Adult Learners and Academic Advising: The Experiences at One Massachusetts Community College

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by

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Abstract

This research explored the nature of academic advising through the experiences of Mount Wachusett Community College advisors with adult learners. This case study originated as an investigation of advisor perceptions of adult learners and their needs during academic advising interactions, specifically early in their transition to college. However, this analysis of one community college advising model revealed a tension between the counseling and teaching and learning paradigms of academic advising within the institution. This case study investigating academic advisors’ perceptions of the needs of their adult students revealed advisors frustrated by the numerous roles they must assume and the necessary skills needed to meet the complex needs of their students within the framework of a progressive, teaching and learning delivery model. Ultimately, this research outlines a model of advising service delivery for adult learners in a community college that blends the counseling and teaching and learning paradigms to meet the complex social/emotional needs of adult learners within the teaching and learning framework supported by the institution.
This paper represents the end of a journey I never imagined I would start. I am grateful for the support and guidance of my reading team – advisor, Dr. Lynda Beltz, second reader Dr. Krystal Clemons, and third reader Dr. Sara Levine. Their kindness and insight stretched and challenged me in ways I never could have predicted. I am so appreciative for all who have supported me throughout this process. I am so thankful for the love and support of my two wonderful children, Will and Bridget. And I will never be able to thank the one true love of my life, Betsy, in a manner remotely appropriate for what she has given to me. She started me on this journey many years ago by encouraging me to “take a few classes” at Middlesex Community College. She guided me through its greatest challenges and darkest moments. She pushed me to be more than I ever imaged I could be. A dedication at the beginning of my dissertation falls so short, but it is nonetheless an admirable start. I love you, Bets, “screen door slams.”
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

All across the country students are failing college: failing to return for their second semester, failing to complete a credential, and failing to learn. National data show unsettling trends in these areas across all sectors of higher education: public, private, and for-profit (Kena et al., 2014). However, the need for higher education has never been greater. More jobs require advanced training and higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, highlighting the importance of a college degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). The ability to earn a family sustaining wage without some form of post-secondary education and training has become increasingly difficult. As the need for a college education increases so too does the impact on those who enroll, yet fail to progress and graduate. Such students often find themselves facing overwhelming financial commitments due to their college enrollment without the benefit of a college-educated salary level to support such commitments. The risks are magnified for adult learners, who often carry with them significant personal responsibilities outside of their education pursuits.

Meanwhile, the roles and responsibilities of academic advisors continue to evolve in efforts to meet the needs of those they serve. Advances in professionalism, technology, and research have influenced great growth in advising practice over the last thirty years. However, the myriad of professionals with advising duties (official or unofficial) and the various models of service delivery continue to present the profession and institutions of higher education with great challenges regarding how best to structure and deliver this critical service. Gone are the days of advising services focused solely on registration. Now, advisors must help students navigate complex decision making processes requiring the collection, analysis, synthesis, and application of multiple sources of complex data from across the college (financial services, academic affairs,
career services, etc.). The “curriculum” of academic, career, and personal success has grown ever more complex, making the teaching strategies employed by advisors more critical than ever.

This is especially true of open access institutions representing a crucial entry point to higher education for many underprepared and at-risk student populations. Though many students require great support as they embark on their educational journey, those enrolling at community colleges require additional support during their transition. Nationally, retention rates decrease as the institution type becomes less selective (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2010). Thus, support for those enrolling at the least selective institutions (open access, public, 2-year colleges) proves most critical. Advisors at these institutions often perform a number of duties serving in many capacities ranging from enrollment representative, to orientation leader, to financial counselor, to mentor. As the demands on these professionals increase and the information they are charged with communicating grows more complex, the need to understand the learning patterns of those they serve intensifies. If higher education is truly to address issues plaguing the success of its students, those on the front lines of student support must be armed with the appropriate information and teaching strategies.

**Background: National Trends**

**Enrollment trends.** Over the past decade, adult learners have represented a fast-growing student demographic. Between the years 2011 and 2021, overall enrollment in United States higher education is expected to increase 13 percent (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Further, significant enrollment growth is expected for students ages 25 and over. Enrollment for students 25-34 is expected to grow nine percent by the year 2022, and 20 percent for those 35 and older during that time (Hussar &
Bailey, 2014). A 2010 *Chronicle of Higher Education* analysis of U.S. Census Data revealed 27 percent of full-time students attending community colleges and 52 percent of part-time students attending college were above the age of twenty-four. Further, in 2011 students 25 or older represented 33.2 percent of the of the total enrollment for first-time full-time students in the United States and 51.4 percent of all part-time students (Kena et al., 2014). Thus, roughly one-third of all first-time full-time students and one half of all part-time students are 25 or older. Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges reported that roughly 60 percent of all students enrolled in community colleges in the United States for the fall 2012 semester were above the age of 22 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). There is no denying that adult learners will continue to represent a growing number of those enrolled in American colleges and universities, particularly community colleges which pride themselves on the flexible course scheduling options attractive to adult learners.

**Student retention and persistence.** Students are struggling to meet academic milestones and return to college after the first year. Roughly one in four students across all sectors of 4-year institutions and almost half of first-time students across all sectors of 2-year institutions nationally fail to return for their second year of college (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2010). Further, these data support unsettling emerging trends among community college students as the picture becomes increasingly grim when factoring in socio-demographic characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, and employment status.

Trends in 5-year persistence and attainment rates among many community college student subsets reveal concerns. Overall persistence and attainment rates have dropped from 52.7 percent (1990-1994) to 49.9 percent (2004-2008). Further, rates among those ages 24-29 dropped from 48.4 percent (1996-2000) to 43.3 percent (2004-2008), while rates among those age 30 and
above have increased only slightly over the same time frame and remain well below the overall rates (37.2 percent to 38.2 percent). Further, 5-year persistence and attainment rates among those in the lowest income bracket decreased from 53.2 percent (1996-2000) to 45 percent (2004-2008) and rates for part-time students decreased from 46.8 percent to 42.9 percent over that same time (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a). Finally, 45.3 percent of students ages 24-29 and 46.3 percent of students age 30 and above reported working full-time indicating the need for part-time enrollment in college coursework. This proves problematic as 6-year attainment rates during that same time showed that 71.3 percent of students who attended exclusively part-time indicated that they had neither earned a degree nor transferred. Thus, part-time enrollment to meet work demands has the potential to push students into an attainment bracket with a roughly 30 percent success rate.

Horn (2009) provides additional insight in her longitudinal study of persistence and attainment among community college students over 3-year intervals. Horn found that while overall 3-year persistence and attainment levels mirrored previously identified trends, students with “less direction” or unsettled academic goals were more at-risk than their more “directed” peers, and that age was a statistically significant factor in persistence and attainment. Horn reported that overall, 49.4 percent of students were retained by their original institution three years after their initial enrollment with small percentages reporting completion of an Associate’s degree, successful transfer to a 4-year institution, or continued enrollment. However, Horn found that 42.5 percent of students in the study had not earned a credential and were no longer enrolled at the institution. Thus, almost as many students who are retained and/or complete a degree or transfer during a three-year span at a community college are NOT retained or fail to complete a credential. Horn also reported 40.9 percent of the “less directed” students left in the first year and
did not return and 58.1 percent of these students reported at least one “stop-out” of 5 months or more. The study found that 44.6 percent of the “less directed” students in the study, or almost half, were above the age of 24, with an average age of 30.1 years. Thus, students above the age of 24 were less likely to have clear direction in their studies and were shown to be at greater risk than students under the age of 24 (Horn, 2009).

**Completion rates and the educational attainment gap.** Despite the record levels of earned college credentials, the educational attainment gap within the United States still threatens the economic stability of the country. United States Census data reveal that as of 2012, 38.5 percent of the population reported holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, only 29.1 percent of those age 25 and above reported holding a bachelor’s degree or higher. By the year 2018, a projected 63 percent of all jobs will require some college and estimates are that the United States higher education system will produce roughly 3-million fewer qualified workers than the labor market will demand (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Further, while completion rates among community college students remain low, those that do complete a credential require extended time to do so. In 2007-2008, those that delayed enrollment in higher education across all sectors took roughly 57 percent longer to complete a credential than their peers who directly enrolled, and the median time to degree completion at public, 2-year institutions was 63 months, or just over five years (Cataldi et al., 2011). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shows only 20.4 percent of the 2007 cohort at public 2-year institutions completed an Associate’s degree within 150 percent of the normal time (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). Further, Complete College America, a not-for-profit organization focused on increasing completion rates among
United States institutions of higher education, reports that only 18.7 percent of full-time community college students and 7.4 percent of part-time community college students will complete an associate’s degree within four years (Complete College America, 2011).

While this trend is glaring at public, 2-year institutions, it holds across all sectors: public, private, 2-year, and 4-year. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows that of the 2004 starting cohort, only 37.9 percent of students at 4-year institutions completed their degree within four years and only 53.9 percent of students at 4-year institutions completing their degree within five years (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). A 2014 report from the National Center for Education Statistics put the 6-year completion rate for the 2006 cohort of full-time, first-time degree seeking students across all public, private, and for-profit institutions at 59 percent (Kena et al., 2014). The numbers at community colleges are even more concerning. Only 31 percent of the 2009 first-time, full-time cohort of students across the public, private, and for-profit sectors completed a credential within 150 percent of the allotted time. That number sank to just 20 percent at public 2-year institutions (Kena et al., 2014). Thus, only one-fifth of first-time full-time students at public 2-year institutions are able to complete a two-year degree within three years.

Economic ramifications. The changing economic landscape in the United States has greatly affected the ramifications for non-returners and non-completers. As students must accrue greater debt to access higher education and employers demand higher standards for prospective hires, those without the necessary tools to compete (i.e. education and credential) find themselves increasingly at risk. A higher education credential provides opportunity, but more importantly, in a volatile economic environment it offers protection.
A college degree protects against unemployment. In August of 2014, the unemployment rate for those 25 years and older with a high school diploma only was 6.0 percent, for those with some college or an associate’s degree, it was 5.4 percent, and for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher it was 3.6 percent (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Even more critical are employment participation rates across those same populations. For those with a high school diploma, only 58.1 percent of the population participated in the civilian workforce; an employment ratio of 54.6 of this population. For those with some college or an associate’s degree, 67.4 percent of the population participated in the civilian workforce; an employment ratio of 63.7 percent of this population. Finally, for those with an earned bachelor’s degree or higher, 74.2 percent of this population participated in the civilian workforce; an employment ratio of 71.6 percent of this population.

Further, a college credential protects against poverty and increases earning potential, contributing greater tax dollars to state and federal revenue. In 2012, 14.3 percent of the United States population 25 or older with only a high school diploma lived in poverty compared to 10.8 percent of those 25 and older with some college or an associate’s degree and just 4.5 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Additionally, those 25 and older in the United States holding a bachelor’s degree reported yearly median earnings of $16,756 more than those 25 and older with some college or an associate’s degree. Increasing the educational attainment of those 25 and older in the United States stabilizes both micro and macroeconomic issues by addressing individual student post-college outcomes as well as broader concerns such as student loan repayment and increasing tax revenue for social programs.
Background Information: The Case Under Investigation

The community college system of Massachusetts first took shape in 1958. A state needs audit during this time period recommended the creation of the community college system. Twelve of the current fifteen community colleges were founded between the years of 1960 and 1975. Mount Wachusett Community College first opened its main campus in Gardner in 1963. Over the years an expanded service area across North Central Massachusetts led to the opening of satellite campuses in Leominster and Devens, Massachusetts. The subsequent expansion of the college’s selective health programs to include degrees in Dental Assistant and Dental Hygiene pushed the opening of an additional satellite campus located within the Fitchburg State University campus in Fitchburg, Ma. The multi-site nature of college has both expanded its reach and presented unique challenges in meeting the needs of those within its service area.

The rural location and economic challenges of residents within the North Central region have presented the college with numerous challenges and required it to adjust its support services accordingly. This research explored the case of academic advising support services and adult learning at Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC). MWCC represents a typical community college serving a complex mission of access, success, and community development. The MWCC mission statement reads:

“MWCC is a lifelong learning community dedicated to excellence in education and responsive to the changing needs of the communities we serve. Our focus is the preparation of individuals for lives of fulfillment, leadership, and service in a diverse and global society. We are committed to engaging students in rich and
challenging learning opportunities within a small college atmosphere that is known for its personal touch.”

