relevance of general education in their learning (Egan, 2015; Lowenstein, 2015; Takahashi, 1982).

Lowenstein (2015) argued that advisors and higher education leaders must be able to articulate and demonstrate academic advising as a vital function in teaching students about general education learning. The role of advising in general education, according to Egan (2015), is to facilitate interdisciplinary, integrative, and intentional learning. Advising that is centered on learning is especially important when academic advisors work with students in a distributional model of general education, which gives students the autonomy to select from a wide range of courses within the general education curriculum (Egan, 2015).

While the faculty members are responsible for engaging students in learning with a course, academic advisors, given their generalist role and their ability to understand the totality of the curriculum, should stand ready to help students develop a fuller and deeper understanding of general education and its relationship to the other parts of their undergraduate experience (Lowenstein, 2015; White, 2013). Academic advisors cannot simply explain the value, purpose, and intent behind the general education requirements to the students; rather, it requires ongoing and meaningful advising conversations through which students cultivate a true understanding of and an appreciation for the curriculum (Egan, 2015). Kirk-Kuwaye and Sano-Franchini (2015) suggested that advisors help students find personal meaning and purpose in general education as one of the ways by which to better engage students in general education learning. Egan (2015) encouraged advisors to engage students in thinking intentionally about their general education
and putting general education in a meaningful context to help them see general education as something more than fulfilling graduation requirements.

While most institutions define and publish the purpose, rationale, and learning outcomes of their general education programs and courses, Guertin (2015) asserted that such published statements about the general education imperatives often cannot be understood and realized by students on their own; academic advising can be the key to helping students foster an understanding and appreciation of the general education imperatives, make informed general education course selections, and articulate the connections between general education and the other components of their undergraduate experience.

**Conclusion.** Colleges and universities make an attempt to convey the value and purpose of general education through publications and presentation at new student orientation; however, students are oftentimes left to their own devices to make sense and meaning of their general education. Learning and meaning making are at the core of learning-centered advising. Scholars of learning-centered advising proclaims the power of academic advising when it focuses on learning and when academic advisors help students put their general education and college experience into meaningful and personally-relevant contexts.

**Chapter Summary**

Academic advising is believed to have a positive impact on student retention and success; however, it is imperative to have a renewed emphasis on “academic” in advising, revitalize and reaffirms its commitment to supporting learning, and realign its role with the mission of higher education institution (White, 2015a). Academic advising can be a powerful tool in helping students with engaging students in general education learning and institutions in facilitating the learning imperatives of general education programs (Lowenstein, 2015).
The field of academic advising has been evolving—from facilitating course scheduling and registration, to ensuring successful and timely completion of requirements, and to meaningfully engaging students about what they are learning in their courses and curriculum (White, 2015a). Lowenstein (2005) believed that the learning-centered model captures the best features of the developmental advising approach and incorporates the learning imperatives into the educative advising. While the literature has become more robust in the discussions surrounding learning-centered advising and its potential in supporting and enhancing general education learning, it shows a paucity of scholarly inquiry into the ways in which practicing academic advisors conduct and perceive their roles in helping students understand general education as an essential component of their undergraduate education. This inquiry was intended to contribute to the literature and practice by examining the role of academic advising in helping students understand general education through the lens of the academic advisors.
Chapter III: Methodology

Academic advising is viewed to have a vital role in improving student persistence, retention and completion at colleges and universities. One of the key responsibilities of academic advisors is to provide students with guidance on understanding and completing their general education as part of their undergraduate experience. However, engaging students in general education has been and remains to be a challenge in general education. Academic advising is purported to have the potential of helping students see general education as an integral part of their undergraduate experience. Academic advising scholar-practitioners believe that academic advising ought to be an academic activity, with the goal of helping students make meaning and sense of their curriculum. However, little research explores the role and practices of academic advising, through the lens of the advising practitioners, in helping students understand general education as a meaningful learning component within their undergraduate curriculum.

Methodology

In order to gain insights into the research problem, this study utilized a qualitative methodology to collect and analyze data. Integrated learning theory, as explicated by Lowenstein (2014), was employed to guide the data collection and analysis to answer the research question. The underpinning of the integrative learning theory is the notion that academic advising is, “a learning activity in which students intentionally and reflectively integrate their academic learning into an education that is a coherent whole” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 1).

This study heavily relied on the participants’ views (Creswell, 2007), particularly through “interactive researcher-participant dialogue” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Burrell and Morgan (1979) emphasized that philosophers and sociologists utilize interpretive paradigm in search of “fundamental meanings” (p. 31). Recognizing the significance in capturing academic advisors’
voices and narratives, the subjectivist approach in the interpretive paradigm would be appropriate for this study. Furthermore, social constructivism paradigm recognizes the ways in which individuals subjectively construct meanings through their experiences.

Employing an interpretive constructivist worldview, the researchers’ primary goal is to establish and unveil meanings of a phenomenon through the lens of their informants (Creswell, 2009, 2015). Moreover, Creswell (2007, 2009) stated that constructivist researchers recognize that the cultural and historical contexts play a role in the meaning formulation of their participants. Likewise, constructivist researchers, too, bring and acknowledge their own knowledge, background, and views, shaping their interpretation (Creswell, 2009). In a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the role of a researcher is to conduct thoughtful and interactive dialogues, such that study participants and the researcher will be able to co-construct deeper meaning of their perspectives and lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Given the researchers’ active role in collecting, examining, and interpreting data in qualitative approaches, Creswell (2009) suggested the researchers consider themselves a key instrument in their qualitative inquiry.

**Research Tradition**

This study was intended to examine the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate learning experience. A generic qualitative method, general inductive analysis (GIA), as explicated by Thomas (2006), was used to frame the analysis for this study. The general inductive analysis approach provides a straightforward approach for qualitative researchers to manage and derive meanings from raw textual data (Thomas, 2006). Miles and Huberman (1994) noted data reduction, presentation, and conclusion or verification as the main tasks of
qualitative data analysis. According to Thomas (2006), the chief purpose of inductive approach in qualitative research is to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).

While the general inductive approach is consistent with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework of qualitative data analysis, Thomas’ (2006) general inductive analysis framework places an emphasis on the researcher’s close and detailed readings of raw data, and subsequently unearthing emerging concepts and themes from analyzing complex and raw qualitative data. Furthermore, Thomas (2006) discussed a common reporting style for analyses and findings derived from an inductive approach; this report shall follow the style, which includes a label of the theme or category, a brief description of the theme and category, and a quotation from the raw text to further elaborate on the meaning of the theme or category.

Research Design

According to Creswell (2009), “we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a research and the participants in a study” (p. 40). This study was intended to examine the practices and roles of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral component of their undergraduate learning experience. In order to answer the overarching research question and gain insights into the problem of practice, the researcher conducted interviews with professional academic advisors whose role includes working with undergraduate students on the selection and understanding of general education coursework.

By conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to collect rich and descriptive information from the participants; moreover, by posing open-ended questions, the
researcher provided participants with opportunities to reflect on their responses and ask for clarification and elaboration on their responses (Creswell, 2012). Employing qualitative approaches allowed the researcher to describe and interpret academic advisors’ perspectives within a specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, as cited in Ponterotto, 2005). The descriptive information provided by the participants allowed the researcher to inductively examine emerging concepts, themes, patterns, and categories (Creswell, 2007, 2009), thus allowing the researchers to draw conclusions and answer the researcher question set forth for the study. The goal of this research was to gather rich, qualitative data from practicing academic advisors, with which the researcher was able to unearth emerging perspectives on the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate learning experience.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate learning experience. In order to gain insights into the academic advisors’ perspectives, this study was guided by the overarching research question:

How do academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students understand general education?

Participants

The goal of this study was to gain insights into the ways in which academic advisors perceive and conduct their role in helping students understand general education. The researcher captured the voices and explored the perspectives of academic advisors on their role and practices in helping students gain a deeper understanding of general education. Purposeful
sampling strategy was employed in the recruitment of participants for this study. Maxwell (1997) defined purposeful sampling as a strategy by which a particular group of participants is selected to provide information on a specific topic or phenomenon that cannot be otherwise obtained from other groups. Patton (1990) asserted that purposeful sampling is a powerful strategy, which allowed researchers to collect information-rich data from a particular group of participants that provide insights into a research study and the centrality of an issue. Furthermore, homogeneous sampling strategy allowed the researcher to gain in-depth information from a subgroup of individuals who met certain criteria or shared certain characteristics (Creswell, 2012).

One of the most crucial tasks of this study was to capture the professional academic advisors’ voices; as such, it was essential that participants in this study be practicing academic advisors, whose primary professional responsibilities included working with students on the selection and understanding of general education coursework as part of their undergraduate studies. This research study had nine participants, all of whom were full-time, professional academic advisors, with at least two years of professional academic advising experience. According to Patton (1990), there are no set rules for sample size in qualitative research; however, when determining the sample size, researchers should be mindful of the purpose of the study, information needed to answer the research questions, data credibility and usefulness, as well as time and resources (Patton, 1990). This study would ideally have a minimum of eight participants, who met the aforementioned criteria.

**Recruitment and Access**

In order to recruit participants who were able to reflect on their experiences and provide insights into the research question, the research obtained recruitment assistance from advising
administrators who directed and oversaw academic advising units that were tasked with the responsibility of providing general education advising. The researcher engaged advising administrators within an urban public university system in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, comprised of twenty-four campuses and units that offer undergraduate programs that follow the same general education curricular framework. Access to participants was granted by the chair of the University Advisement Council at the research site, who also facilitated the participant recruitment process. Through the University Advisement Council and a consortium of academic advising directors, the researcher sought their assistance with the recruitment of study participants. Advising administrators and directors facilitated the recruitment process by providing the researchers with contact information of their full-time advising staff; the researcher sent a recruitment email to all potential participants, informing them of the opportunity to participate in a research study regarding academic advising and general education. As an employee of this university system, the researcher’s campus at which he was working was excluded in this study to avoid any conflict of interest.

Guidelines and research protocols were followed in the recruitment of participants and the protection of human subjects. All participants were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to their engagement in this research. Furthermore, it was made explicitly clear to the participants that their participation or their wish to withdraw from the study at any juncture would bear no effect. Participants were assured that their responses and participation would be kept confidential and would not be shared with their supervising administrator.

**Data Collection**

Interviewing is a way of having, “a conversation with a purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p. 149). In the study, the researcher served as the interviewer when conducting interviews with
study participants. In order to gain insights into the research problem and answer the research question, the researcher conducted interviews with participants who were full-time, academic advising professionals, with a minimum of two years of academic advising experience, whose responsibilities included working with students on the selection and understanding of general education as part of their undergraduate studies.