The institution primarily serves the North Central region of the state occupied by high numbers of the unemployed and working poor and serves industries such as healthcare and manufacturing among others. The college offers 46 associate degree programs, 27 certificate programs, and an additional three credit-bearing certification programs in Phlebotomy, Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), and Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).

IPEDS data indicates that MWCC enrolled a total of 4,734 students for the fall of 2013. Of those students, 42 percent attended full-time while 58 percent attended part-time. Further, 43 percent of MWCC’s total enrollment reported being age 25 or older. Thus, during the fall 2013 reporting period, MWCC served roughly 2,036 adult students. The college further reported first-time student retention rates of 55 percent for full-time students and 43 percent for part-time students. Only 5 percent of both part and full-time first-time students reported completing their program within the “normal time” (two-years for an associate’s degree, one year for a certificate). Additionally, only 15 percent of full-time and 14 percent of part-time, first-time students reported completing their program within 150 percent of the normal time. Finally, only 22 percent of part-time first-time students reported completing their program within twice as long as the normal time for the program. The chart below shows enrollment numbers for the 15 community colleges in Massachusetts for the fall of 2014 reporting period.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>PT Enrollment</th>
<th>25 or Older Enrolled</th>
<th>Percent 25 or older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berkshire</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>1,471</td>
<td>1,048</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>9,189</td>
<td>4,870</td>
<td>3,308</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunker Hill</td>
<td>14,253</td>
<td>9,692</td>
<td>6,698</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod</td>
<td>3,818</td>
<td>2,710</td>
<td>1,489</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenfield</td>
<td>2,127</td>
<td>1,361</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holyoke</td>
<td>6,604</td>
<td>3,566</td>
<td>2,245</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Bay</td>
<td>5,369</td>
<td>3,490</td>
<td>2,148</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massasoit</td>
<td>7,905</td>
<td>4,506</td>
<td>3,004</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesex</td>
<td>9,205</td>
<td>5,707</td>
<td>2,485</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Wachusett</td>
<td>4,336</td>
<td>2,558</td>
<td>1,864</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Essex</td>
<td>6,963</td>
<td>4,665</td>
<td>2,576</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Shore</td>
<td>7,412</td>
<td>4,818</td>
<td>3,039</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinsigamond</td>
<td>8,452</td>
<td>5,156</td>
<td>3,296</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxbury</td>
<td>2,393</td>
<td>1,627</td>
<td>1,364</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springfield Tech</td>
<td>6,622</td>
<td>3,510</td>
<td>2,847</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,459</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,980</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,555</strong></td>
<td><strong>41%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Massachusetts Community Colleges 2014 Fall Enrollment

Mount Wachusett Community College proved an ideal site to conduct this research as its total enrollment, enrollment of part-time students, and enrollment of adult learners all fell within the general range of the average among the 15 community colleges within the state. Its rural location means that common barriers for adult learners as identified in the research, such as transportation and childcare represent tremendous challenges for the student body. Further, the service region of North Central Massachusetts is home to large numbers of economically struggling citizens making the clash between work and school responsibilities critical in the success of all students, particularly adult learners.

This research initially sought academic advisors at MWCC with general advising duties to explore their perceptions of the needs of their adult students. The research planned to focus on how participants defined their role as an advisor, perceived the needs of their adult students, and ultimately defined successful advising practices of such students. The research protocol focused on questions associated with defining the complex nature of academic advising at a community
college, familiarity with advising theory, and how they identified successful advising with an adult learner, specifically within the first semester of enrollment.

**Title III grant project.** In 2010, MWCC applied for and was awarded a Title III grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Such grants assist institutions in better serving low-income students. The department of education describes the purpose of Title III grant funding as the following, “The program helps eligible IHEs to become self-sufficient and expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing funds to improve and strengthen the academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability of eligible institutions.” For the fiscal year 2014 the U.S. Department of Education awarded 35 new Title III grants averaging $422,314. Title III awards typically run five years totaling roughly $2-million in total funds.

The Title III initiative at MWCC brought great change to the institution and its advising model. Among other important goals of the grant, a shift in advising service delivery and practice occurred as a major area of focus for improving student success among low-income and at-risk students at the college. MWCC relocated and refocused its advising services, moving from an Advising and Counseling Center that focused only on services for returning students and housed advising services as well as personal counseling and disability services, to a centralized Academic Advising Center, focused solely on academic, career, and transfer advising and educational and personal planning. This new center housed full and part-time positions that included grant and institutionally supported advising positions. The center provides advising services to all new and continuing students via walk-in and scheduled appointments. The physical movement within the building of the advising center also introduced a symbolic shift among the advising mission of the institution. With a new focus on student success the college shifted from a largely counseling-based approach to academic advising, to a teaching and
learning delivery model consistent with best practices within the industry. The college was awarded $2-million in federal funding through their Title III award, dispersed over five years to implement student success initiatives contributing to transformational institutional change. The shift in advising paradigm from a counseling-based approach to one of teaching and learning represented one such shift attempting to transform the culture of the institution around a critical student service.

The resulting work produced a new advising curriculum. The curriculum included five content area strands critical to student success as identified by the college. The content areas consist of: (1) Student Success (2) Financial Literacy (3) Career (4) Transfer, and (5) Program Knowledge. Advisors deliver the content associated with each of these strands via numerous workshops. Each workshop has an accompanying protocol with clearly stated objectives and assessment measures, ensuring consistency of content delivery regardless of the staff member conducting the workshop.

The clashes between the counseling and teaching and learning paradigms were evident when exploring the experiences of adult learners within the institution. This research used a teaching and learning theoretical framework due to the advising industry standard of approaching academic advising through a teaching and learning lens. However, the high need of adult students as perceived by academic advisors at MWCC revealed a palpable tension between these two paradigms, exacerbated by the institutional priorities revolving around student success initiatives.

As the five-year student success project entered its final months, the exploration of the advising perceptions of academic advisors (especially regarding high need student-populations such as adult learners) proved critical. Not only does the college face great challenges without
the financial support of this grant moving forward, but a window into the success of the culture change exists within such an exploration. This research that began focused on the narrow perceptions of one group of participants revealed so much more.

Statement of the Problem

Student success is a complex construct unique to individual institutions. However, definitions take into account the pre-college experiences and behaviors of enrolled students, the conditions of the institution, and the intermingling of these factors combined in support of a defined post-college outcome (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). Much research has focused on successful integration (Tinto, 1975), the impact of student engagement (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and the role of faculty (A. W. Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1979) in affecting student success. However, academic advising services increase student satisfaction and retention (Tinto, 2006), making them critical to student success. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) defines advising as a teaching and learning interaction complete with learning outcomes, curriculum, and pedagogy (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). This definition highlights a critical shortcoming in advising practice; instructional differentiation. Applying universal teaching strategies to diverse students with unique needs and learning styles does not promote learning. Thus, the implementation of tools and techniques designed to enhance the advising experiences of unique student sub-populations and increase their learning through academic advising is needed. This research explored the problem of designing and delivering effective academic advising services for adult learners at one community college.
Purpose of this Research

Understanding the role academic advising plays in increasing student success, this research explored the perceptions and practice of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution) as it pertains to their experiences with adult learners – a growing student subset at community colleges nationwide as well as Mount Wachusett. Better understanding the perceptions and techniques of a cross-section of advising professionals at this institution will help administrators and practitioners evaluate current advising services to this student population, adjust practices accordingly, and coordinate necessary professional development if/where needed.

Further, this research explored the alignment of advising theory and practice at one Massachusetts community college. As Chapter Two of this report discusses, various theories have emerged within the advising landscape providing professional and faculty advisors effective frameworks within which to conduct their practice. However, advisors must have access to such knowledge and achieve a comfort level infusing their practice with it for such theories to transform and advance the profession. This research explored participants’ knowledge of and comfort with seminal and contemporary advising, adult learning, and student success-related theory in addition to exploring the perceptions of adult student need.

Interpretive Framework

This research employs a social constructivist interpretive lens or paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 107) define a paradigm as a “basic set of beliefs that deal with ultimates or first principles.” A research interpretive framework informs the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological assumptions of that research. The constructivist framework is
appropriate given the research questions and the exploratory nature of the research design. Further, the investigation of the lived experiences and social interaction of the participants further solidify the use of this framework. Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 28) state that the interpretive paradigm “is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience.” This research explores the perceptions of advising practitioners and their social interactions with advisees within a specific environment, encompassing Burrell & Morgan’s conception of the social constructivist interpretive framework.

Further, the social constructivist framework aligns the philosophical positioning of this research methodology. The social constructivist paradigm believes in a relativist ontology. Thus, it believes in multiple realities experienced by individuals and that only through a deep explorative process between a researcher and a research participant can the nature of that reality be uncovered (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the epistemological underpinnings of the social constructivist lens assert that knowledge is created through an intense exploration and is co-constructed by both the researcher and the research participant(s) (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist epistemology is thus interactive and transactional, involving both the researcher and the participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The axiological assumptions associated with this interpretive framework honor individual values, recognize their negotiated nature within time and space, and realizes their impact on reality and knowledge co-construction. Methodologically, the social constructivist interpretive lens uses inductive reasoning to recognize patterns and emerging themes throughout the research process. It uses in-depth interviewing, observations, and text analysis and places the researcher at the center of an interactive, explorative process intimately connecting the researcher to the data (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Denzin &
Lincoln, 2000). The social constructivist interpretive framework set within the qualitative case study design provides the necessary structure for appropriate exploration of the research questions informing this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The researcher explored this problem using the theoretical framework provided in Malcolm Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory. Knowles’ theory addresses the unique learning styles and values of adult learners within the educational environment and emerged from his earlier work surrounding the concept of andragogy, referred to as the art and science of teaching adults (Knowles, 1968), as a more appropriate and effective approach to engaging adult learners in educational activities. Adult Learning Theory posits the following guiding principles:

1. **Self-concept:** As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. **Experience:** As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. **Readiness to learn:** As a person matures his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.
4. **Orientation to learning:** As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
5. **Motivation to learn:** As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles, 1984, p. 12)
This theory poses the perfect lens through which to view the academic advising experiences of adult learners within community colleges. Burns Crookston’s (1972) developmental advising approach views advisor-advisee interactions as designed to increase advisee knowledge of academic requirements, campus support systems, and educational, career, and life goals while facilitating the personal development and growth of the individual student. Further, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) defines academic advising as a teaching and learning interaction complete with a curriculum and pedagogy (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). Thus, academic advisors engaging their advisees in learning interactions must alter their techniques and strategies to meet the unique needs of the students within the learning environment. As increasing numbers of adult learners return to higher education via community colleges, advisors must develop the skills necessary to serve them. The complex nature of academic advising, coupled with the unique needs of adult learners, creates ideal conditions for miscommunication, unmet expectations, and dissatisfaction with the advising experience. Given that the advising interaction often represents a students’ first interaction with the college experience the damage that can be done within that first exchange is immeasurable. Thus, increasing the understanding of advisors perceptions of this experience and if/how that aligns with appropriate theory and research proves crucial. Using Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory as the lens through which to view this research provides the opportunity to support the practice of bringing adult learning teaching techniques to the advising interactions of adult learners.
Research Questions

This research explored the academic advising experiences of advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution, located in Gardner, MA) and their perceptions of the advising needs of adult learners. Further, this research sought to explore advisor familiarity with both advising and adult learning theory and how/when/if they infuse their practice with such knowledge, in an effort to better understand the academic advising practices and professional development needs of both professional advisors at an open access institution serving a diverse student population with varying academic goals, academic histories, and learning needs. This research focused specifically on advisor perceptions of adult student experiences and sought to answer the research questions below:

- *How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College perceive the advising needs of adult learners during their first semester of enrollment?*
- *How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College alter their practice to meet the unique needs of adult learners?*
- *How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College define successful academic advising for adult learners?*

Limitations and Researcher Bias

A comprehensive examination of researcher positionality addresses potential researcher bias and increases the reliability and validity of the research (Briscoe, 2005). Positionality acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and socially constructed identifiers (Parsons, 2008). Adult learners occupy many unique positions within the complex community college mission of access, preparing students for transfer, and skills and workforce
development (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Geller, 2001; Leinbach, Jenkins, & Columbia Univ, 2008; Mendoza et al., 2009). Many community college students balance a variety of roles and responsibilities and adult learners are no different. However, adult learners often display a tremendous work ethic and persistence in approaching their academic responsibilities while lacking the tangible academic skills and confidence in the classroom that lead to early success (Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011). This highlights the unique case of the community college adult learner – committed but underprepared. One wonders if the same can be said about the advising professionals guiding their experience within this context – committed but underprepared to help these unique students.

However, the very nature of adult learners and their individualized needs present a limitation to this research which identifies themes and trends within their advisors perceptions. Difficulties generalizing research results steeped in the variable lived experiences of its participants represent a limitation of this research. The qualitative case study design employed within the constructivist framework dictates the importance of the individualized experiences of the participants and the intimate exploration of those events by the researcher. Given the social constructivist framework, multiple realities exist and knowledge is co-constructed. Thus, generalizing results to a sample beyond those participating in this research presents a challenge. However, the researcher addresses these limitations by using purposeful sampling techniques designed to produce a representative sample of the population to increase the generalizability of the results of the research.

Additionally, two areas of potential researcher bias exist in this study. First, the researcher’s educational background represents a potential area of bias. The researcher conducting this research attended a community college. Further, the researcher formally enrolled
at a community college at the age of 26. Thus, the researcher was an adult learner in a community college experiencing the circumstances under investigation in this research, and at times within a similar environment. However, the social constructivist framework recognizes the multiple realities within our lived experiences. Thus, the researcher’s experience with academic advising during the first semester at a community college is not necessarily reflective of the experiences of others – notably the research participants of this study. Further, the bounded nature of the case study under investigation provides the parameters to control for this bias. The case under investigation is bound by time and space – both of which are different from that of the researcher’s experienced phenomenon. Thus, the researcher’s previous advising experiences within a community college have no bearing on the interpretation of the experiences under investigation.

Finally, the researcher’s previous professional experience as an advisor within a community college environment serves as another potential contributor to researcher bias. In his practice, the researcher has confronted numerous opportunities to counsel and advise adult learners during their first semester of enrollment within the environment under investigation. Once again, the co-constructed epistemological and ontological positioning of the social-constructivist lens recognizes that the researcher’s experience providing academic advising to any one individual does not influence how the research participants within this study will interpret their academic advising experiences within the studied environment. The use of inductive reasoning to recognize emergent themes within this research project allows the researcher to adjust the scope and direction of this research based on the lived experiences of the participants as opposed to the researcher’s history as an adult learner advisee or an academic advising practitioner.
However, the same time/space parameters that protect this research from potential bias also limit its generalizability. The results of this research represent a thorough exploration of the condition at only one research site and as perceived by only a small sample of individuals. While this research provides needed insight into the problem under investigation, it does so in a limited basis at one location. Further research is needed to explore this issue further and better understand the ramifications of the results across a larger sample.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The following section identifies key terms present in this research. Academic advising researchers face numerous challenges due to the nebulous nature of the profession itself. This lack of clarity within the profession highlights the critical need for clarification of key terms within a research project. Further, the often disjointed and fractured nature of the community college advising experience necessitates clarity of terminology, defining a common language and ensuring rigorousness of the research.

For the purposes of this research project the term *Academic Advisor* refers to any individual employed by the research site (Mount Wachusett Community College) with formal academic counseling responsibilities. Such personnel include full-time faculty members as well as full and part-time professional academic counselors. This research explores strictly formal academic advising activities conducted by qualified college personnel as opposed to informal advising and mentoring known to occur on many college campuses outside of defined academic advising interactions.

The term *adult learner* refers to any individual above the age of 24 who is enrolled in credit bearing courses at the research site. As explored in this research, using age as a delineating factor can be problematic. Many community college students below the age of 25 face barriers to
success similar to those traditionally associated with adult learners (childcare/caring for a dependent, full-time work schedule, academic under-preparedness, and financial barriers to name a few). However, given the federal government’s use of the age 25 in their census data collection, its use as a characteristic of adult status within higher education provides avenues for important comparisons and analysis.

Finally, the term “first semester of enrollment” refers to the first semester that a student officially enrolls in credit-bearing coursework including developmental and/or remedial coursework at the research site. Often times this may not be the student’s first ever semester of enrollment. As previously discussed “stop-outs” are common among adult students and those reporting more stop-outs are less likely to complete a credential within six years. Thus, stopping out among adult students can be used as a retention predictor. As such, the first semester of re-enrollment after a stop out can be just as critical as the first semester overall. Often times it can be more important as the student has significant barriers to overcome both attitudinal and administrative in nature.

**Significance of this Research**

This research addresses a gap in the advising literature, further explores theory to practice in academic advising, and informs the self-improvement cycle of one institution by identifying potential weaknesses in advising services and areas of professional development. Further, the research site’s position as a typical community college serving a complex mission and learners of all academic levels with a multi-faceted academic advising system suggests that the results of this research could have implications beyond the research site. Currently, much of the adult advising literature focuses on graduate student advising and/or advising specialized student populations such as veteran students. This research looks at the perceptions of advisors working
with adult learners within an open-access, public, 2-year institutional context. This research opens the door for further research regarding the experiences of these students and the professionals guiding them.

Further, the American community college has a unique opportunity to re-invent itself due to broader consumer needs and economic circumstances. Financial and employability concerns represent three of the top four factors influencing college enrollment decisions for first-time, full-time students at four-year institutions (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2013). The fiscal sensibility of the community college, flexibility to pursue a liberal or skills-based associate’s degree, and increasing structured pathways to 4-year institutions for those pursuing further education have repositioned the community college as a savvy choice for college students of all ages and academic prowess, not merely the academically adrift or underprepared as once portrayed. Proposed changes to state and federal funding patterns may further encourage enrollment at community colleges for some or all of one’s college experience, particularly among adult learners craving relevant, applicable skills training and continuing education designed to provide tangible outcomes toward improving their personal, professional, and financial outlook.

Given the current local and national policy supporting the community college mission of access, success, and affordability, a community college enrollment explosion could be upon us. Institutional funding tied to student success metrics such as retention, completion, and credit progression toward a credential continue to spread, pushing student success from a student-level issue to an organizational, state, and federal-level issue as well. Should college personnel whose responsibilities span the student success spectrum (academic, student, and financial services) be unprepared to differentiate their practice to meet the needs of their students and assist them in
attaining these markers, student and institutional stability may be compromised. Sheer numbers and human resources represent only part of the story. All those currently employed in such capacities as well as those hired in the future must be armed with the appropriate tools to assist all of their students in meeting these milestones and success markers. This research represents the first step in the long process of understanding where advising practitioners within this context currently stand, and exactly how far we need to go.

Summary

Adult learners occupy many unique positions within the complex community college mission of access, preparing students for transfer, and skills and workforce development (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Geller, 2001; Leinbach et al., 2008; Mendoza et al., 2009). Many community college students balance a variety of roles and responsibilities and adult learners are no different. However, adult learners often display a tremendous work ethic and persistence in approaching their work while lacking the tangible academic skills and confidence in the classroom (Day et al., 2011). This highlights the unique case of the community college adult learner – committed but underprepared. As such, the perceptions of those charged with successfully guiding their academic progress and personal development prove critical.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Academic Advising is an interdisciplinary action spanning a continuum of professional skills ranging from administrative to counseling (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006). Service models range from professional, centralized offices, to decentralized faculty-based models, to various combinations of the two. Further, specialized advising services and practitioners geared toward specific student populations exhibiting complex circumstances and unique need (veteran students, international students, etc.) exist on many campuses. The topic of adult learners and academic advising at community colleges represents the complex intersection of teaching and learning, student support services, student development, student success, and the role of institutional context in all of the aforementioned. The research questions driving this study encompass many debates within the advising literature that seek to further define the very nature of the act.

This research explored the perceptions and practice of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution) as it pertains to their experiences with adult learners. This research explored the alignment of advising theory to practice at one Massachusetts’ community college and the various theories that have emerged within the adult learning, academic advising, and student success landscape using the research questions below to guide the inquiry

- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College perceive the advising needs of adult learners during their first semester of enrollment?

- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College alter their practice to meet the unique needs of adult learners?
How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College define successful academic advising for adult learners

This chapter reviews seminal works and critical research in areas pertinent to the research: adult learning, student development, academic advising, and student success.

Adult Learners

A growing body of research attempts to better understand elements of the adult learning experience. Constructs such as learner typology (Cranton, 1994; Houle, 1961), enrollment motivation (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003; Morstain & Smart, 1974, 1977; Stein & Wanstreet, 2006), and barriers to academic success (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; P. K. Cross, 1981; Falasca, 2011; Keith, 2007) have been explored. This chapter first analyzes these areas in greater depth before exploring how these constructs interact with other areas of the literature and how they inform the current study.

Adult learner typologies. Benne (1956) discussed the important role of adult learners on a collegiate campus and the needs of institutions to better understand this population and strive for better service of adult learners on campus. However, it was Cyril Houle (1961), in his seminal research, who first categorized adult learners into three distinct types – goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. Goal-oriented adult learners are driven by specific personal goals whose attainment is supported by the educational activity. Activity-oriented adult learners are driven more by the social elements of the learning activity. Finally, learning-oriented adult learners are motivated by the act of learning itself. Houle’s adult learner typology represented the first important step in better understanding the unique properties of adult learners
and spawned additional research in many branching areas of adult learner typology and participation.

Attempting to derive relationships between motivation and learning orientation, researchers expanded the tools used to research the patterns of participation and motivation of adult learners. Sheffield’s (1964) research gathered 58 reasons participants identified for participating in educational activities. His analysis yielded the following five factors or orientations, three of which correspond to Houle’s typologies and two that do not: (1) Learning Orientation (2) desire-activity orientation (3) personal goal orientation (4) societal goal orientation and, (5) need-activity orientation. Similarly, Burgess (1971) identified 15 factors from similar research regarding motivation and participation for adult learners. However, it was Boshier’s (1969) New Zealand study of adult participation and dropout behaviors that ultimately lay the foundation for what is now known as the Education Participation Scale (EPS). Boshier’s (1971) research used the EPS framework to identify 14 factors and/or orientations: (1) social welfare (2) social contact (3) other-directed professional advancement (4) intellectual reaction (5) inner-directed professional advancement (6) social conformity (7) educational preparedness (8) cognitive interest (9) educational compensation (10) social sharing (11) television abhorrence (12) improvement and escape (13) interpersonal facilitation and, (14) education supplementation. From those factors, Boshier ultimately identified two types of learners – those motivated by growth (heterostasis model) and those motivated by deficiency (homeostasis model). Boshier honed the EPS eventually narrowing its scope to the measurement of six factors: Despite Boshier’s assertion that the EPS provides a more detailed and nuanced analysis of adult learners, both his instrument and Sheffield’s Continuing Learning Orientation
index ultimately support Houle’s seminal work and initial typologies (R. Boshier & Collins, 1985; Dickinson & Clark, 1975).

However, Houle’s typology and factor analysis derived from the Continuing Learning Orientation index and/or the EPS does not represent the only means of categorizing adult learners. C. Kasworm (2003) posited that adult learners derive meaning in the classroom through a “renegotiation of both their understanding of collegiate knowledge and past understandings of the world,” (p.82). Kasworm further identified three key influencers in the knowledge construction of adult learners across institutional context: “(a) the classroom as the defining collegiate context, (b) learners views of knowledge in relationship to their adult life worlds, and (c) instructor actions and related program design elements,” (p.84). Through the tension associated with the renegotiation of previously held views within the context of these three key influencers, Kasworm identified five voices or categories that emerged from her research representing participants belief about knowledge construction: (1) entry voice (2) outside voice (3) cynical voice (4) straddling voice, and (5) the inclusion voice. Kasworm interviewed 90 adult learners across multiple higher education contexts ranging from a private liberal arts college to a public 2-year institution. Her voices represent a qualitative methodology for producing a categorization model or learner typology. Her model represents a departure from the quantitative, factor analysis methodology of Sheffield and Boshier, instead approaching adult learner typology through a social constructivist frame. The idea of using a social constructivist framework to categorize anything seems contradictory given the principles of that particular interpretive framework. However, her work provides another system of labeling and categorizing adult learners in an attempt to make sense of their interactions and beliefs of knowledge construction.
Whether quantitative or qualitative in nature, the categorization of adult learners provides researchers and practitioners a means to make sense of the often perplexing case of the adult learner. While measurement and categorization prove critical in increasing our understanding, the theories informing that process provide equally important space for increasing our comprehension of this complex student population.