Semi-structured interviews with standardized open-ended questions were the primary means of data collection in this research study. Patton (1987) explained the consistency in the wording and sequence of questions, which were determined prior to the interviews, would allow for a greater level of comparability; in addition, the standardized open-ended interview approach would reduce researcher’s biases. It is important to note that a level of flexibility was exercised to encourage participants to share anything that they believed was pertinent to the area of research inquiry. Creswell (2007) suggested developing an interview guide so as to provide the researcher with a structure and a direction for the interview, and an interview protocol was followed throughout the interview and data collection process.

Interviews were conducted individually with each of the study participants. Interviews were conducted at a location that was chosen by and convenient to the study participants; each interview lasted approximately one hour. In addition to note-taking during the interviews, all interviews conducted were audio-recorded, using two digital audio-recorders. The researcher had the audio recordings transcribed by a professional transcription service; participants were assured that only the professional transcription service and the researcher would have access to the recorded audio files. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in the study; during the interview, a pseudonym chosen by the participant was used during each of the participant interviews.
In addition to conducting interviews, the researcher reviewed pertinent documents, such as the college bulletin, university website, and literature, pertaining to academic advising and general education. The data gathered from document and content analysis provided background and curricular information, as well as contextual understanding.

**Data Storage**

Data collected from interview sessions were stored in a centralized and secured location so as to protect participants’ identity and maintain anonymity and confidentiality. All audio recordings were stored in a password-protected computer; once interviews were transcribed, audio-files recorded from the interview sessions were destroyed. All transcribed interviews in text form were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office to which only the researcher had access.

**Data Analysis**

Prior to data analysis, interviews conducted as part of the research study were transcribed for coding purposes. The researcher contracted a professional transcription service for the transcribing of interviews. The researcher communicated with the professional service and specified the ways in which interviews should be transcribed; upon receiving the transcribed interviews, the researcher reviewed all transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Thomas (2006) outlined a five-step process of inductive coding, which the researcher followed as part of the data analysis. The procedures for the inductive analysis of qualitative data were as follows: 1) preparation raw data files and data cleaning; 2) close reading of text; 3) creation of categories; 4) reducing overlapping and redundant codes and categories; and 5) continuing revision and refinement of category system (Thomas, 2006, p. 241-242). The goal of the coding process was to create a small number, between three to eight, of the most important
categories or themes emerged from the raw data that address the research objective (Thomas, 2006).

The researcher utilized manual coding, using the Microsoft suite to assist with the management and organization of data coding. Coding methods, assignment of codes, and categories corresponded to the constructs, as well as research objectives and questions set forth for the research inquiry (Saldaña, 2013; Thomas, 2006). The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the roles and practices of advising in helping students understand general education in their undergraduate studies. The initial cycle of coding was done via descriptive and in vivo methods of coding. Saldaña (2013) asserted that descriptive and in vivo coding methods are virtually applicable to all qualitative studies; descriptive coding allowed the researcher to use a word or short phrase to summarize or label a segment of data, whereas in vivo coding extracted the words and short phrases directly from participants’ own language. Descriptive and in vivo methods were particularly helpful in summarizing the ways in which participants described and defined their role in general education advising. Subsequently, values coding method was employed to explore participants’ perspectives on their roles and opportunities in facilitating students’ search for deeper meaning in general education through academic advising. According to Saldaña (2013), values coding method assigns a label to data that reflects participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs.

**Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2007) considered validity an important concept in qualitative research; researchers employed various strategies as a means by which to ensure accurate data collection, analysis, and reporting. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) seminal work addressed the questions about the notions and characteristics of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiries. Qualitative researchers
must be able to gain the confidence of the readers and convince the readers of the rigor and worthiness of their research findings. While the researcher had the recorded interviews transcribed by a professional transcription service, the researcher made every effort to ensure that interviews were transcribed without errors. Creswell (2007) strongly recommended that researchers employ a minimum of two validation strategies to ensure trustworthiness in their qualitative inquiries.

Interviews were the primary method of data collection in this research; the researcher served as the interviewer for all interviews conducted for this research study. The researcher conducted member-checking and provided study participants with an opportunity to review the transcribed interview and submit commentaries on preliminary findings; the member-checking strategy was employed to ascertain congruent views on data interpretation and analysis (Creswell, 2007). The members of the doctoral thesis committee, which included an external examiner, served as peer reviewers and conducted external audits, ensuring the researcher’s interpretation and analysis of data was accurate. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2007) suggested the use of triangulation, utilizing multiple data sources in qualitative research; in addition to collecting data through in-depth interviews, the researcher conducted an analysis of any documents that were pertinent to the general education program and participants in the study. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) asserted the important task of self-reflection, allowing researchers to consider biases they bring to their research; the positionality statement in the doctoral thesis served as the researcher’s platform for clarifying personal and professional biases on the research topic.
Protection of Human Subjects

The cardinal rule in a research relationship is to ensure that research participants are not harmed in any way and are respected throughout the research process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher had the responsibility of maintaining ethical conduct and standards, as well as ensuring the protection of human subjects. Federal agencies, institutional review boards, and professional associations have set forth formal code of ethics and regulations to ensure that researchers conduct their research ethically and their research participants were not harmed in any way throughout the research process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

This study examined the roles and practices, through the lens of the academic advisors, in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate learning experience. Participants were recruited from an urban public university system in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participation in this research study did not present any obvious risks to the participants. Participants were provided with a document, explicating the purpose and goals of this study. The researcher clearly articulated the purpose of the research to his participants to avoid the issue of deception; Creswell (2009) suggested ethical issues related to deception occur when participants and researchers had different understanding of the purpose for the study in which they were involved. Participants were informed of the research procedures and their right to withdraw from the study at any juncture should they feel the need to do so. Participants were assured that their identity would be confidential and reported with pseudonyms in the research study. Furthermore, participants were informed of their right to ask any questions related to the study and to obtain a copy of the research findings. Informed consent forms were signed by all participants and collected by the researcher prior to the individual interviews.
Given the level of risk was low for the study participants, the researcher applied for and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through an expedited review at Northeastern University.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

A key responsibility of academic advising practitioners is to provide undergraduate students with guidance on their coursework within their general education curriculum (Tuttle, 2000). Given advisors’ unique roles in guiding their students’ course-taking, academic advisors could play a central and influential role in helping students make meaning of their general education (Darling, 2015; Egan, 2015; Takahashi, 1982; Yoduf, 2003). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the roles and practices of academic advising, through the lens of academic advisors, in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate learning experience. This chapter is a report of research findings of the data collected through interviews with academic advising practitioners, whose key responsibilities included advising undergraduate students on their general education requirements. This study was guided by the following overarching research question:

How do academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students understand general education?

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the study participants to establish a contextual understanding of the participants’ backgrounds, as well as their perspectives of general education in undergraduate studies. In this study, general education is defined as the portion of the undergraduate degree component that is shared and completed by all students, regardless of academic major. The second section presents the recurring and salient themes emerged from the data collected through interviews with study participants. The final section of this chapter presents a summary of the emergent themes and provides a preview of the fifth and final chapter of this research study.
**Study Site and Participants**

**Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Name*</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years of Advising Experience</th>
<th>General Education Advising as Main Responsibility</th>
<th>Academic/Educational Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Psychology and Student Personnel Services; Graduate: Higher Education Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Psychology; Graduate: Higher Education Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.5 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Latin American and Latino Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.5 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Sociology, and Black and Puerto Rican Studies; Graduate: Public Administration; Postgraduate: Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>12 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Business Marketing and Management; Graduate: Urban Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: History; Graduate: Higher Education Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Urban Studies, Planning, and Architecture; Graduate: Higher Education Administration and Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4.5 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate and Graduate: Forensic Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Undergraduate: Media Management; Graduate: Industrial and Organizational Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nine academic advisors participated in this study, all of whom worked at various college campuses within the same public urban university system in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The university system in which they worked has a unified general education framework for all of its undergraduate degree-granting colleges; each of the colleges identifies...
and designates the courses that meet the learning outcomes of the ten-category general education curriculum, which all undergraduate students must complete in order to earn a degree. The participants in this study represented a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, the majority of whom hold a graduate degree. In order to participate in this study, participants must have had at least two years of academic advising experience, whose primary responsibilities included providing students with academic advising on general education requirements.

Background questions posed during the interviews established a contextual backdrop of these participants’ academic and educational experiences in relation their role as academic advising practitioners. As part of the interview, all participants shared what they perceived to be their key responsibility as an academic advising practitioner and the purpose of general education.

Anne. Anne had ten years of experience working in academic advising and higher education. She worked part-time as a student and counseling assistant during her undergraduate studies. As a result, Anne realized that higher education was the field in which she wanted to pursue a professional career. Prior to her current role as a senior academic advisor at a public baccalaureate-granting institution, she worked at two other public higher education institutions, one community college and one four-year college. In addition to her role as an advising generalist, Anne served as an advising specialist whose role focused on developing programming for first-year students. Anne holds an undergraduate degree in psychology with a minor in counseling and student personnel services and a graduate degree in higher education administration.

Anne believed her key responsibilities as an academic advisor were:

To ensure that students fully understand what the requirements are to graduate. It’s understanding their general education requirements, their major requirements, and all that
is needed to complete 120 credits. I believe that’s probably the main component. Then, also, providing students with support and guidance.

Anne thought that working with students on their academics was a key component of her role; she believes that her advising role afforded her opportunities to empower students to “learn how to find their voice, how to be their own advocate, how to research and find out what resources campus offers and so on.”

When asked about the purpose and role of general education in undergraduate education, Anne described general education as “the foundation” of a degree program:

It is really a foundation to give you a holistic experience, where it’s not just you’re learning computer science or psychology or political science, but there are also other disciplines that in today’s world and what we’re dealing with, whether it’s the economy, whether it’s politics, whether so many things that are happening in the world, this is helping you to become a better person and an individual who’s well-informed.

**Bianca.** Bianca had three years of experience working in academic advising. Prior to her current role in academic advising, Bianca worked in college admissions and recruitment for several years for an urban public university system in the Northeast. Bianca held an associate’s degree in business administration and a baccalaureate degree in psychology. While working as a college recruiter, Bianca completed her graduate degree in higher education administration. During her graduate studies, she discovered the field of academic advising and decided to pursue a career in academic advising.

When asked to describe her key responsibilities as an academic advisor, Bianca shared:

The number one would be the academic side of making sure the student is aware of what the requirements are and how those requirements also could overlap with their major
requirement because I think there’s no student who doesn’t want to downsize the amount of courses that they can take as much as possible, so awareness of requirements and teaching them those requirements. To be able to explain it in a way that makes sense for someone who’s not an academic basically, translating these terms for them, and I think, that’s number one for me.

Bianca further elaborated on her approach to academic advising and described her approach as “holistic,” highlighting the importance of seeing her students as individuals as a whole in their advising interaction:

I don’t just focus on the academics. I mean, I have to get through the academics, so that’s my first priority. I’m definitely the type of advisor who looks into the emotional state of the students. I think that’s where my psych degree comes in.

In reflecting on her experience with general education as a college student, she recalled not being particularly mindful of the intent of general education:

As a psych student I had no idea I had to take statistics. No one thinks about this side of psychology when you first start it. I understood enough to do the right classes, and I really didn't struggle with my undergraduate degree and putting classes together, and keep it on track with my requirements. I just understood this was what I had to take and I did it. And that was it.

**Fabian.** Fabian had two years of experience working in academic advising. He held an associate’s degree in business marketing and a baccalaureate degree in Latin American and Latino Studies. Prior to working in higher education, Fabian worked in the healthcare insurance industry and assisted New York City residents with enrolling into health coverage plans offered through the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. In conjunction with his advising
generalist responsibilities, Fabian also served as a project director that supported and mentored underrepresented minority students at his institution. Fabian plans on pursuing graduate studies in creative writing, with the goal of incorporating literature and creative writing in his work supporting college students and improving student persistence.

When asked to describe his key responsibilities as an academic advisor, Fabian shared:

Number one is understanding your own college’s policies and procedures as they relate to academic programs, making sure that every student you come into contact with, when you are explaining these procedures, walks away with better understanding. Not a complete understanding, but a better understanding of what their particular academic map, let’s call it that, entails.

Fabian said the purpose of general education was “to learn what you didn’t know you needed to learn.” He further elaborated on the opportunity for students to gain new lenses through general education learning:

[General education] becomes so many things and what I tell the students, like you’re here to get a degree to get a good job. But you’re not thinking of just staying at an entry-level job all the time, right? So, if you start taking these general education classes now that may teach you how to be a better public speaker, that may teach you how to do or see things in a different perspective that most people don’t.

**Jazz.** Jazz had two and a half years of experience working in academic advising and at least a decade of experience working in higher education. While she had only been holding the title of academic advisor officially for the last two and a half years, Jazz indicated that advising was a function in her prior roles, serving as an admissions advisor and as an assistant director for an academic and cultural exchange program. Jazz held an undergraduate degree in Black and
Puerto Rican Studies and sociology; in addition, she holds a graduate degree in public administration and a postgraduate certificate in higher education.

When asked about her primary advising role and responsibility, Jazz viewed herself as an educator:

I discuss things like resources that they have available in the school. I am educating them about that. I also find myself as an educator when we discuss what I call usually Plan A, Plan, B, if they are [encountering] any challenge.

In describing the purpose and intent of general education, Jazz talked about the contract between the student and the university, which encouraged students to:

…gain universal knowledge. We’re not a silo in the university. The whole idea or understanding that I have of general education is for the student to explore and to learn or to have universal knowledge in humanities, the arts, etc.

Mary. Mary had twelve years of experience working in academic and higher education. Mary held a degree in business marketing and management, and she was completing her graduate degree in urban affairs. Initially working as a part-time college assistant when her daughter was very young, she was eventually offered an opportunity to move into an academic advising role, and she accepted the new opportunity and challenge. When she assumed her advising role, she worked with undergraduate students, as well as adult students returning to the classroom. In addition to her advising generalist responsibilities, Mary currently works closely with honors students and scholarship recipients.

When asked about what she perceives to be her key responsibilities, Mary shared:
The key responsibilities, I believe, are, of course, advising the students on exactly what the requirements are for graduation, but also all of their options when it comes to grading policies, withdrawing from classes.

As someone who attended a liberal arts institution, Mary passionately talked about the value students would gain through general education, indicating, “you don't go to school to learn facts, but you go to learn how to think for yourself and how to reason beyond facts you're given. I think if you follow a true liberal arts education, you can do that.”

Max. Max had fifteen years of experience working in academic advising and higher education. Prior to working in higher education, Max worked in the private sector in customer service. His initial experience working in higher education included serving as an academic advisor for a graduate program at a public college and then as an administrator at a private college in an academic department. Max joined the academic advising team at his current institution while completing his graduate degree in higher education administration. In addition to his graduate degree in higher education administration, Max held an associate’s degree in liberal arts and science and a baccalaureate degree in history.

In describing his role as a student advocate and advisor, Max spoke about his responsibility:

Our real responsibility would be to support, not just looking at this as academically, but as a personal thing, because with each situation, academically there's something behind it. Not that we're gonna go prying for it, but is it something that's affecting? Is it academic or personal? What are your responsibilities? How are you growing as a person, not just as an academic?
Max believed that the purpose of general education was “about adapting the college-level work and college-level responsibilities, as well as [developing] critical thinking.”

**Michelle.** Michelle had eight years of experience working in academic advising. After graduating from college, Michelle worked for a non-profit organization that supported low-income, first-generation college students, assisting them with the college application process and supporting their progress toward college graduation. After completing an interdisciplinary degree that infused urban studies, planning, and architecture, Michelle went on to pursue a graduate degree in higher education administration and policy. Upon receiving her graduate degree, Michelle worked as an academic advisor for four years at a private college, and later on, assumed her current role as a senior academic advisor at a public baccalaureate-granting college.

When asked to describe her primary role and responsibilities as an advising practitioner, Michelle shared:

My main role is to make students understand that they have someone that they can come to if they have any questions or concerns, that I’m providing that inclusive feeling; you’re here, here’s the assistance, I’m here to assist you to make sure you get to that goal. Not just to tell students what classes they need to take, yes, that’s an important part and making sure they’re on track, but helping them to solve problems, helping them to be proactive students and not reactive students. Helping them to find answers for themselves.

Describing herself as an advocate of liberal arts education, Michelle said general education allowed students to “explore things that you never thought you would take, this is the time to do that, because it may open up a door for something that you never thought that you
would actually be pursuing.” Furthermore, Michelle felt that general education provided opportunities for students to develop skills needed for their college-level studies.

**Natalia.** Natalia had nearly five years of experience working in academic advising. She held an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree in forensic psychology. Natalia worked as a peer advisor during her undergraduate and graduate studies in the office in which she is currently serving as an academic advisor. While she had the intention of pursuing a career in criminal justice and forensic psychology, Natalia indicated that her experience as a peer advisor, coinciding with a full-time opportunity in academic advising, led to her realization that she wanted to pursue a career in higher education and academic advising.

When asked about what she perceived to be the key responsibilities of an academic advisor, Natalia said:

The ultimate goal for advisors is just ensuring student success, so a lot of that, I feel like, has to do with how you connect with students, how you follow up with students if you actually have the ability to do so, depending on what your institution is and how they work, but that’s the ultimate goal and I feel like every advisor might feel like they have different responsibilities, but in terms of just making sure that students are doing their best, recognizing their strengths and also just recognizing their weaknesses as well, but not letting the negatives of having weakness drive them through life, but realizing how it can actually be turned into strength, like let’s focus on that and see where that goes.

In reflecting on the purpose of general education, Natalia viewed general education:

Just a way to expand your perspectives, or just to expand your knowledge on general subjects… It could be a way for students to just kind of take classes that they never would have thought that they, you know, would ever take.
**Olivia.** Olivia had four years of experience working in academic advising and nearly a decade of experience working in higher education. She holds an undergraduate degree in media management and a graduate degree in industrial and organizational psychology. Natalia worked as a residence hall director for approximately five years prior to joining the academic advising field. While working in residence life, Natalia often discussed with students about their academics and transition to college life. When considering a career switch from residence education, Olivia felt that the work of academic advising would allow her to have and foster those one-on-one conversations with her students.

In conveying what she believed to be the key responsibility of an academic advising practitioner, Olivia said:

… helping students clarify their goals and what they are looking to get out of their college experiences. Reinforce with them that it’s not necessarily one major equals one job. It’s not so specific and that it’s more about what skills do you want to develop, what do you want them to learn. I feel like a lot of students come in just thinking I have to check off boxes and trying to get them to realize that it’s more than that.

When asked about the intent and goals of general education, Olivia believed:

[General education] forces them to look at different areas of study that they might not look at on their own if just given the choice to choose anything, so it broadens their horizon. A lot of times I feel like it provides them with an opportunity to experiment, especially if they’re unsure of what major they want to pursue. To experiment in different areas and it’s almost without penalty.
Research Findings

This study was intended to explore the roles and practices of academic advising in general education. A generic qualitative research method, general inductive analysis (GIA), was used to frame the analysis of this study. The chief purpose of the inductive approach in qualitative research is to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). In analyzing the data collected from interviewing the study participants, three salient themes were identified to answer the overarching question regarding the ways in which academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students understanding general education. The three salient themes were identified to answer the research questions are:

1) Advisors serve in multiple roles in guiding students through general education;
2) Advisors face challenges that affect their general education advising; and
3) Advisors see their learner-practitioner role in supporting their students in general education.

Theme 1: Advisors serve in multiple roles in guiding students through general education.

One of the objectives of this study was to document the roles that academic advisors played, through the lens of the advising practitioners, in helping students understand general education as a component of their undergraduate studies. The first theme emerged from the interview data with academic advisors illuminated the various roles in which they served in guiding students through their general education coursework.

Information disseminator. Information disseminator is a significant role in academic advisors’ work in making sure that students understand the general education requirements for which they are responsible to obtain a degree. All of the study participants revealed their role in
informing students about general education requirements, as well as academic policies that governed general education in the undergraduate degree, as a key responsibility in general education advising. Natalia asserted that she and her colleagues make certain that students were aware that they, the advisors, are the “general education experts” and students should speak with an academic advisor whenever they needed consultation on anything pertaining to general education requirements and policies for their degree.

In order for students to complete their undergraduate degree successfully and efficiently, all participants believed all students be provided with sufficient and transparent information on degree requirements, which included general education. Anne, Bianca, Mary, and Natalia stated that they put general education as one of the most important topics in their advising conversations with students. Mary explained the ways in which she approached general education advising with her students:

I almost all the time do a gen ed check when they come in and I try to tell them how everything fits in. How their classes fit in to fulfilling general education and make sure that they have the list of classes that will fulfill those requirements. I make sure that if they are sure about a particular major that they know that there is an overlap [with general education].

Similarly, Bianca identified general education as a priority topic in her advising with students, emphasizing that students’ understanding of general education is foundational to their academic and educational planning:

I try to get through gen ed first, make sure they know what they need, and then move on to the next part, which is really important for planning. We need to look out for until the end of your degree to really understand what your undergrad is going to look like.
Anne described her approach to making sure that her students were provided with information on their general education requirements:

Through my sessions with them, and the information that I'm providing to them. I'm very detailed when I go over their gen ed requirements. I take it as far as going through the course offerings sheet to also let them know within each gen ed requirement, these are your choices within each category, and we talk a little bit about what those choices are to highlight which disciplines may be a good fit for them.