Adult learning theories. Within the concept of andragogy (the art and science of teaching adults) in contrast to pedagogy, Malcolm Knowles identified distinct needs of adult learners that when met, could increase educational outcomes for adult students (Knowles, 1968, 1970, 1978, 1984). Knowles’ (1970) Adult Learning Theory states that. “mature learners: (1) are moving from dependent to self-directed learning (2) accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes a rich resource for learning (3) Their learning readiness becomes orientated increasingly to the developmental task of their social roles (4) their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application,” (p.44-45). Knowles later sharpened these principles and added a fifth principle regarding the development of internal learning motivation as one matures (Knowles, 1984). Hartree (1984) meanwhile, critiqued Knowles’ theory questioning its place as a theory, tested through rigorous research. Hartree argued it as a group of characteristics rather than a tested and validated theory. However, Knowles’ adult learning theory remains a widely used theoretical framework for research in the area of adult learning.

Another commonly applied theoretical framework in adult learning is Mezirow’s (1978) Transformational Learning Theory, which identifies three domains of learning – instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory. Transformational learning includes critical reflection of past experiences and the integration of new knowledge resulting in behavioral change, moving

**Barriers to success.** Patricia Cross (1981) identified three categories of barriers to successful enrollment for adult learners in higher education: (1) situational, (2) institutional, and (3) dispositional. Cross identified the situational barrier that typically refers to time/money challenges as the most common barrier faced by adult learners. Cross further defined institutional barriers as those practices that intentionally or unintentionally discourage adult learners from participation in educational activities. She categorized these into five specific types of institutional barriers: (1) scheduling problems (2) location and/or transportation challenges (3) lack of interesting, practical or relevant courses (4) procedural problems and time requirements, and (5) lack of information about programs and procedures. Cross formalized that which had been observed to affect adult student enrollment and success.

Chao et al. (2007) more recently identified four barriers to successful enrollment for adult learners that closely align with Cross’ framework: (1) time, (2) family commitments and responsibilities (3) scheduling flexibility, and (4) cost of enrollment. Much attention has been paid to the effect of these types of variables on adult learners’ ability to successfully manage the multiple responsibilities associated with college life (Dayton, 2005; Genco, 2007; Morris, 2013; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009).
Situational barriers also affect role-identity for adult learners. C. Kasworm (2005) explored adult student perceptions of the ideal student in relation to their own academic self-concept. This research showed a potential barrier to adult student learning exists within their identity confusion and incongruence between their vision of the ideal student, and their ability to maintain the behaviors of that ideal student given their situational characteristics. This research supports the notion that the adult learning experience is a complex, multi-layered construct (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; C. E. Kasworm, 2010).

This complex construct includes both internal and external threats to success. These threats can be situational, dispositional, or institutional in nature. Any organization or individual charged with assisting adult learners must fully understand the scope of the adult learner construct and the many ways in which the organization or individual interacts with the various layers of this construct at any given time and within any given space.

Academic Advising

The following section reviews elements critical to academic advising and student development. First the author reviews the history and purpose of academic advising; the latter of which representing an ongoing debate within the literature and industry. Then, analysis of pertinent theories and advising models commonly discussed in the literature. Finally, the author discusses the intersection of the advising and adult learning literature.

History and purpose of academic advising. The complex nature of the adult learning experience further complicates contemporary debates within the advising literature regarding the nature of academic advising. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) states
that advisors are responsible (1) to those whom they advise (2) for involving others, when appropriate, in the advising process (3) to the institutions they serve (4) to Higher Education (5) to their educational communities (6) to their profession (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). However, this professional standard fails to account for student type and/or institutional context. The literature shows that strategies and techniques used to support these professional domains may vary based on elements such as advising lens and institutional context.

Academic Advising became necessary due to the introduction of the elective system within higher education (V. N. Gordon, 2004). Prior to the instruction of the elective system a program’s curriculum was set and course selection mirrored the required courses of the curriculum. With the elective system, student choice was introduced to the course selection process where it previously had not been. As such, students required more assistance in areas of course selection as they decided what courses appropriately complimented their program requirements. The term “advisor” was first used in the late 19th century and referred to one on a college campus who provided guidance to students in the areas of selecting appropriate elective coursework while providing social guidance (Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). The elective system redefined the academic planning and course selection process. As a result, students required greater support and guidance, typically provided by faculty members. However, over time, student needs forced a reevaluation of the academic advising process to be more representative of the complexities of their experiences and goals.

The post-WWII influx of students accessing higher education through the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill) influenced the emergence of specialized individuals on a college campus trained to assist students with specific elements of academic planning and transition assistance (Cook, 2009). Though the nature of academic advising had shifted with the
introduction of the elective system, the practitioners of advising services had remained campus faculty. Given the enrollment surge from the GI Bill, and the administrative complexities associated with the legislation, the introduction of specialized professionals on college campuses to assist students with these matters became a necessity. Despite the introduction of professional, centralized advising centers staffed by professional advisors, faculty members remained the primary deliverers of academic advising services on college campuses throughout the 20th century. However, the changing role of faculty on American campuses combined with the magnitude of advising responsibilities has created a chasm within advising practice. Further, the multitude of delivery models for institutional deployment of professional and faculty advisors complicates the definition of the term. The use of faculty and professional advisors requires tremendous communication and collaboration between both parties in support of common student learning objectives. However, in some cases professional advisors only advise strategically identified at-risk student groups and focus solely on the specialized needs of each group, such as first-year students, undeclared students, or student athletes (Tuttle, 2000). The growing number of individuals involved in supporting student academic progression and success provides additional opportunities for miscommunication, misinformation, and poor advising.

A confluence of events during the 1970s exacerbated the growing tension between the advising profession and those most commonly prescribed with carrying out its duties on college campuses. The seminal works of Crookston and O’Banion (discussed later) not only challenged the widely held perceptions of academic advisors (primarily faculty-advisors) but also portrayed a more specialized skill-set required of those involved in academic advising activities on college campuses. Increased interpersonal skills as well as increased knowledge of counseling
techniques, college programs and policy, and campus resources now were crucial to successful academic advising.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) researched faculty-student interactions outside of the classroom and found that “informal interactions which extend and reinforce the formal academic experience,” positively affect freshman persistence. Academic Advising provides a construct to frame such informal social interactions representing a positive avenue for faculty to engage in supporting student success. The creation of the National Academic Advising Association, however, marked the perceived professionalization of academic advising. The first national NACADA conference provided the following framework for academic advising: (1) Advising has measurable impact upon students (2) Advising must be recognized within the institution (3) Advising must have well-articulated goals (4) Components and criteria for quality advising must and can be isolated for the purposes of research, improvement, and evaluation (5) Research is essential to discover new advising methods and to improve present methods (6) Central coordination of advising is necessary to prevent fragmentation and to maintain advising excellence (Beatty, 2009).

Despite the positive impact tied to informal student-faculty interaction, the complex circumstances contributing to successful integration on college campuses influenced the call for professionals with specialized knowledge and training. However, the original NACADA framework provides a clear separation in the organization and administration of advising services – recommending centralized professional advising services to oversee advising activities.

As a clearer picture of best practices within student success emerged in the 1980s and 90s, the role of academic advising within it became more complex. The emergence of the centralized and professionally staffed advising center created a unique shared space for academic
and student affairs – the student affairs side attempting to create intentional and deliberate teaching and learning opportunities within a largely administrative context, and the academic side attempting to find the balance of social and academic interaction. When increasing technological advances were added to the equation, many campuses experienced a reshuffling of responsibilities with the registrar’s office, professional advisors, and faculty members that often served to depersonalize the advising process (V. N. Gordon, 2004). The characteristics that constituted quality advising continued to challenge the field as professional advisors staked greater claim to the advising process.

As the student success literature established the importance of pre-college experiences, student behaviors, institutional conditions, and engagement in educationally purposeful activities as factors contributing to outcomes, professional and faculty advising literature engaged in discussions attempting to define the nature of quality academic advising. Cuseo (2003) argues that the mere existence of professional advising services does not increase retention, however, professional advisors are at the center of campus activities empirically shown to support student retention and success including – assisting in the establishment of clear goals, increasing access to campus support services, and facilitating a connection to the institution. Marc Lowenstein further declared the importance of academic advisors in the broader scope of student learning and success by asserting that advisors teach students how to “make/create logic from one’s own education,” (Lowenstein, 2005). Lowenstein championed the learning-centered approach and further discussed the role of the advisor as teacher within it referencing the concept that the academic advisor does for a student’s entire curriculum what one instructor does for a single course.
However, faculty perspectives, regarding the purpose and scope of academic advising reveal inconsistencies with widely held perceptions. Dillon and Fisher (2000) found that faculty view program knowledge as the single most important component of their advising duties, more so than the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships with advisees (a critical component of developmental advising practices). Allen and Smith (2008) found that while both advisors and students agreed regarding the importance of many areas of advising, faculty advisors reported the least comfort in discussing informational topics (such as program requirements and college policy) and students reported the least satisfaction with topics within the informational realm of their study. Thus, the assumption that faculty advisors excel at providing students with information while struggling to create lasting relationships may be flawed. Information, meanwhile, is something that students crave and have little patience in waiting to receive (Lowery, 2004). Roberts and Styron (2010) found in their study of persistence and dropout at a research institution, that students who did not return reported much lower levels of perceptions of connectedness and faculty approachability.

Lynch (2004) in his research of undergraduate experiences with both faculty and professional advisors captured the vexing inconsistencies in both the literature and practice. Lynch found that students reported professional advisors were less accessible and had less flexible schedules than faculty advisors. Further, the study indicated that students rated professional advisors as having better program knowledge. This research essentially reverses commonly held assumptions about the strengths and weaknesses of faculty and professional advisors.

**Student development theories.** The early 1970s sparked a mini-revolution in exploring and reassessing how institutions and their support networks view the student experience. Arthur
Chickering’s (1972) Student Identity Development Theory posited that students moved through seven vectors of development throughout their college experience. Chickering identified the following vectors of development experienced by college students: (1) Developing competence (2) Managing emotions (3) Moving through autonomy toward interdependence (4) Developing mature interpersonal relationships (5) Establishing identity (6) Developing purpose and, (7) Developing integrity. These major areas of personal development, while applicable to academic domains and cognitive development in some cases represent largely non-academic areas of student development and thus lend themselves greatly to the holistic development of students seen in the work of many student affairs professionals.

Academic advising services straddle the areas of academic and student affairs, often struggling to find balance between the holistic development of the entire student and each student’s progress toward achieving specific academic milestones. Chickering’s theory provides advisors a framework for student development within which they can embed student academic progress. For instance, within the developing competence vector, Chickering identifies three distinct types of competence: (1) Intellectual competence (2) Physical and manual skills, and (3) Interpersonal competence. Intellectual competence refers to areas of cognitive development and content mastery, physical and manual competencies provide avenues for self-discipline, while interpersonal competencies refer to micro level areas of development such as listening and communication skills as well as macro level areas of development such as creating and sustaining relationships that allow a group to flourish. As such, the advising relationship formed between an advisor and an advisee over time allows students the opportunity to master areas of new content regarding various domains of information (financial, college policy, academic requirements, etc.) as well as synthesize that information and demonstrate mastery of this content.
in the form of sound decision-making regarding academic and career planning. Thus, Chickering’s theory of identity development provides one framework within which numerous advising objectives can be re-enforced.