Whereas Anne provided her students with curricular information, including the courses that satisfied the various categories of general education, Michelle highlighted the importance of informing students about degree progress tracking tools, such as DegreeWorks. This is an electronic tool used by the university to assist students who needed to locate information on general education, monitor their general education requirements, and identify unmet requirements in their degree. Michelle states she must ensure that:

[Students] understand first and foremost their DegreeWorks--so where that is so that they can see what they are missing what they still need to take going over into more detail, those classes they need to take for their gen ed.

In addition to informing students about general education requirements, these participants discussed the necessity to inform students about the rules and policies that are associated with the general education curriculum, which included grading policies, specific area requirements, and the allowance of overlapping requirements between general education and their major.

Olivia provided an example of one of the key cardinal rules that she needed her students to learn from their advising conversations:
Our gen eds have some very specific rules. There's some things that I have to touch on and make sure that they walk away knowing. One of the big things being we have a foreign language requirement as part of our general education requirement. They need to do two semesters of a foreign language. The foreign language goes in very specific areas of our general education requirements. I need them to walk away knowing not only do they have to do two semesters of the same foreign language, but those courses are going to go in these two specific areas.

**Navigator.** Navigator is a prominent role in which academic advisors serve to help students “unpack” general education requirements and policies. In addition to delivering curricular and requirement information to students, all participants noted the need to “unpack” general education with the students by translating the requirements prescribed by the institution. While students were provided with documents and undergraduate catalogs that outlined degree requirements, general education, and course-choices, Anne shared “it’s somewhat naïve of us to just put it on paper and say [to the students], read this in the catalog or read this on the website and understand it.”

Bianca shared similar thoughts as Anne’s, explaining “a lot of [the general education information] could be self-explanatory, but as an advisor, myself in this institution, our purpose is to translate these general education requirements [to the students].” Moreover, since general education is distinctively disconnected from student’s major, students oftentimes perceive general education courses as “electives,” to which Bianca says she debunks the misconception by “translating the difference for them of what an elective is versus general education requirement.”

Using “solving a puzzle” as an analogy to describe his role in guiding students through their general education requirements, Max described:
It's about really solving that puzzle with them and helping them understand how the curriculum changes and what it means, so our responsibility is really to not just tell them what they need to do.

In Max’s example, the puzzle represented the different pieces of general education and degree requirements; he emphasized the advisor’s role was to be present and help students navigate through the various pieces of their degree requirements and putting them into a coherent picture.

Unlike major curricula, which were more structured with prerequisites and course sequencing incorporated into the program, the general education curriculum often provided students with many course choices from which to choose for fulfilling their general education requirements. All participants all describe their role in helping students navigating through a maze of course-choices and policies that govern general education at their respective institution.

Since general education is a set of requirements that must be completed by all students, Olivia said that it important to convey, “the purpose of gen eds are so [students] can expand past their major… getting students to really understand that and understand that this is a choice.”

With a considerable list of choices for each of the general education categories, Olivia saw the need to help students navigate through a smorgasbord of course-choices to ensure that their course selection aligned with their needs, including the overlapping coursework between general education and their intended major. Olivia described:

A lot of times students want to know, so focused on the major, they need a course in this general education category and there’s a list of 30 courses that would fit that category, but which one is going to go best towards my major. A lot of it is making sure the students understand that these are not major-related. Occasionally, there's a general education
course that's a prerequisite for a major, that would be a good step for that student. That's fine and I would let them know.

Fabian also used students’ major to anchor his advising discussion about general education choices in relation to their major. Here is an example from Fabian:

Let's see how [gen ed] ties into your major, why these general education requirements tie into the major. Or even if they don't necessarily tie as in a link, but how it prepares you to your major, so that the student doesn't walk away saying, "Oh my God, I have to take another class that has nothing to do with my specific degree.

While some students begin college with an idea as to which major they wish to pursue, some advisors point out that many are unsure of their intended major when entering college. Mary, Natalia, and Olivia, shared their approaches for working with students who were undecided as to which major to pursue, encouraging them to explore as it is one of the key purposes of general education. Mary explained:

A lot of times, especially when they come in as freshmen, and they say that they don't know what they want to major in, then I say, "That's fine, that's what general education is for. Don't take three history courses to fulfill your requirements, but you can. Take a history, take a philosophy, take an art history, take an anthropology course. Try to take a lot of different courses to fulfill those requirements. Maybe you'll find something that you love, and you had no idea what it was about.”

In addition to helping student navigate the course-choices for general education, participants discussed the importance of navigating the complex rules and policies that were applicable to the general education curriculum. Again, while documents and institutional literatures provided students with information on their requirements, participants were
sympathetic to the fact that rules and regulations are forever-changing and students often find themselves trapped and confused in general education. Olivia stated:

The rules confuse them. I think we have a lot of specific rules and they're confused easily.

Again, I don't blame them, it can be confusing especially since there's no preparation for something like this. Our general requirements are like, here's a category fill it up but be mindful that you need to do 200-level courses, and be mindful of this.

Michelle spoke about the major curricular changes made to the general education curriculum at her college, which generated confusions among students, especially during the transition period. She discussed the importance of making sure that students are taking the right courses, in accordance to their matriculation and catalog year. Michelle explained:

In the past few years, the school had done a few changes to gen ed, where one example was before the current gen ed, students were required to do a language, as far as their degree, and now students under the new gen ed don't have to do a language, so sometimes students, when they're self-advising themselves, they'll go online, and they'll research what's needed for the gen ed. But, it may not be for their specific catalog year. And so we have student coming in saying I'm taking a language because I thought I needed to and I'm like, "No!" That was since pre-2014!

Negotiator. Negotiator is an advising role that academic advisors hold when working with students who are resistant to the notion of general education. Participants in the study indicated that they were often confronted by students about their general education requirements; most advisors indicate that students, especially those entering college with a major or career in mind, challenged the notion of general education, which, according to the students, had no relevance to the area in which they planned on pursuing, both academically and professionally.
Since general education was a critical component of their degree requirement, participants discussed their role in negotiating these requirements were met prior to graduation. Anne discussed working with her students, informing them that general education courses were non-negotiable if they intended to graduate:

> Hopefully by the end of their session with me, they know and it's very clear to them that this general education piece is a large component. And I always tell them, regardless of your major, every student on this campus has to complete this gen ed sheet, regardless of if you're undecided or you change your major. This is part of your degree.

Natalia recalled moments of her advising with students in which they were not particularly thrilled about the requirement to take general education courses and described one of her approaches to making general education more appealing. She shared:

> It's definitely something that students are not excited to take. It's just more of I need to get this out of the way, then I can get to my major. And then there's also certain students that, depending on their major, a lot of the major classes or just prerequisites to their major can be done within the gen ed, so that could be another way to sell it to students, that you actually are taking care of your major by doing some of your gen ed requirements, so that's just another way.

While some students found general education irrelevant to their studies, several participants spoke about how students showed resistance to taking general education courses. This was because they had a fear in certain general education areas, particularly in mathematics and sciences. Olivia described a scenario in which students were concerned about taking their science requirement and her strategy in negotiating the requirement with the student:
Getting students that will just be like, "I hate science." "All right, well we're going to have to ..." we got two science classes on the way here--science based courses. Students pick a subject, there's always one subject that a student is not too thrilled about taking. I think trying to ... excited is the wrong word because I get it there's always going to be one subject that you're not going to be excited about. Making sure that you still ... You don't let your ... Science or math are probably good examples that if we're not excited about doing our math course, okay but don't let that hold you back. By not taking that course it's going to hold you back from future courses.

**Sense-maker.** *Academic advisors attempt to help students find meaning and purpose in their general education course-taking.* The roles already presented in this section focused primarily on the necessity to ensure appropriate and timely course-taking. The last prominent role that all study participants shared related to their responsibility in pushing their students to look at general education more thoughtfully than “going through the motions” of completing requirements. While ensuring students’ successful and timely completion of general education is a key goal in advising, all participants shared how their role was necessary in helping students make sense of general education in relation to their major and interests, as well as the new lenses that they may develop through general education course-taking.

General education was and still is a new concept for students entering college. To them, it seems nonsensical. Bianca talked about the advisors’ responsibility to ensure students did not feel inadequate. She said:

Not to make [students] think that I think they're stupid for not understanding, or anything like that. It's very much, I know this makes no sense for now, but I'm going to explain this to you so you can understand why this is a requirement, because I know that for them it
doesn't make any sense and it's very confusing. I do feel a sense of responsibility to explain that to them.

Although general education courses may resemble the subjects that students had completed in high school, students may find some of the subject areas or disciplines unfamiliar; consequently, they may not place much value on general education courses. Anne said:

A lot of the gen ed courses are interdisciplinary. They can intersect, so students may not see the value in taking ... Well, if I'm studying counseling and psychology, why do I need philosophy or urban studies or certain courses? Then you can show them that certain courses and disciplines do tie in based on what area you're looking to maybe do, study counseling or psychology or education and so on.

Anne’s example illustrated the need for advisors to help students think on a much deeper level about general education courses, including those that were interdisciplinary by nature, and how such courses could have underlying relationships to the field they wish to pursue academically and professionally.

Jazz discussed how general education courses could potentially help students gain new lenses through which to further broaden their perspectives on their chosen field. Jazz shared an example of her advising with a business student in completing a course in the general education category entitled, “World Cultures and Global Issues”:

If you're gonna be in business, do you think you're just gonna be punching numbers? No. You need that social connection, because at the end of the day, there is gonna be a social connection and interaction with not only your colleague next door, but business and global issues.
Similarly, Fabian discussed how his advising conversations with students encouraged them to think about the possibility of gaining new perspectives through a social science course in general education for a finance major:

"Alright, so you have to take these general education requirements, but how do they tie to your interests? "Well, don't you think that someone who's going into banking should also understand the sociological impact that some of these things might have?" So let's look if there are any general education classes that would maybe touch on some of these topics or maybe just introduce you to a subject that you never thought.

While advisors often try to tie general education to students’ major and interests, Bianca explained that it was not always successful. Rather, Bianca encouraged students to take advantage of taking general education courses that seemingly had no direct relationship to their major or interest as a way to gain new lenses and perspectives. Bianca asked students:

How can we use it as an advantage just to learn something new, or maybe make them think of ways that it could apply to what they wanna do in the future… they don’t see it that way because they get so caught up in titles and departments that are teaching these classes.

**Theme 2: Advisors face challenges that affect their general education advising.**

In sharing their roles in general education advising, study participants also highlighted some of the challenges that they encounter in their work with students on general education requirements. Two particular prominent and recurring themes unearthed from their narratives were: 1) lack of awareness and understanding and 2) institutional constraints and limitations.

**Lack of awareness and understanding.** *Academic advisors recognize that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of general education among students.* All participants
stated that there was a lack of awareness about general education among incoming college students. They questioned whether college-bound high school students had received adequate information about general education as a vital component in American undergraduate education.

Most of the participants shared examples of their students seeing general education course-taking as merely something that they needed to “get through,” and they did so by just going through the motions because they would not graduate otherwise. Reflecting on his experience working with students on general education, Fabian said: “most of the students I see want a checklist of the requirements they need to graduate and how to get them done as quickly and easily as possible.”

Similar to Fabian’s view, Jazz and Olivia believed that students did not see the importance, such as skills development, in taking general education courses. Olivia said:

I don't think students realize the benefit of these skills and how that can apply towards their future. [Students] think these are courses that [they] have to check off because the school says [they] have to. Really the writing that you're going to be able to develop, your writing skills, and your communication skills whether that be non-verbal, verbal.

Anne, Jazz, Max, Michelle, Natalia, and Olivia talked about students’ focus on their major, leading students to overlook general education as a vital and valuable component of their undergraduate studies. Anne shared that “some of them want to jump right into their major. Students asked, “Why do I have to take these gen ed courses? What is the point of me taking this?” Some students, according to Michelle, only wanted to take “what matters and what matters to them are major courses.” Elaborating, Michelle added:

You hear that conversation with first year students, like, 'I don't want to waste my time with this liberal arts and electives. I want to take what's relevant. I'm gonna take what I
need.’ Which, in their head, is major courses in the major they're thinking of pursuing.

Because I think it's been fed to them that you've got to go to college, so you can get a degree in a certain area, that you can guarantee a job in. I just feel like there’s so much pressure that the current generation is dealing with, that sometimes what is lost is that desire for learning and that opportunity to be engaged in their learning.

In Michelle’s example, students perceived general education as elective courses, suggesting that students did not possess a full grasp of the role of general education in the overall undergraduate curriculum and viewed general education coursework as bearing very little relevance to what they are pursuing.

Additionally, participants shared their concern about students’ being socialized into thinking that they had to be “major-focused” even before they arrived on a college campus. Mary asserted, “society in general says you have to go to school to be something, not to learn.” Anne believed that college-bound high school students were not well informed about general education, despite the fact that all college students had to complete some form of general education requirements in college. Anne said:

Students are not well-informed as they're transitioning out of high school to understand what to really expect when they enter college and what that means as a whole… they want to focus tunnel-vision on what their end goal is, which is their major, not really understanding that there's this general education component that plays a huge role in completing their degree.

While Anne spoke about the lack of information provided to students in high school, Max questioned whether colleges do an adequate job in informing prospective students about general education. Max said:
I don't know exactly what institutions are doing to let students know [about general education] besides putting it on the website and just saying "Okay, prospective students, here's what you have to do." So, at some point, they're assuming that students are doing their due diligence by researching and saying "Okay, here's what to expect [about general education].

**Institutional constraints and limitations.** Staffing and time constraints make it challenging for academic advisors to have in-depth discussions about general education. While academic advisor recognized that many students did not fully grasp and embrace general education, these participants discussed how both the advisor-to-staff ratio and time constraints made it challenging for advisors to engage students in more in-depth and meaningful discussions about the intent, purpose, and value of general education. All of the participants in the study indicate that their institutions did not have a caseload advising system, explaining that the current staffing level did not allow for a caseload-advising model. Students at their institutions were not assigned to work with one advisor, although students were welcome to return to the same advisor if they wished to do so to maintain advising continuity.

Fabian used the term “transactional” to describe the type of advising that he provided during walk-in advising sessions. Fabian elaborated:

We’re just talking about this one requirement and they’re still not understanding. We’re 30 minutes in and we still need to finish with the rest of the classes, but I can’t spend too much time explaining why this class is important.

Michelle discussed the time and staffing constraints at her college, making it extremely challenging to have detailed discussions with students about general education. Michelle shared:
There’s only eight advisors and for a population of 15,000 students, so we have days where we do what’s called an express session, where we’re meeting with students for 15 minutes. Going into that detail is not even possible; the main goal at that point is to make sure students are aware—this is what you need to take, this is where you are stand right now, are you on track? This is what you need to take, make sure you register for these classes because [otherwise] it will disrupt you being on track.

Bianca also shared Michelle’s sentiment about the staffing constraints, suggesting that additional advising was needed:

There’s a lot of time constraints just because of the amount of staffing that we have versus the amount of students, so the ratio of student to advisor is definitely off. In order to really get that specific and feel that confidence that I’ve spent enough time to explain this to them, it would require more staff on this end for sure.

While the non-caseload advising model and the walk-in advising model may not be conducive to having in-depth general education conversations, Anne took pride in her ability to foster ongoing advising relationships with her students, thus affording her the opportunities to delve into general education conversations more intentionally. Anne shared:

I’ve created relationships with students and they come back to me over a period of time; as we’re choosing courses for the following semester, we can start digging a little deeper and really looking into the meaning behind why you are taking these gen ed courses.

Anne believed that “it takes over a period of time to really get students to understand the importance of gen ed.”
Theme 3: Advisors see their learner-practitioner role in supporting their students in general education.

In discussing their academic advising roles and practices in general education, participants reflected on the ways in which they worked with students on understanding general education. These advisors talked about the opportunities and possibilities in further developing their knowledge, understanding, and skills to better support their work with students on general education.

Deepening understanding of general education. Academic advisors see their role in becoming learner-practitioners and deepening their understanding of general education in order to help their students think more thoughtfully about general education. A majority of the participants in the study believe that they could learn more about general education that was beyond the requirements. In particular, most advisors express that they are not particularly familiar with, or well versed in, the expected learning outcomes in each of the general education categories.

When asked whether she discusses with students about learning outcomes in general education, Anne stated:

To be honest, through my sessions with students, I don't find that I’ve had the opportunity to get that deep. Maybe it's personally not knowing how to connect [general education and learning outcomes]. Maybe even possible, to be honest, not having the correct training in terms of how to really talk about gen ed in an advising session that links in outcomes, something I would be interested in learning and really digging deeper.

Additionally, Jazz indicated that in order for her to help students understand general education, she would need to understand the expected learning outcomes in her college’s general education
curriculum. Jazz said, “I think it will be helpful for advisors to actually be trained on those core skills [and outcomes] that the students are supposed to obtain through general education.”

Besides the learning outcomes, advisors spoke about the need to be more knowledgeable about different academic disciplines and their place within the general education curriculum in order to help students develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for general education. Fabian stated:

How can I teach a student about something that I have absolutely no understanding of, or very little understanding of? So cross-training would be necessary. I think a bit of an immersion into each department because it would serve a similar purpose for us.

**Fine-tuning their advising practice.** Academic advisors see the need to learn and fine-tune the ways in which they articulate general education to students. All participants in this study expressed an interest and a need in refining the ways in which they articulated general education to better support students’ understanding of general education as a vital component of their undergraduate studies. The previous subtheme illuminated the need for advisors to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of general education in relation to learning outcomes and students’ skills building. This subtheme highlighted the advisors’ interest in sharpening their skills in explaining and verbalizing the purpose and value of general education. Natalia stated that “professional development or training could help advisors better explain to students the gen ed requirements and its importance. It’s definitely something that we have to figure out.”

Michelle reflected on her advising training and she shared:

I never had [training] that focused on how to verbalize, how to articulate, how to make students understand liberal arts education and gen ed. I think it would be a benefit to do that more. I would be very interested because I feel personally I could verbalize it, I can
improve on how I verbalize it as well to students. I think there are different tools I can
take out of the toolkit that I can use to better make them understand gen ed.

Bianca also reflected on her initial training as an advisor, as she shared, “I wish there was a
component or workshop that all advisors had to sit through to learn different ways of explaining
[general education] to students.” Bianca suggested that novice advisors could learn a great deal
from seasoned advising practitioners who expertly explained to students about not just the
general education requirements, but also the purpose and value of general education.

Similar to Bianca’s thoughts on learning from other advising practitioners, Olivia
indicated that she would be interested in engaging in professional dialogues with and learning
from advising practitioners at the other colleges. Olivia said:

We don't often get the chance to do it, but I'd be curious to see what similar schools to
mine in our university system are doing, especially the schools are going to have these
similar gen ed requirements. What are other schools like mine doing? What are other
advisors like me doing to answer. When students ask why do I have to take this? What is
this going to do to help me?

Olivia added, “I think this [interview] has just brought up for me how great it would be to have
more conversations that are gen ed focused and how we’re getting students to understand the
purpose, be a little bit excited at least.”

**Conclusion**

This study was intended to explore the roles and practices of academic advising in
helping students understand general education. Nine academic advising practitioners participated
in this research study and provided insights into their advising work with students on general
education. Chapter four presented the results derived from the data collected through individual
interviews. Three salient and emergent themes were identified from the interview data: 1) Advisors serve in multiple roles in guiding students through general education; 2) Advisors face challenges affecting their general education advising; and 3) Advisors see their learner-practitioner role in supporting their students in general education.

The following and final chapter will revisit the problem of practice and discuss the findings in relation to the research question, literature, and theoretical framework. Additionally, implications for practice and recommendations for future research are identified and discussed.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

This concluding chapter will revisit the problem of practice and the methodology employed to conduct this research study. This chapter will present the key research findings and the ways in which the findings addressed the overarching research question. Furthermore, it includes a discussion of the key research findings in relation to the existing literature and the theory used to guide this research. This final chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

General education is a distinctive feature in the American undergraduate curriculum and a commonly shared academic experience among college students (AAC&U, 2015; Boyer, 1988; Hachtmann, 2012). While general education is intended to expose students to a range of academic disciplines and develop critical skills, faculty and college leaders contend that students struggle with making meaning of and identifying connections among their general education coursework (Benander & Lightner, 2005). Students perceive general education as a roadblock or merely a series of courses on a degree checklist, instead of an opportunity for their intellectual growth (Guertin, 2015; Johnston, et al., 1991). Facilitating and promoting students’ understanding of general education has been, and remains to be, a challenge at many American colleges and universities (Kirk-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015; Lowenstein, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate experience. Academic advising is purported to have promising potential in supporting the learning in and understanding of general education. While the literature on academic advising has become more robust, there had been limited investigation into the ways in which academic
advising contributed to students’ understanding of general education and the ways in which advisors can help students see general education as a meaningful part of their undergraduate experience (Egan, 2015). The identity, nature, and practice of academic advising will become more defined as we continue to examine advising through scholarly inquiry (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Without capturing the voices and considering the perspectives of the practitioners regarding their work in general education advising, the challenge of guiding students toward a fuller understanding of general education shall only persist. This inquiry was intended to contribute to the literature and the field of academic advising by exploring the role of academic advising in helping students understand general education through the lens of the academic advisors.