**Developmental advising.** Burns Crookston proposed a new way to approach academic advising that better incorporated many of Chickering’s concepts. His developmental approach to academic advising proposed a stark move away from traditional power structures, goals, and outcomes of what he termed “prescriptive advising,” toward a more holistic process of shared decision-making that developed areas of interpersonal growth, cognitive complexity, mutual respect, and collaboration between advisees and advisors (Crookston, 1972). Smith and Allen (2006) identified characteristics of developmental advising as being student centered, integrating student goals, connecting the curricular and co-curricular, and providing opportunities to practice productive problem-solving and decision-making strategies. Kramer (2003, p. 6) identified nine characteristics of effective faculty advising practice within the teaching framework of developmental advising practices as: (1) engage the student (2) provide personal meaning to students’ academic goals (3) collaborate with others or use the full range of institutional resources (4) share, give, and take responsibility; (5) connect academic interests with personal interests (6) stimulate and support student academic and career planning (7) promote intellectual and personal growth and success; (8) assess, evaluate, or track student progress; and (9) establish rapport with students.

However, problematic elements of the teaching and learning framework first proposed by Crookston and developed by others throughout the years have emerged. Most notably growing advisee/advisor ratios making the numerous points of contact over time necessary to develop a true teaching and learning process between and advisor and an advisee difficult to develop and
sustain. Further, the infusion of numerous technologies into the advising process has served to depersonalize many academic advising interactions. However, as Grites and Gordon (2009) suggest, Crookston did not introduce a dichotomy when referring to prescriptive and developmental advising practices. Rather, Crookston introduced a new end of the advising continuum. Thus, academic advising is a fluid process that often ebbs and flows, bouncing between developmental and prescriptive practices designed to further student development and progress toward defined goals and objectives.

**Career advising.** In 1972, Terry O’Banion published his five-step model of course selection that included a hierarchy of steps and student needs that must be met prior to appropriate course selection. These necessary steps included: (1) The exploration of life goals (2) The exploration of vocational goals (3) Program choice (4) Course choice, and (5) Course selection (O’Banion, 1972). His seminal work articulated the importance of career knowledge and information within the realm of academic advising. While his seminal work predates the creation of NACADA and the formal professionalization of academic advising, it further pointed to the need of a specialized skill set and knowledge base needed for college staff to engage in effective academic advising practice.

The importance of career information in effective advising practice was further supported through the work of Virginia Gordon. Gordon posited a specialized approach to academic advising termed “career advising,” a method blending elements of career counseling (specifically career information gathering and career assessment techniques) and traditional academic counseling and advising strategies, especially when working with undeclared or exploratory students (V. Gordon & Grites, 1984; V. N. Gordon, 1981). Further, V. Gordon and Steele (2003) identified varying levels of the undeclared state in their 25-year longitudinal study of incoming
students at a large public university. The term exploratory students has begun to gain traction within the advising industry to more accurately reflect such students’ position within an active stage of development rather than a state of relative paralysis or indecisiveness. Having identified varying levels of undecidedness among incoming freshman at Ohio State University, Gordon recommended tailored sets of career-based advising interventions for students based on their level of undecidedness. While many adult education programs seek to address this issue through providing an industry contextualized curriculum and/or in depth-college and career readiness programming, the nuances of the undeclared entering student remain present and emphasize the formal and informal diagnostic skills required of college support staff such as professional and faculty advisors.

**Appreciative advising.** Born from the Appreciative Inquiry, an organizational change model steeped in the recognition of organizational strengths and positive qualities rather than deficits (Bushe, 1995; D. Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; D. L. Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Johnson & Leavitt, 2001), Appreciative Advising applies the principles of Appreciative Inquiry to the realm of Academic Advising. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) introduced the 5-D process of inquiry-based change: (1) Define (2) Discover (3) Dream (4) Design, and (5) Deliver. Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008) applied this framework to the field of academic advising by introducing their six phases of appreciative advising: (1) **Disarm** (2) **Discover** (3) **Dream** (4) **Design** (5) **Deliver**, and (6) **Don’t Settle**. This six phases form the structure through which advisors and advisees deliberately and collaboratively engage in traditional academic advising interactions around academic and career planning, social problem-solving and decision-making, and personal development. The recognition of these separate and critical phases of positive interaction allows
advisors to be intentional in their actions toward, and communication with, their advisees in efforts to support strong connections and positive outcomes.

Though relatively new to the advising field, appreciative advising is fast becoming a widely used academic advising technique and its principles can be found in the advising practice of a wide range of advising practitioners. Redfern (2008) argues for its applicability to non-traditional distance learning students given their unique characteristics, however, overall its application to advising adult learners remains unstudied. On the surface, many appreciative advising techniques appear geared toward the traditional aged student and may not resonate with the adult learner. Often, the adult learner brings with them a multitude of pre-conceptions based on their previous educational experiences. This can lead to levels of apprehension regarding the process and their role and ability to succeed within it. Thus, the growing popularity and widespread use of appreciative advising may in fact support elements of misapplication to adult learning student populations. While principles of appreciative advising are certainly applicable to working with adult learners, modified techniques within each phase may be necessary to resonate with adult learners and build the strong connections needed to support them. Without this critical adjustment advisors may create unintended barriers between themselves and their adult advisees. Further, little research is available regarding whether appreciative advising techniques increase student learning in academic advising interactions. Do students exposed to appreciative advising better understand academic policy and requirements? Do they access referrals at a higher rate? Do they learn more about career resources? While affective and full of promise, appreciative advising remains an unknown in the realm of advising adult students.
Student Success

The evolution of student success research has produced a far greater understanding of the components necessary to foster student success on a college campus. Psychological researchers seeking to better understand the experiences of college dropouts began to explore the phenomena during the 1960s. Their research laid the groundwork for much of the language and discussion embodying contemporary student success literature.

Tinto’s theory of student departure. Vincent Tinto (1975) explored the phenomena of student dropout through an interdisciplinary approach using both sociological and economic theory to explain the process. Tinto described the dropout process as a “longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experience in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout,” (Tinto, 1975, p. 94). In applying Emile Durkheim’s sociological work on malintegration and suicide to a cost-benefit analysis, identifying two systems at work on college campuses – the academic and the social – that greatly affected a student’s ultimate decision to stay or leave college. In an interesting and significant element of Tinto’s theory, he placed faculty members within the social system of the college rather than the academic system despite their role in directly shaping the academic system through student evaluation. This highlighted the complex role of faculty in supporting successful student integration. Tinto, too, recognized the importance of pre-college factors but highlighted the institutional conditions as the prevailing factors in decisions regarding student dropout.

Further exploration of the socializing role of faculty members in relation to academic success
supports Tinto’s assertion of the importance in faculty members as facilitators of successful integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1979, 1980).

Astin’s student involvement theory. Alexander Astin’s (1964) longitudinal study looking at the dropout patterns of high aptitude students explored both pre-college and institutional factors contributing to student dropout. He found that pre-college socio-demographics such as lower socio-economic status, lower high school rank, and lower academic motivation were prevalent in students who dropped out of college. Astin continued to explore pre-college and institutional conditions in the formation of career goals among high aptitude students. Astin’s work revealed a correlation between vocational choice and intuitional characteristics (Astin, 1965). However, in order to successful research the impact of the college environment, Astin had to effectively control for pre-college variables. This strategy in his early research laid the groundwork for the input-environment-output model used in measuring institutional conditions that affect student outcomes. Savicki, Schumer, and Stanfield (1970) furthered explored the role of student dropout, satisfaction and socialization finding that academically dismissed students displayed preferences toward socializing and reported the lowest levels of academic motivation and student satisfaction.

Astin (1984) introduced his student development theory, further tying the evolving role of academic advisors to student success theory. Astin identified the five major components of his theory as: (1) Involvement requires the investment of physical and psychological energy (2) Involvement occurs along a continuum (3) Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features (hours spent studying vs. content comprehension, for example) (4) The amount of student learning or personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (5) The effectiveness of a policy or practice is directly
related to its capacity to increase student engagement. Cruce et al define student engagement as "the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices," (Cruce, Gonyea, Kinzie, Kuh, & Shoup, 2008, p. 542). The rise of the advising profession coupled with emerging student success theory and literature created a unique and central role for both faculty and professional advisors in facilitating "educationally purposeful activities." The National Survey for Student Engagement 2012 yearly report *Promoting Student Learning and Institutional Improvement: Lessons from NSSE at 13* in describing the work of successful engagement programs identifies Key Points of Engagement (KPEs) which include opportunities such as service learning and volunteer activities, learning communities, structured and purposeful interactions between students and faculty, internships and culminating senior experiences. The goal of KPEs is to more clearly define when and where students are accessing co-curricular opportunities while clearly stating their outcomes and measurement strategies (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). KPEs represent an essentialist attempt to create measurement and accountability for a structure that has largely existed without one within higher education.

**Summary**

Academic advising has traditionally engaged students in intentional interactions with a member of the college community designed to increase knowledge associated with academic and social success at the institution as well as areas of successful, academic, career, and life planning. A multitude of models and frameworks exist for whom, how, and when, to best deliver this service to students. However, despite many efforts, the field of academic advising remains one of numerous gray areas and gut feelings. Given its shared responsibility between a growing band of
specialized industry professionals and existing faculty members, the tension surrounding the successfully delivery of advising services mounts on many campuses and within many sectors of higher education. Further, the implementation of performance funding in many states has swung the pendulum from the developmental side of the advising continuum, slowly back towards the prescriptive methods more aligned with performance outcomes (i.e., credit attainment markers). This places the adult learner in a tenuous position; needing specialized guidance from professionals struggling to define themselves and a service struggling to operationalize its delivery.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Academic Advising is an interdisciplinary action spanning a continuum of professional skills ranging from administrative to counseling (Kuhn et al., 2006). Service models range from professional, centralized offices, to decentralized faculty-based models, to various combinations of the two. Further, specialized advising services and practitioners geared toward specific student populations exhibiting complex circumstances and unique need (veteran students, international students, etc.) exist on many campuses. The topic of adult learners and academic advising at community colleges represents the complex intersection of teaching and learning, student support services, student development, student success, and the role of institutional context in all of the aforementioned. The research questions driving this study encompass many debates within the advising literature that seek to further define the very nature of the act.

This research explores the perceptions and practice of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution) as it pertains to their experiences with adult learners. This research explores the alignment of advising theory to practice at one Massachusetts community college and the various theories that have emerged within the adult learning, academic advising, and student success landscape using the research questions below to guide the inquiry:

- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College perceive the advising needs of adult learners during their first semester of enrollment?
- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College alter their practice to meet the unique needs of adult learners?
How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College define successful academic advising for adult learners

This chapter states the design of this research project and further outlines research processes and procedures undergone throughout the inquiry.

Research Design

Qualitative research. This research study exploring academic advisors experiences advising adult learners in a community college employed a qualitative case study approach. This design provides the methodological structure for a thorough exploration of the lived experiences of individuals and the multiple realities they experience within the same studied environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Creswell (2012, 2013) a qualitative research approach takes place in a natural setting, places the researcher at the center of data collection, requires complex reasoning incorporating both inductive and deductive methods, is focused on meaning-making, and is reflective and interpretive in nature. Hatch (2002) further identifies qualitative research by its subjectivity, emergent design, reflexivity, and use of inductive data analysis techniques. The central research questions informing this project and its exploratory nature lend themselves to such a research design.

Case study tradition. Yin (2009) identifies three distinct types of case study approaches – explanatory, descriptive, and exploratory. This research employs Yin’s exploratory approach best suited to answer questions of “how” and “why,” central to the research questions examined in this study. Stake (1995) meanwhile, identifies two types of case study approaches: instrumental, and intrinsic. Intrinsic refers to a case that is of interest in and of itself. Such cases do not focus on building theory or cases representative of a typical unit of analysis. Instrumental
cases on the other hand seek to provide insight into a particular issue or experience. Thus, the qualitative case study requires some form of intense investigation of a set of events or interactions that occur within a defined place and time.

This research study applied Yin’s exploratory approach, which he states is most appropriate when “an intervention under investigation has no clear set of outcomes,” (Yin, 2009, p. 20). Given the uncertainty and evolving nature of academic advising outlined in the previous chapter, one can argue that advising itself lacks a clear set of outcomes. Further, the investigation into the lived experiences of professionals within this realm, such as this inquiry, has no clear set of outcomes. As previously mentioned, the bounded nature of a study is critical to its place within the case study context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Creswell (2003) refers to the case study as bounded by time and place whereas Stake (1995) refers to binding cases by place and activity. Levy (2008, p. 2) discusses the case study approach within the political sciences as “an attempt to understand and interpret a spatially and temporally bounded set of events,” further tying the case study approach to time and space parameters. This research explored a process as its unit of analysis that is bound by time (length of enrollment) and place (a community college) as well as activity (academic advising). Thus, this research satisfies characteristics of either the Yin or Stake case study approach.