**Revisiting the Methodology and Research Question**

A general qualitative research method, general inductive analysis (GIA), was used to frame the analysis of this study. This inquiry relied heavily on the participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2007), particularly through “interactive research-participant dialogue” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with nine practicing academic advisors, all of whom worked in the same urban public university system located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In order to collect rich, descriptive data that aligned with the research purpose and question of this study, these advisor-participants had a minimum of two years of academic advising experience and had general education advising as one of their key advising responsibilities. All interviews were conducted individually, and subsequently audio-recorded and transcribed to allow for data analysis.

The chief purpose of the inductive approach in qualitative research is to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data”
After all interviews were transcribed, the researcher followed a five-step process of inductive coding (Thomas, 2006), which included cleaning and close reading of raw data, creating categories, reducing overlapping and redundant codes and categories, and refining categories. Thomas’ (2006) general inductive approach to data analysis places an emphasis on the researcher’s thorough readings of raw data, and subsequently unveiling emergent and prominent themes from analyzing raw and complex qualitative data.

Chapter four included background information on each of the participants, as well as their perspectives on their key responsibilities as an advising practitioner and the purpose of general education. Through an iterative and a careful data analysis process, salient themes were identified from the interview data. As suggested by Thomas (2006), the reporting of findings should include a label of the theme or category, followed by a brief description of the theme or category, and a quotation from the raw text to elaborate on the meaning of the theme or category.

This research inquiry was guided by, and designed to answer this research question: *How do academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students understand their general education?* The following section presents a summary of the research findings, answering the research question. Additionally, a discussion of the research findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework is also included.

**Discussion of Research Findings**

After an iterative coding process of the raw interview data, three salient themes emerged from the interview data collected from interviewing these nine advising practitioners, answering the research question. The salient themes emerged out of the data are as follows:

1) Advisors serve in multiple roles in guiding students through general education;

2) Advisors face challenges that affect their general education advising; and
3) Advisors see their learner-practitioner role in supporting their students in general

**Multiple and robust advising roles in general education.** The role of academic advising in general education is more complex than merely informing students about their requirements. One of the primary goals of this study was to capture the voices of the practicing academic advisors and, through their practitioner’s lens, identify their role in guiding students on general education as a vital part of their undergraduate studies. Based on the narratives from the participants, it was evident that these academic advising practitioners perceived and conducted their role as more than simply providing students with requirement information and completing degree checklists. The participants in this study described their practices in general education advising, and the following distinctive roles emerged.

*Information disseminator.* Academic advisors in this study resoundingly stated that providing students with transparent and accessible information on general education to be one of their most essential responsibilities. Since the completion of general education was mandatory in order to earn an undergraduate degree, academic advisors placed the provision of degree information as critically important. As Musser and Yoder (2013) indicated, academic advisors recognize their primary advising role as an agent of degree completion, disseminating timely and accurate degree information is essential.

In describing her approach to working with students on general education, Mary shared, “Basically my approach is, even 99% of the time, I will fill out … I will give them a general education check and try to let them know what requirements they still have to fulfill.” In addition to providing students with information on general education and the degree framework, advisors in this study discussed the necessity to provide students with information on institutional policies that govern general education. The role of information disseminator
demonstrated the academic advisors’ concern about students’ appropriate course-taking and meeting general education requirements. The role of information disseminator fits the description of the prescriptive advising approach as it primarily focuses on the function of delivering degree information to the students (Crookston, 1972, 1994), corresponding to the notion that academic advisors play a role in facilitating students’ degree completion.

*Translator and navigator.* As Anne expressed during the interview, “it’s somewhat naïve of us to just put it on paper and say [to the students], read this in the catalog or read this on the website and understand it.” While the dissemination of general education information was recognized as a vital component by academic advisors, all participants in this study realized the same level of importance in helping students “unpack” the complexity and nuances of general education. Academic advisors guided students by navigating the innumerable course-choices provided to students to fulfill their general education requirements. Additionally, participants in this study spoke about a significant amount of time spent on helping students navigating curricular and policy changes that affected students’ general education course-taking. While information on general education was readily available to students, academic advisors in this study were sympathetic as curricular information and changes could be extremely confusing and convoluted to students, which may affect students’ ability to complete their degree efficiently.

In the process of translating and navigating the terrain of general education, academic advisors needed to engage students in conversations about their interests, as well as their intended majors. Rather than giving students a checklist of general education courses to take, this prompted the academic advisors to proactively engage students in more dialogic advising conversations, taking into consideration of the students’ interests and goals. The translator and navigator roles of advising are supported by the notion of developmental advising, which takes
into consideration of the students’ personal and professional goals (Crockett, 1978; Crookston, 1978; Grites, 2013; Smith & Allen, 2006).

**Negotiator.** Study participants acknowledged the fact that many of their students were unhappy being required to enroll in general education coursework. Participants reported that students often perceived general education coursework to be irrelevant and disconnected from their academic and professional aspirations; these participants’ observation aligns with what the literature has been discussing about students’ lack of motivation in taking general education coursework (Gaff, 1981; Kirp, 2003; Stearn, 2002). Some of the participants discussed their strategy in connecting general education with students’ major to reduce students’ anxiety and combat their reluctance to enroll in general education courses (Stearn, 2002). Furthermore, some participants discussed the students’ hesitancy to take certain types of general education courses due to the students’ perceived weakness in specific academic disciplines. Olivia described a scenario in which she was able to diminish a student’s anxiety about taking a science course; in her example, she explained her approach of highlighting courses that were interdisciplinary, which in this case, a literature-based science course, appeared less intimidating for students who self-identified as being weak in science and technology. This particular role exemplified the advisors’ role in negotiating these requirements and ensuring students’ degree completion, while facilitating more interdisciplinary and intentional learning through general education advising (Egan, 2015).

**Sense-maker.** The study participants unanimously spoke intensely about their role in ensuring that students take the appropriate general education coursework, while being mindful of the pertinent policies and rules, to shepherd them to the graduation. In addition to helping students select the appropriate general education courses in accordance to their program of study,
academic advisors believed that they have the responsibility in helping students make sense and meaning of their general education courses. These study participants also described their role in helping students make meaning of the general education requirements in relation to their interests, majors, and development of critical skills. The role in helping students make sense of their general education is in line with the learning-centered advising paradigm, which scholars (Darling, 2015; Egan, 2015; Hemwall & Trachte, 1999, 2005; Lowenstein, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2014; Takahashi, 1982; Yoduf, 2003) believe that advising practitioners could play an influential role in facilitating their search for meaning of general education in relation to the other parts of their undergraduate studies.

In particular, several participants described their conversations with students about gaining new lenses and perspectives through general education. This demonstrated the academic advisors’ efforts in encouraging students not to “go through the motions” with general education; rather, they served as sense-makers to their students, helping them to think more thoughtfully and intentionally about general education as a valuable learning component of their degree. In essence, study participants believed that students ought to understand not just the mandate of general education, but also the intent, value, and potential in general education course-taking to maximize their learning.

Academic advising practitioners provided students with academic guidance and intellectual mentorship. While many people interpret the role of academic advisors differently, the descriptive, interview data collected from these academic advising practitioners illustrated the role of academic advising within the context of general education to be more robust and complex. Based on their narratives, these academic advising practitioners were working to ensure that students met the necessary requirements for their degree, while attempting to help
them find some meaning and purpose in general education. In providing students with advising on general education, the advisors’ roles were in alignment with three prominent advising approaches: prescriptive, developmental, and learning-centered advising.

**Challenges in general education advising.** In discussing their roles and practices in general education advising, the participants in this study discussed challenges they faced in their advising work with students. The narratives of these participants illuminated two recurring and persistent challenges that academic advisors faced in their advising work with students on general education. The participants echoingly expressed that students had limited awareness and understanding of general education. Advisors asserted that incoming college students were not equipped with information about general education by the time they arrived on campus. This suggested that college students, including prospective and incoming college students, were not at all familiar with general education, even though it was, and still is a key undergraduate degree component at nearly all colleges and universities. Moreover, the major-centric mentality among college students gives students a “blinder” on coursework outside of their major, precluding them from fully grasping and embracing the values and benefits of general education.

Another challenge facing academic advisors was the staffing and time constraints at their institutions, limiting their ability to conduct more ongoing and dialogic advising conversations about the purpose, intent, and value of general education. Due to these staffing and time limitations, advisors felt that they needed to prioritize their conversations, which meant they placed a greater focus on identifying unmet general education requirements and helping them select the appropriate coursework to ensure that they completed the requirements for graduation.

**Becoming better advising learner-practitioners.** In considering their own professional learning needs, study participants expressed their interests in gaining and developing a fuller
understanding of general education. While academic advisors were well-versed in general education as academic requirements, they confessed that they were not particularly familiar with the learning outcomes that students were expected to achieve in each of the general education categories and in general education as a whole. Without examining and furthering their own understanding of general education, advisors may be unable to engage their students in more intentional and intellectual matters effectively. In conjunction with having a more sophisticated understanding of general education, the study participants saw the need to refine their skills in articulating general education, especially its purpose and values, to students. In reflecting on their professional advising training, advisors reported that they did not recall any training pertaining to the articulation of general education; the training they received largely focused on understanding general education as degree requirements, as well as the policies that govern the general education curriculum. Advisors believed professional dialogues and exchanges within the advising community about general education could help the academic advisors elevate the ways in which they provide general education advising and clarify the goals of general education advising.

The narratives provided by the academic reflected the evolvement of the academic advising field. Academic advising as a profession and field has evolved from merely facilitating course registration, to becoming more mindful of the students’ academic, personal, and professional goals, to considering the learning imperatives of academic advising in ensuring that students develop a logical understanding of their academic experience (White, 2015a). The distinctive roles emerged out of the participants’ narratives paint a fuller and clearer picture of the academic advising role in helping students understand general education. Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) suggest that the identity, nature, and practice of advising will become more
defined as there is continued examination of academic advising through scholarly inquiry. A gap in the literature on general education and academic advising still exists. This study, however, contributed to the literature by presenting the role of academic advising as one that helped students understand general education as being both robust and complex.

**Summary.** These findings affirmed the vital role that academic advisors played in guiding students through the completion of their general education. While most view academic advisors’ role as merely informing students about general education requirements, the narratives of the study participants illuminated the multifaceted and complex roles they played in general education advising. Academic advisors in this study recognized the importance of providing students with degree information on general education; however, it was clear that they did not perceive this to be their sole function or role as an academic advisor. Academic advisors who contributed to this study evidently employed various advising approaches to support their students, and this was supported by Fielstein’s (1994) assertion that prescriptive and developmental advising need not be mutually exclusive. The academic advisors in this study demonstrated that they perceived and conducted their advising role adaptively in response to their students’ individual needs, which is critical to ensuring that students’ needs are met and they find their advising experience productive and satisfactory (Hale, Graham & Johnson, 2009).

Academic advisors do not just *tell*; rather, they facilitated students’ understanding of general education by translating, navigating, negotiating, and making sense with them. The study participants’ narratives uncovered numerous challenges that they regularly faced, which posed limitations on their ability to have more in-depth and dialogic conversations with their students about general education and its potential. Finally, study participants reflected on their own
understanding of general education and expressed interests in furthering their understanding of
general education and enhancing their general education work with their students.

Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

Lowenstein’s (2014) integrative learning theory, as applied to academic advising, was
employed to frame this study. Additionally, it was used as a lens to explore academic advising
practitioners’ perspectives on their role in helping students understand general education.

Aligning with the learning-centered paradigm, the integrative learning theory, as explicated by
Lowenstein (2014) postulates that academic advising is a teaching function. The underpinning of
the integrative learning theory is the notion that academic advising is “a learning activity in
which students intentionally and reflectively integrate their academic learning into an education
that is a coherent whole” (Lowenstein, 2014, para. 1). The integrative learning theory of advising
suggests that the advising role goes beyond the dissemination of degree information and assisting
students with course selection.

Active participation in the advising process. Integrative learning theory of advising
posits that students must be actively participating in the advising process and not be passive
recipient of information. All of the participants in the study discussed making concerted efforts
to be developmental and holistic in their advising. Instead of giving their students a checklist of
courses they should and need to take, academic advisors in this study talked of the need to
engage their students in conversations to learn more about their goals, needs, and challenges.
Involving students in the advising process by asking probing questions is supported by
integrative learning theory. Lowenstein (1999, 2000, 2005, 2015) asserts students are
responsible for their own learning and sense-making in the advising activity; however, it is the
responsibility of the academic advisors to help students develop a logic of curriculum—an
understanding of the underlying relationships among courses and the interplay among degree components, which include general education, major, and co-curricular activities.

**Advising should be transformative.** All study participants asserted the importance of providing students with clear and accurate curricular information to facilitate timely degree completion. Although information dissemination is a key function of advising, the narratives provided by the participants, however, revealed that their roles stretched beyond disseminating requirement information and helping students select their general education courses. Integrative learning theory emphasizes that academic advising should be transformative, not transactional (Lowenstein, 2014). It is through educative and dialogic conversations that academic advisors push their students to think contemplatively and on a much deeper level about the role and learning potential of general education in their undergraduate studies. In so doing, the academic advisors did not only conduct advising transactions with their students; rather, they attempted to teach their students about other ways to conceptualize general education as a valuable learning experience. This type of learning through advising certainly should be considered a transformative learning activity.

**Meaning making.** A key tenet of the integrative learning theory is the element of meaning making (Lowenstein, 2014). Meaning making is one of the avenues by which academic advisors can facilitate and enhance students' learning; academic advisors encourage students to think intentionally and reflectively about their course-taking and consider how various components of their degree, such as general education and major, could coalesce into a coherent academic experience. Learning in advising occurs only when academic advisors guide students in making sense through intentional, dialogic advising conversations (Darling, 2015; Lowenstein,
The chief goal of such advising conversation is to encourage students to construct meaning out of their courses and learning.

Sense making is also one of the commonly employed strategies for advisors to combat students’ resistance to taking general education or help students find purpose and relevance in their general education coursework. Participants’ narratives exhibited their genuine interests and attempts in framing their advising around learning and making connections to the student’s major. However, it should be noted that the participants in this study spoke very little of their advising conversations with students about the connectivity among general education courses and provided limited insights into their conversations with students about the role of general education within the totality of the undergraduate curriculum.

Normative theory inspires the advising community to reflect and refine.

Lowenstein’s (2014) integrative learning theory of advising was a helpful lens through which to explore academic advising practitioners’ perspectives on their role in helping students understand general education. This study prompted the participants to contemplate the areas of learning and professional development that are in need of additional focus. The integrative learning theory is a normative theory of advising, which illuminates the fundamental ideals of academic advising and positions learning at the core of academic advising (Lowenstein, 2014). As suggested by Lowenstein (2014), the integrative learning theory of advising should inspire advising practitioners to critically examine their current practices and consider new approaches that would allow them to better support and maximize their students’ learning through academically-centered advising. Furthermore, participants discussed institutional constraints with staff, which precluded advisors from conducting advising that aligned with the learning-centered advising paradigm.
Limitations of the Study

The researcher recognized that there were several limitations to this study. This study was conducted at a public urban university system in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, with only nine practicing academic advisors who served as study participants. Given the specific institution at which the study was conducted, as well as the small number of participants in this study, the generalizability of the study findings is limited. It should be recognized that while these participants worked at the same university system, the advising policies, procedures, and goals at their respective campus may have varied, which could result in variabilities in their perspectives. The findings of this study emerged out of individual interviews conducted with these nine study participants, and no additional data was taken into account in this study. While the findings may not be generalizable to all institutions and advisor populations, it has great potential in furthering the dialogues surrounding advising policies and practices to situate learning at the core of academic advising, especially in helping students find meaning and relevance in general education.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Lowenstein (2014) asserts that integrative learning theory of advising ought to drive the ways by which administrators, faculty, staff, and students view the necessity of having adequate and effective advising to ensure that students learn to make meaning and sense of their education through advising. Using integrative learning theory as a lens could help advisors, advising centers, college leadership, and other advising partners think thoughtfully about the role of academic advising and clearly define the learning goals and expected educational outcomes of academic advising, especially within the context of general education requirements. This could potentially illuminate and address institutional barriers to providing intentional, learning-centered
advising, including staffing constraints that many of the study participants expressed as a challenge that affected their ability to engage students in more in-depth and purposeful conversations about learning.

In comparison to the prescriptive and developmental advising, integrative learning theory of advising (Lowenstein, 2014) is still a relatively new theory in the advising field, with which academic advising practitioners may not be familiar. The participants in this study spoke passionately about themselves as developmental and holistic advisors. While they described elements of learning-centered advising, it was apparent that these advising practitioners were not particularly familiar with the tenets of the learning-centered advising and how integrative learning theory could help them frame their advising work with students. Professional development and learning opportunities that focus on learning-centered advising and integrative learning theory could provide advising practitioners with an additional lens to understand the importance of their advising work and see that their role is, in fact, at the core of the learning mission of higher education.

In reflecting on their learning and professional development needs, the participants in the study spoke enthusiastically about their interests and needs in deepening their knowledge about general education and fine-tuning the skills in advising students on general education. While the advisors in the study were clearly well-versed in the requirements and policies of general education, several of them reported that they never had any training or professional development that focused on general education advising, including the articulation of the purpose, intent, and value of general education. Professional development and dialogues focusing on general education should be provided to academic advising practitioners on a continuous basis.
Finally, one of the challenges that academic advisors in this study discussed was the lack of awareness of general education in the incoming student population. General education is a common undergraduate experience at most American colleges and universities; yet, college-bound students are not equipped with any knowledge or awareness about this distinctive American undergraduate learning tradition. The academic advising community may consider helping other advising partners, such as their colleagues in pre-college program and college recruitment, understand more about general education and its significant role in their prospective students’ undergraduate studies. This could potentially tackle the lack of general education awareness challenge, where many college students find general education foreign concept when arriving on college campuses, thus making them perceive general education to be unnecessary and irrelevant.

Further Research

This study contributed to the literature and practice of advising by capturing the voices of the advising practitioners and exploring their perspectives on the role they played in helping students understand the general education curriculum. While the body of the literature on academic advising continues to grow, the field of academic advising must remain vigilant in their examination of the practices of academic advising through scholarly inquiry to further define the identity, nature, and purpose of academic advising within the academy. Building upon the findings in this study and the existing literature, further research may include:

- An exploration of effective advising pedagogies, tools, and policies that facilitate students’ search for meaning and connections among general education courses.
- A case study that incorporates the perspectives of the academic advisor, students, faculty, and college leadership to garner a deeper understanding of the landscape of general
education and academic advising, and to identify whether the perspectives of those groups are in alignment.

- A pilot study that employs learning-centered advising in a general education program and evaluates students’ ability to make meaning and connections among their general education courses and other components of their undergraduate degree. Such an evaluation study may include qualitative and quantitative data to explore whether integrative learning theory of advising facilitates and enhances students’ understanding of the general education curriculum.

- A broader study may be helpful to compare other large-size, multi-campuses university systems that have a similar university-wide general education curriculum or framework so as to identify promising practices in general education advising to promote students’ understanding of general education as an integral part of their undergraduate experience.

Conclusion

This study intended to explore the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand the general education curriculum. General education is a common undergraduate learning experience at most American colleges and universities; the challenge of engaging students in general education has been and continues to be a challenge in American higher education. Faculty and college leaders contend that students struggle to make connections between general education and major coursework, as well as apply knowledge and skills that they acquired in general education to upper-level coursework. Conversely, students perceive general education coursework to be irrelevant and unnecessary roadblocks that they need to “get them out of the way” before embarking on their major coursework. General education reformers
thought of academic advising as a vehicle for helping students understand the role of general education and its learning potential within the context of their college education.

While academic advising has evolved over the years in American higher education, and the literature on advising has become more robust, very limited investigation has been conducted into the role of academic advising in helping students the general education curriculum. This study garnered the voices and perspectives of the academic advising regarding the roles in general education. A key finding from the study was that academic advisors are far more than just disseminating information to students to make sure that they complete the right general education courses to earn their degree. They serve in roles that ensure that they are able to comprehend the requirements they need to complete, while taking into consideration their academic, personal, and professional goals, helping them to make sense and meaning of general education in relation to their interests and goals. The advisors’ narratives illuminated challenges that aligned with the concerns about students’ lack of understanding of general education. Furthermore, due to institutional constraints, academic advisors felt that staffing and time limitations precluded them from conducting the type of dialogic and intentional advising conversations that could engage students in thinking and reflecting on their general education on a more intellectual level.