Further, this research study explored the complexities of the advising relationship between a specific student subset (adult learners) and academic advisors within a specific time (length of college enrollment) and place (the community college). Thus, the exploratory case study approach which Ogawa and Malen (1991, p. 271) state is best suited to “extend our understanding of complex social phenomena,” proves most appropriate. Despite the unclear nature of the expected outcomes of the interactions under investigation, the qualitative research
approach allowed the researcher to thoroughly explore all facets of the phenomena under study and provided structure for the appropriate methodology including data collection, analysis, and reporting strategies (Creswell, 2013). Given the exploratory nature of this study, the qualitative approach allowed the researcher the necessary flexibility to modify and adjust research questions and protocol given emergent themes throughout the data collection process while still providing the methodological framework needed to conduct rigorous research.

**Ethical considerations.** The qualitative case study design of this research conducted within the constructivist framework required the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data including observations, interviews, and relevant documents (Creswell, 2012, 2013). The success of this project depended heavily on the protection and well-being of participants throughout all phases of the project - initial design, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and data reporting.

Ensuring ethical research first begins with the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to conducting any official research, the researcher obtained approval from both the Northeastern University IRB as well as the Mount Wachusett Community College IRB. Obtaining these approvals ensured that the planned research protected participants at all times. Recruitment practices, informed consent protocol, data collection protocol, data storage, participant confidentiality, and the risks and benefits associated with this research all received approval from institutional bodies as ethical practice.

Additionally, the research design for this project incorporated numerous steps to ensure ethical research practices and the protection of all participants. At the time of recruitment, the researcher informed all participants of the nature of the research and exactly how their participation was incorporated into the research process and final data reporting. Next, the
researcher reviewed and obtained signed letters of informed consent for all participants at the
time of data collection. Additionally, the researcher informed all participants of their option to
withdraw themselves from the research project at any time. Transparency and participant
autonomy are critical to ethical research and both were present in this project.

In addition to the steps taken prior to data collection, the researcher also took critical
steps to protect participants during the data collection and reporting phases of the research. The
researcher kept all hard copies of field notes and interview transcripts in a locked file cabinet and
stored all electronic files on a password protected personal computer. Additionally, the
researcher made all data collected throughout the research process available for review by
research participants at all times should it be requested. Finally, the researcher removed all
names and identifying information that could identify a participant through contextual analysis
from the final report of the findings.

However, ethical research goes beyond researcher transparency, participant autonomy,
and data protection. Treating all participants with dignity and respect is equally critical to ethical
research practice. When discussing their concept of the conversational partner, Rubin and Rubin
(2012) outline characteristics of respectful researcher behavior expected of those conducting
qualitative research highlighted by the concepts of showing respect and honoring promises.
While conducting interviews for data collection throughout this research, at no time were
participants mislead as to the beliefs of the researcher in order to solicit a response. Further,
promises of anonymity and access to interview transcripts were honored through the data
reporting and validity methodology used in this research.

**Sampling methodology.** A bounded system such as the one necessary for this
exploratory case study informed the sampling methodology of the research. Creswell (2013)
identifies various purposeful sampling strategies common to case study research including typical case sampling designed to capture the typical experiences of a sample, and what he terms “maximum purposeful sampling,” (p. 100) designed to capture unique or unusual cases. Given that this research attempts to answer questions associated with how a cross-section of professionals with formal academic advising duties at a community college experience their interactions with a specific subset of students, recognition of the unique characteristics and structures of advising delivery models within a community (faculty, professional, part-time, full-time, TRIO) proved paramount to the research study. As such, the researcher determined the use of maximum variation sampling most appropriate. Creswell (2013) describes the purpose of maximum variation sampling as to “document the diverse variations of individuals or sites based on specific characteristics,” (p.158). Further, maximum variation sampling yields detailed descriptions of each case increasing the recognition of uniqueness and reveals shared patterns across cases (Patton, 1990). Lastly, maximum variation sampling can, “identify essential features and variable features of a phenomenon as experienced by diverse stakeholders among varied contexts to facilitate informed, global decision-making,” (Suri, 2011, pp. 67-68).

When applying purposeful maximum variation sampling general criteria must first be set. Sandelowski (2011) refers to this as “casing” the case study and cites its importance in creating and maintaining intimacy between the researcher and their research. The casing process refers to the parameters set forth by the research in creating the case under investigation. Hatch (2002) refers to creating the boundaries of the case or the unit of analysis as among the most important actions in case study research. For the purposes of this study, defining the case is largely set forth by the time/space/activity parameter previously discussed combined with the purposeful sampling strategy outlined here.
The participant characteristics were defined first by the presence of formal academic advising duties with the college. This information was obtained through consultation with the Assistant Dean of Success, who oversees all advising activity at the college, including those professional advisors staffing the college advising center. The Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Success also oversaw the creation and implementation of the MWCC academic advising curriculum. This document was analyzed as part of the research project. Next, given the complexities of community college advising systems, a thorough cross section representative of all those responsible for delivering this service was critical. It was also important that those participating in this study worked with adult learners. With the help of institutional administrators who oversee areas of academic advising and academic and student affairs at Mount Wachusett Community College potential participants were identified. The group included grant-funded and institutionally-funded professional advisors. The sample consisted of both full and part-time advisors and included staff members with an array of qualifications and specialties. Such a stratified sample accurately represents the numerous professionals responsible for delivering advising services at a community college, necessary for thorough exploration of the phenomena under investigation.

This research purposely included advisors who also carry specialty knowledge areas within the college such as financial literacy, health programs, career, and transfer advising. Many such professionals work within the professionally staffed advising center and carry these expertise areas on top of their assigned advising duties. However, this study did exclude professionals responsible for advising specialized adult learning student populations such as veterans. These students represent a large number of adult learners at community colleges. For example, a recent study showed that 43 percent of students with military experience attended
community colleges (Radford, 2011). However, professionals supporting this growing segment of the adult learning student population within the community college environment will be excluded due to the myriad of unique and tailored services emerging to support their needs (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). This research focused on traditional advising delivery mechanisms involving general practitioners who may carry specialty areas, but are not otherwise specially trained to serve a segment of the adult learning population.

This research followed the recommended protocol for multiple case research studies by including a minimum of four cases representative of multiple perspectives of the problem under investigation (Creswell, 2012, 2013). Thus, this research explored the experiences of diverse sub-groups of advisors within the larger unit of analysis, the case of academic advisors advising adult learners during the first semester at a community college. Given the broad range of institutional characteristics associated with community colleges and their unique programs and services based upon local partnerships and geographic locations, this research sought to address the experiences of academic advisors who serve adult learners within the unique bounded system of one community college. The site in question was selected by the researcher based on professional connections and its position as a typical community college serving a complex mission of access, preparation for continued education, and workforce development within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In conjunction with the Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Success, the researcher identified potential participants for this research through a thorough investigation of college employees with formal advising responsibilities at the college. Once identified, the researcher sent an email to all within the sample outlining the scope and purpose of the research and their potential role within it. This email clearly stated the purpose of the research study in
layman’s terms and contained contact information for the researcher so that all potential participants could contact the researcher to ask questions regarding the project. The contents of this email as well as all potential additional contact methods were approved by the Northeastern IRB. At no point were potential participants pressured in any way to participate. All participants signed an informed consent form which outlined their role in the research project and emphasized that participation was voluntary and all participants free to stop participation at any point in the research.

**Research sample.** The research sample consisted of six participants with an array of advising experiences and specialty areas. The specialty knowledge areas or service roles of the participants included the following: (1) Financial Literacy (2) Selective Health Programs (3) Transfer Counseling (4) Career and College Navigation, and (5) TRIO Student Support Services. Experience at the college ranged from four to 28 years providing a unique cross-section of institutional and academic advising experience. All participants were female, and five of the six were located at the main campus location of the multi-site institution. All participants conduct general academic advising services as well as advising within their areas of specialty. Additionally, five of the six participants currently or previously had assigned responsibilities associated with the college’s pre-enrollment workshops titled “SMART START.” Thus, most participants had experience working with students both within their first formal activities with the college, and their ongoing guidance and support throughout their first semester and beyond.

**Data collection and storage.** Yin (2009) identifies six potential sources of qualitative data collected using the case study methodology: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts. This research study collected data through document review, direct observations and one-on-one interviews. The researcher
conducted multiple visits to the selected site in order to observe characteristics of the institution. Researcher observations captured both physical and cultural aspects of the organization. Interviews with the selected participants took place in their office or another designated private area on campus selected by the participant. At the time of data collection via scheduled interviews, the research reviewed parameters of informed consent and received such consent prior to beginning data collection. Interviews were conducted over a two-week period from April 10, 2015 through April 24, 2015. Using a semi-structured research protocol, the data collected via individual interview explored all elements of the advising experience in an effort to capture the essence of the individual’s approach to advising adult learners. The researcher reviewed and refined the interview protocol given the evolution of the research project and data collected—providing the flexibility essential in a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013).

All data was stored in a manner consistent with the protection and ethical treatment of all participants. As such, site observations, document reviews, and all other manner of field notes were stored in a locked file cabinet within the researcher’s home office. All interview data was recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed into a word processing program. All files associated with data collection were saved on a password protected laptop or within an encrypted cloud-based folder. Once audio recordings had been transcribed and analysis completed, all audio recordings were destroyed. Pseudonyms were used when saving all electronic files and no identifiable data was used in either the interview transcriptions or electronic file names. At the conclusion of the research report all audio recordings of the data were destroyed while the transcriptions will be saved for a period of three years.

**Data analysis.** Miles and Huberman (1994) identify three major areas of qualitative data analysis: data reduction, displaying the data, and then drawing conclusion from that data.
Eisenhardt (1989) meanwhile, further identifies two distinct phases in case study analysis when attempting to generate a theory or model: within-case and cross-case. This research employs multiple analysis techniques consistent with Miles and Huberman’s approach as well as that of Eisenhardt’s methodology specific to case studies. This analysis uses Thomas’ (2006) general inductive approach designed to condense extensive amounts of raw data, establish clear links between the data and emerging themes, and develop a model associated with data collected. As a method of increasing research validity, this research uses multiple analysis techniques. The method of constant comparative analysis, a commonly used qualitative data analysis, as well as KWIC (keyword in context) strategies that allow the researcher to use the language of the participants to better understand the experiences under investigation were used in analyzing the raw data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). KWIC techniques use IN VIVO coding that uses the exact language of the participants in the developed coding structure (Saldana, 2013).

Initial steps in the data analysis process focused on organization of the data. First, all researcher observation forms focused on site observations were separated from the rest of the data. Then, hard copies of the raw data were organized by research participant and stored in a three-ring binder. Additionally, after the conclusion of each interview, the researcher created an informal, short report summarizing the key concepts and major focus of the interview as related to the research questions in order to further accelerate thorough, within, and cross-case analysis (Dierckx de Casterlé, Gastmans, Bryon, & Denier, 2012).

Next, preliminary exploratory analysis took place. Creswell (2012) describes this as necessary to “obtain a general sense of the data, memoing ideas, thinking about the organization of data, and considering whether you need more data,” (p.243). This process consisted of the
researcher thoroughly reading and re-reading the hard copy transcriptions several times, creating memos and initial notes regarding potential themes prior to beginning first cycle coding analysis.

After completing the preliminary exploration and notation, the researcher began first cycle coding using within-case analysis. All transcript data was imported into the computer program MAXQDA for detailed analysis. First, the researcher applied descriptive coding techniques. Saldana (2013, p. 88) defines Descriptive Coding as “summarizing in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data.” Descriptive coding is often the first step of first cycle data analysis. Constant comparison analysis calls for chunking of data and the identification of descriptive codes for each chunk of data. New chunks are compared with previously coded data to ensure the appropriate coding of new data. This constant act of reviewing previously coded data and comparing to newly coded data provides opportunities for reviewing and revising previously coded data allowing themes to emerge and evolve over multiple coding cycles.