The study allowed advisors to reflect on their learning and professional development needs, suggesting that ongoing and further professional dialogues about general education advising are warranted. Academic advisors in this study felt that they had to become learner-practitioners to ensure that they had a fuller understanding of the learning imperatives of both general education and advising in order to best support their students learning through academic advising.
Reflection

About eleven years ago, I left a position in college recruitment and admissions to take on a new role in academic advising. Admittedly, at the time when I accepted the advising position, my perspective on academic advising very much aligned with prescriptive advising, believing that an academic advisor’s job was to tell students which courses they needed to take in order to graduate from college. As I delved into the work of academic advising, I quickly realized that I was sorely mistaken, thinking that my job was merely giving out degree checklists to students. I was, however, glad that I decided to take a leap of faith and take on an academic advising role. It afforded me the opportunity to learn so much more about the inner workings of higher education and the ways in which different components of the higher education enterprise work in coordination to make certain that students’ needs are adequately met, and that they are provided with the proper resources and support to achieve their goals.

I knew that I was a decent academic advisor; however, it was when I began to immerse in the advising literature that I knew I needed to investigate general education and academic advising—the two loves that I have in higher education. The work and efforts that I poured into this dissertation research changed and sharpened my perspective on academic advising, which, in turn, change the ways in which I work with students in an academic advising setting. The main thesis of this research study illuminated the significance of facilitating students’ search for meaning and purpose through academic advising, and I am forever grateful for having discovered this through this inquiry as it helps me understand and solidify my purpose in higher education administration. Not only did I realize my purpose in higher education and academic advising, this research has given me the confidence to share what I have learned about learning-centered advising with my colleagues who work tirelessly with the students, making sure that they will
walk across the commencement stage. Now I ask—will these students walk across the commencement stage, being able to thoughtfully explain their learning and see the underlying relationships among the courses that they completed and in relation to their academic and professional goals?

Lowenstein’s (2014) integrative learning theory as applied to advising has given me key insights into the role of academic advising. This research experience has afforded me the opportunity to consider the ways in which scholarly inquiries could potentially further the movement in promoting learning-centered advising, and elevating and solidifying the role of academic advising in higher education. My role as a scholar-practitioner, who bridges research and theory to practice, will afford me opportunities to engage other advising practitioners, faculty, administrators, and students in intentional and purposeful dialogues about the role of academic advising and the ways in which academic advising facilitates integrative learning and meaning-making in undergraduate education. As I wrap up this chapter, I look forward to many exciting chapters to come, utilizing my newly developed scholar-practitioner lenses to improve the ways in which we help students search for meaning and purpose in their education.
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Appendix A: Informed Consent Document – Study Participants

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Sara Ewell, PhD, Principal Investigator; Ivan Scott Lee, Student Researcher
Title of Project: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Roles and Practices of Academic Advising in Facilitating Students’ Understanding and Search for Meaning in the General Education Curriculum

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will provide you with information about this research study; in addition, the student researcher will explain it to you in detail. You may ask the student researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a full-time academic advisor with a minimum of two years of academic advising experience.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to examine the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate learning experience through the lens of the advising practitioners.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in one in-person interview, which will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Interview questions will be developed in advance prior to the interview; follow-up and clarifying questions will be developed throughout the interview process. The interview will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for research purposes. Once your interview has been transcribed, you will be asked to review the interview transcript to verify the accuracy; you will also have an opportunity to provide feedback and/or make requests for changes to the interview transcript.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The in-person interview will take place at a location chosen by you and at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is minimal risk for participating in this study. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefits for you by participating in this research. However, you may feel engaged and inspired by thoughtfully reflecting on your role and practices in academic advising in supporting and promoting your students’ understanding of liberal arts and general education. The findings of this study may contribute to the advising literature and contribute to the advising community by starting a professional dialogue about promising practices in promoting general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate studies.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the principal investigator, Dr. Sara Ewell, and student researcher, Ivan Scott Lee, will have knowledge of your information and participation. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this study. You will be asked to select a “study name” as a pseudonym to use in this study to ensure anonymity. All data and documents pertaining to this study will be securely stored for a three-year period following the study; at
the conclusion of the three-year period, all data and documents pertaining to this study will be appropriately destroyed.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

Participation is entirely voluntary.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There is little risk in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this research study at any time during the research and interview process; you do not have to answer all questions and may decline to any questions posed by the researcher. If you do not participate in this study or decide to terminate your participation after beginning the study, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact Ivan Scott Lee, Student Researcher, at [redacted] and/or lee.iv@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator, at 617.373.6459 and/or s.ewell@northeastern.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4388, Email: a.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There will be no compensation provided for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no cost for your participation in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

Not applicable.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

__________________________________________________________________________

Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

__________________________________________________________________________

Printed name of person above

__________________________________________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

__________________________________________________________________________

Printed name of person above
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Research Study (Title): A Qualitative Study into the Roles and Practices of Academic Advising in Facilitating Students' Understanding and Search for Meaning in the General Education Curriculum

Interview Date and Time

Interview Location

Study Participant/Interviewee

Informed Consent Form signed, collected, and copy made for participant (Yes/No)  

Researcher requested participant’s permission to audio-record the interview (Yes/No)  

Study participant granted permission to audio-record the interview (Yes/No)  

Welcome
Thank you for your participation in this research study. I believe your voice and perspective, as an advising practitioner, will be very valuable to this study and will help us understand the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education. This interview will last approximately 50-90 minutes.

Interview questions have been developed prior to this interview; however, there may be follow-up questions throughout the interview process to obtain additional clarification or insights.

I want to assure you confidentiality of your participation and responses in this study. To ensure confidentiality, you will identify a “study name” for yourself, which will be used as a pseudonym throughout this interview and research process in this study. I will confirm your study name prior to asking the first interview question in a few minutes.

Purpose of Research
One of the responsibilities of academic advisors is to provide students with advisement and guidance on their general education requirements and course taking. However, scholars and higher education leaders contend that students struggle to understand the intent and value of general education. There is limited research on the roles and practices of academic advising, particularly through the lens of advising practitioners, in helping students develop a fuller understanding of general education. The purpose of this study is to examine the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate studies.

Research Question
This study is guided by this overarching research question: How do academic advisors perceive and conduct their roles in helping students understand general education?

Data Analysis
This is a qualitative study, and the goal of this research is to find emerging themes out of the rich narrative provided by the study participants in this study, who are full-time academic advisors with minimum of two years of academic advising experience. Your responses to the questions that I am about to ask are essentially the data that I am collecting for this study. In order to capture everything that you share, this interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes. I can assure you confidentiality of your participation and responses in this study. Only your “study name” will be used when quote are used from this interview in reporting the findings. Also, only your “study name” will be attached to the interview transcript.

Do you have any questions at this point?
Informed Consent Document
In compliance with the human subjects requirements at Northeastern University, study participants must review and verbally agree to this Informed Consent form and document. I am going to go over this form with you.

You are being asked to take part in an interview focused on the ways in which you perceive and conduct your role as an academic advisor in helping students understand general education as an integral part of their undergraduate studies. There is minimal risk for participating in this study, and there will be no direct benefits to you. Your participation and responses in this study will be treated and handled in a confidential manner. Only the principal investigator, Dr. Sara Ewell, and the Student Researcher, Ivan Scott Lee, will see the information that you provide during this interview. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary; you may withdraw from this study at any time during the interview and research process. If for any reason you wish to terminate your participation during the interview and research process, please let me know and we will stop immediately. Also, you may decline to answer any questions posed by the researcher. If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me or Dr. Sara Ewell. Should you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Director of Human Subject Research Protection at Northeastern University. All of our contact information can be found on the informed consent document.

Do you have any questions or concerns about the interview process, this form, or the study?
We are about to begin the interview. Do you have any questions at this time?
Please let me know the “study name” that you have selected for yourself to be used in this study.

Interview Questions
• Could you please tell me a little about your academic and professional background?
• How many years have you been working in the field of academic advising and why did you become an academic advisor?
• What do you consider to be the key responsibilities of an academic advisor?
• Do you subscribe to a particular advising approach and/or philosophy?
  o How do you think your advising approach or philosophy drives or frames your advising practices?
• What do you perceive to be the purpose and value of general education?
• How do students initially learn about their general education requirements?
• In your role as an advisor, how often do you work with students on their general education?
  o Could you please give me a few examples of your general education advising with students?
• What responsibilities do you think you have as an academic advisor in working with students on their general education?
• What challenges do you encounter when working with students on their general education?
• Do you employ any strategies and/or practices to help students understand the purpose and value of general education?
• How do you think your academic and professional experiences prepare you for working in the field of academic advising?
  o Specifically, how do you think your academic and professional experiences prepare you for working with students on general education?
  o What types of academic and professional preparation would better help you facilitate students’ understanding of general education?

Conclusion
This concludes the interview session. Thank you very much for your responses and insights. As mentioned earlier, the interview recording will be transcribed. Once the interview transcript is available, I will share the interview transcript with you via email for your review. You will have an opportunity to provide feedback and make request for any changes to the transcript to ensure accuracy. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Be well.
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Subject Line: An Opportunity to Participate in Research Study on Academic Advising

Sara Ewell, PhD
Principal Investigator
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University

Ivan Scott Lee
Doctoral Candidate/Student Researcher
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University

August 2017

Dear <first name>,

I write to invite you to participate in a research study on academic advising. The purpose of this study is to examine the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students understand general education as an integral part of students’ undergraduate learning experience. This research study is being conducted as part of my doctoral thesis research with at Northeastern University. The findings of this research study may contribute to the literature and practices by examining the roles and practices of academic advising in helping students gain a fuller understanding of general education through the lens of the advising practitioners.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will participate in one in-person interview, which will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted at a convenient time and location chosen by you, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for research purposes. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time during the research process. You may decline to answer any questions posed by the researcher during the interview process. It is important to note that your identity and responses will be treated and handled in a confidential manner. Only the principal investigator and student researcher will have any knowledge of your participation and responses in this research study. To ensure confidentiality, you will have an opportunity to select your own “study name” to use as a pseudonym in this study to maintain anonymity.

The goal of this research is to gain insights into the ways in which academic advisors perceive and conduct their advising role in helping students understand general education in their undergraduate studies. As an academic advising practitioner, your voice and perspective will help us gain insights into the challenges and opportunities in engaging students in liberal arts and general education. While there will be no remuneration or direct benefit to you for participating in this study, your insights may contribute to the advising literature and practices and help institutions consider ways to better engage students in liberal arts and general education.

Please respond to this email and provide your contact information if you are interested in participating in this study. Your response to this email, however, does not automatically enroll you into the study; moreover, your further inquiry about this study does not obligate you to participate in the study. Prior to scheduling for an in-person interview, the researcher will conduct an initial conference call to verify your eligibility to participate in this study.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you should have any questions about this study.

Be well,

Ivan Scott Lee
Doctoral Candidate/Student Researcher
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
lee.iv@husky.neu.edu
Appendix D: Required Training for Research Involving Human Subjects

NIH Human Subject Training Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Ivan-Scott Lee successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 06/12/2012.

Certification Number: 936098.