After the completion of first cycle coding, the researcher employed multiple transitional coding strategies including code mapping and code landscaping (Saldana, 2013). Additionally, coded data was re-read and compared to the applied code to test the validity of that code. Each of these strategies helped establish the categories emerging from first cycle coded data. Such strategies eased the transition to second cycle coding techniques. Second cycle analysis included axial coding strategies. Charmaz (2006, p. 60) states that axial coding “relates categories to sub-categories and specifies the properties and dimensions of a category.” Such properties and dimensions refer to the contexts, conditions, interactions, and consequences of a process (Saldana, 2013). The researcher defined the parameters for data inclusion in a specific category
and applied and re-applied these criteria to cataloged data. Thus, second cycle coding sought to reduce existing redundant codes to just the most salient codes developed in first cycle coding.

After second cycle analysis, the researcher transitioned the data from the major categories developed in analysis into major themes of the study in relation to the research questions as well as a model for advising adult learners during the first semester applying a teaching and learning framework.

**Validity and reliability.** All rigorous qualitative research must engage in elements of validity and reliability testing. Creswell (2013) identifies eight strategies used by qualitative researchers to ensure validity: (1) prolonged engagement (2) triangulation (3) peer review (4) negative case analysis (5) clarifying researcher bias (6) member checking (7) rich, thick description (8) external audits. Creswell further notes that rigorous researcher engages in a minimum of two of these strategies. However, due to the complex and emergent nature of qualitative research, techniques and terminology regarding validity and reliability methods vary based on the interpretive framework through which the research is conducted. As such, the interpretive framework associated with this research informed the validity and reliability methods employed. Given the constructivist framework of this research, particular attention was paid to Angen’s (2000) concepts of ethical and substantive validation as existing within such common validity methods as clarifying researcher bias, triangulation of the data, rich description, and member checking.

The researcher clearly addressed areas of potential researcher bias present in this study through a thorough examination of his positionality and role as the main instrument of this research. Further, the researcher addressed his role as the instrument through which the experiences of the participants were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted. Qualitative
research demands intimacy between the researcher, his methodology, and his data. However, the case study methodology, bound by time and space, as well as the constructivist interpretive lens provided a framework through which researcher bias within this study was addressed. The spatial and temporal parameters of this research, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of its interpretive framework, assure the reliability of the analysis. Additionally, the research design and data analysis techniques lend itself to increased validity. Case study research relies on multiple forms of data collection and analysis – interviews, observation, and documents among them (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). This research study collected data via these techniques including but not limited to, individual semi-structured interviews, research site observations, review of important primary and secondary documents (Sharan B. Merriam, 2009) such as advising programming/workshop protocols and curriculum documents, as well as academic catalog and handbook entries regarding academic advising. Through a comprehensive collection and categorization of the data, the researcher verified the experiences of both advisors and advisees at Mount Wachusett Community College. Further, the use of constant comparative analysis creates opportunities for reading and re-reading of the data to confirm applied coding and revisit previously applied codes to revise and edit them based on emergent themes.

Additionally, the narrative form of the research report provides an outlet for rich, thick description. Creswell (2013) defines thick description as when, “the researcher provides details when writing about a case or when describing a theme….that can emerge through physical description, movement description, and activity description,” (p.252). Rich description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; S.B. Merriam, 1988). Thus, the reporting methodology associated with this research study supported the validity of the research itself.
-threats to the validity of this study were addressed by the researcher. First, the attitudes of participants presented a great threat to the validity of this study. For the same reasons that dispositional characteristics in adult learners can form barriers to their successful enrollment in and completion of higher education (P. K. Cross, 1981), so too could they present a threat to the validity of this research. The guarded nature of some adult students presents a quandary for advising professionals who must constantly evaluate whether students are being forthcoming with them as they interact. This proves especially difficult with adult learners as their previous work, life, and educational experiences can make it difficult for advisors to forge strong connections and assess student need. However, this research addresses this issue through its approach to this problem through the eyes of the practitioner. The perceptions of academic advisors are under investigation here, not the perceptions or lived experiences of the student. Thus, the researcher explores the how advisors perceive and address the needs of their adult students. Then, the researcher aligns these perceptions with known elements of adult learning to identify successful or unsuccessful areas of practice at Mount Wachusett Community College. Thus, the major threat to the validity of the study (adult learner disposition) has been removed through the research design. This focus allowed for the collection, analysis, and reporting of large amounts of rich qualitative data.

Summary

The research design and interpretive framework informed the methodology employed by the researcher throughout this study. Techniques were implemented at various stages of the project to ensure alignment with characteristics of the design. The constant, however, was the central position of the researcher throughout the research design, data collection, data analysis,
and reporting phases of the research process. Given the emergent design of qualitative research and the necessary flexibility required of the data collection protocol, the research must assume the position of constant – continually aligning methodology and process to the questions driving the inquiry.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Introduction

This research explored the perceptions and practice of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution) as it pertains to their experiences with adult learners. This research explores the perceptions of academic advisors, the alignment of advising theory to practice at one Massachusetts community college, and the various theories that have emerged within the adult learning, academic advising, and student success landscape. The researcher collected and analyzed multiple forms of data throughout this research, using numerous qualitative research and analysis techniques. The following research questions drove this inquiry:

- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College perceive the advising needs of adult learners during their first semester of enrollment?
- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College alter their practice to meet the unique needs of adult learners?
- How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College define successful academic advising for adult learners

This chapter describes the findings of this research project, outlining the various types and amounts of data collected before describing in greater detail how those data inform the major themes emerging from this project. This chapter uses both quantitative and qualitative means of displaying the results of this research relying on charts, graphs, and tables, as well as excerpts from recorded interviews. The data presented reveals the complexities of academic advising, especially when focused on the needs of adult learners.
Data Collected

Over six hours of raw audio data were collected throughout this research project. Ultimately, the researcher transcribed the audio data into 64 pages of interview data for coding. Additionally, the researcher collected 32 separate documents associated with the academic advising curriculum developed by Mount Wachusett Community College under a federally funded Title III grant project designed to increase student success at the college. The multi-year project encompassed a number of curricular and co-curricular initiatives ranging from the implementation of learning communities, the purchase and campus-wide rollout of advising technology including DegreeWorks (a degree audit software), to a revamped intake, orientation, and advising model. The advising curriculum documents provided a detailed window into the ideal delivery methodology of advising content and support at MWCC. Meanwhile, the interview data provided a unique window into actual advising practice at the college and illuminated areas of conflict and incongruence, especially when advisor perceptions of the needs of adult learners clashed with the realities of college process and the daily tasks of advising a diverse student population.

The analysis of the collected data yielded a total of 338 coded segments of data. First cycle descriptive coding produced 64 individual codes. During second cycle axial coding those 64 codes were organized into the following 10 categories: (1) Position descriptions (2) Advisor roles (3) Advisor behaviors and traits (4) Andragogical practices (5) Definition of adult learners (6) Student behaviors (7) Student characteristics (8) Perceptions of barriers (9) Student Emotions, and (10) Student Outcomes. The remainder of the chapter provides further analysis of the individual categories before the final chapter discusses the major themes that emerged from this work.
Position Descriptions

When asked to describe their position with the college, participants provided a wide array of information. As shown in the table below, a total of 15 passages were coded with the “position description” code. This represented 4.44% of all coded data. All six participants provided at least one passage coded within this category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position Description</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Position Description Coding

All participants described themselves first as general academic counselors before identifying a specialty area. Specialty areas ranged from specific student populations served to specific content areas. For example, one participant identified a specialty area of working with students interested in certain programs of study, specifically selective health programs.

“I’m an academic advisor slash academic counselor that primarily works with our selective health programs. Um, under the Perkins grant. So again, my primary role is general advising. And, um, I primarily work with our students that are wanting to apply to selective health programs which are, dental, nursing, physical therapy assistant, health information management….um…what am I missing…..Rad Tech. Um, I also advise our pre-health care academy which is a specific cohort for our high school students.”
Meanwhile, other participants identified a content specialty area as opposed to a student specialty area.

“I’m an academic counselor with a focus on financial literacy and that’s through the Perkins grant. The focus on financial literacy mainly means that I work with students who are suspended or who are at risk of being suspended. But it also means that I help students with things like figuring out how to make a budget, learning what a credit score is, filling out their FAFSA and evaluating their financial aid, and I help students apply for scholarships as well. So anything money kind of related would go through me. And then, academic advising for all students as well.”

However, after recognizing their general duties and student or content area specialty, participants provided greater detail regarding the types of duties and tasks often associated with their position. A trend emerged that despite very specific specialty areas, general advising duties encompassed a range of institutional and student-service related tasks. These tasks ranged from administrative in nature, to counseling-based, consistent with previous studies within the field. Further, the shared delivery model employed by Mount Wachusett Community College further confuses the role of the professional advisor. King (1993) identified four major factors influencing the organization and delivery of advising services: (1) institutional mission (2) student population (3) role of the faculty, and (4) institutional policies, procedures, and programs. Given the complex, multi-faceted mission of the community college, the unique and diverse needs of its students, the union environment dictating the role of faculty in student services, and the
complex system of organizational procedures and policies, the muddled duties associated with the professional academic advisor within a community college does not surprise.

One participant listed a myriad of duties associated with her position, before ending by describing them as, “all of the traditional advising type roles.” Another participant described the position as one that “wears many hats.” That same participant later described providing services around areas that fall to other departments within the college.

“We even get phone calls on health insurance….and you know…financial aid.”

Ultimately one participant summed up the difficulties of describing the typical duties of the academic advisor perfectly:

“…at the end of the day, the type of work we do….um…sometimes can’t be measured.”

Advisor Roles

Participants displayed difficulty accurately capturing the numerous duties associated with the academic advising position at Mount Wachusett Community College. Similarly, participants discussed numerous roles assumed by the academic advisor at various points of their interaction with students depending on the needs of that particular student. Just as with their duties, advisors described a myriad of roles they assumed during an advising interaction.

As shown in Table 2, below, a total of 63 passages were coded within the category of “advisor roles.” Those passages covered a total of 18.65% of all coded passages within the data analysis. Thus, almost every fifth coded passage dealt in some manner with the various roles an
academic advisor must assume during the advising process. Nine different descriptive codes fell within the advisor role category.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
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<td>7.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guide</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem Solver</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Translator</td>
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<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model</td>
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<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coach</td>
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<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>18.65</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Advisor Role Category

The most commonly referred to role revealed in the analysis was that of a teacher. Given the predominance of the teaching and learning framework within the advising profession and the infusion of this model and additional active learning techniques throughout the enrollment and advising process at Mount Wachusett Community College, the frequent mention of the teacher role aligns with industry and institutional practice. The advising mission statement for the college reads:

“Academic Advising at MWCC uses a teaching and learning model that instills essential student success skills in all educational practices. As a result of academic advising, students are able to articulate and attain educational, career, and life goals.”
Participant responses also revealed a commitment to the teacher role of the professional advisor. Many participants cited their support for the teaching and learning paradigm within the profession and the active learning strategies implemented at the college.

“What we’ve done in the last few years with the advising curriculum we really have been trying to teach students. So that, that, whole aspect of teaching students to become um….self-advocators for, their, their progress and their success. And teaching what they need to do in order to succeed. Um, so we’ve kind of shifted from that counseling aspect to that teaching aspect.”

Another participant compared the active learning strategies implemented throughout the revised enrollment process to classic teaching methodology seen in higher education including the lecture format and the “sage on the stage” mentality. The active learning strategies were seen as much more engaging and participatory. The introduction of these techniques within the enrollment and advising process at Mount Wachusett Community College has generated a larger shift than could have been imagined as evidenced by the consistent mention of the advisor as the learner as well as well as the teacher. Participants referenced the active learning strategies on numerous occasions describing its impact on themselves, their practice, and their students.

“I can’t sit through someone talking at me for any longer than an hour now. I just…I really can’t, you know…um….kind of doing away with the PowerPoints, the lecture, all these things that we’re so classically trained is the right way to teach just kind of throwing that all out the window and kind of really embracing the student and letting them kind of run the show in a sense.”
However, the dramatic shift to a teaching and learning paradigm incorporating active learning strategies has also generated concerns among some practitioners. The traditional role of the advisor as counselor still resonates with many at Mount Wachusett Community College who are skeptical about swinging too far away from the origins of their position.

“It’s that teaching and learning and let’s do what the faculty do so people can honor the work that we do. And I feel like that’s where it’s coming from.”

Additionally, the transition from the counseling paradigm to the teaching and learning paradigm proved challenging for many that never saw themselves as educators when they entered the advising profession.

“It was a really really hard transition to go from advising curriculum to……from, from being a counselor, to doing that teaching and learning. Um, because, I didn’t want to be a teacher. I went to school to do counseling.”

However, despite this resistance, participants still referenced examples of the specific use of their counseling backgrounds. Participants discussed the use of counseling skills such as compassion, empathy, and referrals to other campus services. Despite their absorption into the teaching and learning paradigm, participants expressed the need and the importance of exercising their counseling, guiding and helping skills to improve student experiences and advance the mission of academic advising at the college.
Advisor Behaviors and Traits

In addition to the various roles expected of their position, advisors identified many behaviors and/or traits they deemed critical to advising adult learners at Mount Wachusett Community College. These ranged from using humor in the advising process, to an advisor’s capacity to retain facts and institutional information deemed “knowledge capacity.” Table 3, shows the 13 descriptive codes within the Advisor Behaviors and Traits categories. A total of 81 passages were coded with descriptive codes from within this category representing a total 23.97% of all coded passages. The top three codes present within this category represented interrelated advisor traits – supportive, invested, and student centered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invested</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conciseness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Centeredness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge Capacity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.97</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Advisor Behaviors and Traits

The need for advisors to demonstrate that they are invested in their adult learner population proves critical in supporting successful advising outcomes. Adult learners often bring with them powerful negative experiences with educational systems and personnel, thus the importance for advisors to tell, as well as show, their adult learners their level of investment in them personally
cannot be understated. One participant described some of the questions used to indicate her level of investment to advisees.

“…what would you like to do….um what is your life like…do you work? Do you have children…what are their names? How old are they? Do they go to school? You know…if you’re invested in them, you know, they may be more invested in….you know…what…what we’re trying to accomplish.”

These questions all revolved around situational life circumstances rather than academic or career goals. Houle’s goal-orientation supports student success for adult learners. However, probing questions often asked during the disarm phase of the appreciative advising model prove critical to building credibility and signifying investment to the advisee.

However, other participants indicated that while the nature of the interaction was important to show investment, the frequency of the interaction was just as, if not more, critical to producing the desired effect. Said one participant:

“I think that if he didn’t have someone to check in with weekly he wouldn’t be here anymore. Um…and it just kind of came from organically, he got sent to me and had a good experience and so he kept coming back….um…and so he’s finally like got a major after two, two-and-a-half years here.”
Yet another participant expressed the importance of both non-academic topics of conversation as well as the frequency with which those conversations take place as a means of fostering connections with adult students.

“I actually had one student that we emailed a lot. And back and forth. I felt like I knew her because she was very, she was very….she was an adult learner. She wanted to do one of our Nichols 3+1 programs. She went back and forth back and forth. She had actually gone back and forth between two different schools. So then when she, she came, I’ve actually only seen her in person two or three times in like the last three years….two, three years that she’s been trying to do this. But because we’ve done so much email back and forth, when she comes in it’s like we….we connect.”

Still for others, it’s the act of recognizing the accomplishments of the few that illustrate to the many the level of investment. One participant described how she recognizes such accomplishments with her students.

“I honestly have the graduation bell so if I see a student who comes in and they’re registering for that last semester before they leave I ring the bell. And everybody who is around and who is available will clap to congratulate them. And I do warn them, I do tell them that I’m about to embarrass you but it’s a good thing. And it’s a good form of embarrassment and we here are proud of what you’ve accomplished.”
Participants described numerous behaviors and traits they identified as important to successfully advising adult learners. However, the ability to demonstrate a level of investment in the lives of their students proved most critical. Participants identified three major techniques for accomplishing this goal—direct questioning regarding non-academic aspects of students’ lives, frequent communication designed to build familiarity, and public acts of recognition for important accomplishments.

**Andragogical Practices**

The data further described techniques and strategies for effectively engaging adult advisees in learning activities within the advising interaction. Additionally, strategies employed by advisors to gather information and inform their practice were described. Ultimately, twelve descriptive codes were included within the Andragogical Practices category representing 48 total coded segments of data. This represented a total of 14.21% of the total coded segments. The number of coded segments was distributed rather evenly across the twelve codes assigned to this category. The even distribution of coded segments across multiple codes associated with teaching practice aligns with the heavy emphasis on the teaching and learning paradigm at Mount Wachusett Community College.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formative Assessments</td>
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<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tactile learning opportunities</td>
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<td>2.07</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Story-Telling</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visuals/Graphic Organizers</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Self-Disclosure</td>
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<td>Transparency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Probing Questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group Instruction</td>
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<td>2.07</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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Table 4: Andragogical Practices

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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<td>48</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The use of probing questions, strategies for generating formal and informal formative assessments and the use of tactile learning opportunities represented the most commonly referred to andragogical techniques. Advisors occupy a unique space between counseling and teaching. Thus, both skills are integral to the successful advising of adult students. Additional techniques such as self-disclosure and group instruction are often utilized when advising adult students. Given the enrollment procedures at Mount Wachusett Community College which require attendance at a group intake session called a “Smart Start,” many participants discussed elements of group instruction as well. Further, participants referenced the unique application of counseling skills within the teaching and learning paradigm:

“So whatever student comes into your office and you start asking them questions….that’s how you can determine if you’re going to wear the teacher hat or you’re going to wear the counselor hat.”

Additionally, one participant described how her practice was informed by the informal formative assessment she conducted through the counseling process as the advising interaction progressed, adjusting her pacing and instructional delivery based on her observations and conclusions regarding student comprehension.
“…start there and depending on what the student is able to demonstrate that they’re picking up on, you know, we can move a little faster, or you know, I will definitely, slow it down if the student is demonstrating that you know, they’re not following it.”

Additionally, participants consistently described providing their advisees with tactile learning opportunities throughout the advising interaction – specifically around registration and academic planning. Participants discussed several reasons for incorporating this technique – transparency of process, increasing student autonomy, increasing technology skills and familiarity with online college tools. However, regardless of the reason, advisors consistently described a similar hands-on andragogical practice ideally suited for adult learners.

“…students do the hands on with the computer so that they’re kind of running the show a little bit.”

“Um….so kind of we’ve had them sort of sit in our chair and do it themselves so they kind of get over that (fear) and we’re still there.”

“Um, and then when they look at the classes and kind of configure a schedule I let them sit at my desk and say okay so what’s the first step? What do you do?”
Participants also described how such techniques within the group “Smart Start” format can be problematic for adult learners without that one-to-one support to navigate the technology. One participant shared a story of an adult student in a Smart Start session that was unable to follow the first instruction of opening a web browser and going to the Mount Wachusett Community College Website. Such descriptions highlight the difficult position the college faces when designing and implementing student success programming – technology can simultaneously provide and restrict access to college resources for a student population depending on their technological skillset.

**Definition of Adult Learners**

The means by which advisors and institutions define adult learners represented a central question driving this research. Typical means of identifying adult learners focus on age as the defining criteria. This study produced seven coded segments associated with how the participants defined adult learners. These segments represented a total of 2.07% of all coded segments in the research project. Much of what participants said aligned with current methodology for identifying and tracking adult learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Definition of Adult Learners

However, at times, participants did begin to scratch the surface of a more nuanced definition; a definition that incorporated situational characteristics as a driving force of student
maturity levels and “adult” status. Participants described the life circumstances that often accompany community college students of all ages.

“I would say anybody who has either been out of school for a few years or is coming back to school. A lot of the students I get who are suspended will say, “well the last time I was here, I was young and stupid and now I’m ready to be here.” And those are my adult learners. I would say anybody that is maybe a year out of high school…and honestly anybody that has a child, despite their age because I think that that just grows them up really quickly.”

However, the mere presence of such barriers may not be enough to capture the effect of such elements on a student. Which situational characteristics, and how many of them exist, can alter the formula of this definition. Another participant completely omitted age from the discussion while articulating the complexity of the situational characteristic as the defining characteristic of an adult learner:

“...number of responsibilities and levels of responsibilities that make them now have to function in a more…adult, mature…you know, manner.”

Still another participant looked at the definition of an adult learner not through the lens of age or life circumstance, but rather educational participation, experiences, and sequencing.
“Time away from education in general. I think of…..what else…adult learners….maybe people who haven’t had a good experience in high school. Or in GED…now called HiSET. Yeah, that’s…I see them as more vulnerable.

While age remains the most common identifier of adult learners, the realization that the situational characteristics commonly associated with adults (child care, work/life balance, financial barriers, etc.) affect students of all ages within the community college environment. While age remains an important marker, its use as a sole indicator of adult student status misses the mark.

**Student Characteristics, Behaviors, and Emotions**

Defining the adult learner at Mount Wachusett Community College takes far more care and commitment than a simple exploration of age and circumstance. Participants also spent a great deal of time and energy dissecting the characteristics, behaviors, and emotions of the adult students they supported through their advising practice. Participants often vacillated between stories of specific encounters, and perceptions of potential student need. A total of thirteen segments were coded under the student behaviors category, fifteen describing student emotions, and ten describing general student characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
<th>Coded Segments</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Negativity</td>
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<td>Lost Perspective</td>
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<td>High Expectations</td>
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<td>Timid</td>
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<td>Student Emotions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervousness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants found the adult students they serve to possess unique characteristics while exhibiting a range of emotions and behaviors given their unique situational and dispositional characteristics. Participants often cited adult learners’ life experiences as a major influence – in some cases positive and others negative. Referring to adult learners, one participant stated:

“I think they’re much more receptive…..They’re a lot more willing to listen to advice when they have life experience telling them to.”

Another participant referenced the drive and focus of the adult students she has worked with.

“I think they are more focused, more directed. Maybe more than some of the students coming directly from high school because some of them are floundering and don’t have a focus.”

However, despite these positive characteristics, further comments focused on the fragile mental state of the adult learner. Feelings of insecurity and negativity highlight the dual role life experience plays in the dispositional characteristics of the adult learner. On the one hand, previous experience provides the adult learner with motivation, focus, and self-advocacy skills. However, it simultaneously feeds negative academic self-perceptions, as well as feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy within the college environment. One participant described her adult

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>15</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Characteristics</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Student Characteristics, behaviors, and emotions
advisees as, “very reserved,” and the fact that “adult learners think they are doing worse than they are.” This combination of passivity and distorted academic self-perception wreaks havoc on the adult learners’ ability to accurately self-assess and appropriately self-advocate. Participants described wide ranges of student emotions and behaviors associated with the adult learner and academic advising feeding this often spiraling negative cycle. One participant described interactions with a particular student via email that highlighted this dangerous pattern:

“And through the emails I could see, you know, quite a bit of pain. And so I’ll email, you know, and I’ll say, “well, here’s, um…you’re saying that this isn’t going well and I’m looking at this and I’m seeing brilliance. So, how am I seeing brilliance and you’re seeing absolutely no good? Let’s have a conversation.”

Another participant described how self-perceptions can influence the experiences of an adult learner as they re-integrate into the culture of an academic institution and their complex systems:

“Um…..maybe….you know, maybe their own feelings of that perceived stigma that they’re coming back to school, that they didn’t do it right away, or maybe that they had some trouble the first time around.”

The lack of ability to accurately self-assess feeds other emotional elements of the adult learner. Despite being more receptive to institutional support and guidance, challenges around accurate self-assessment often feed emotional instability generating barriers where none previously
existed. One participant captured this perfectly when describing a common interaction with her adult advisees:

“More of the…of the…adult students, um….come in and say I’m failing. And it’s like okay let’s come in and talk about that. And then you hear their scores and it’s like well how is that failing?”

Participants described the feelings of fear and anxiety among their adult students that often presented as early as the point of enrollment. Often times the fear that has been building throughout the enrollment process boils over when adult students enter a one-on-one advising environment. One participant cited the anxiety for adult students associated with the group advising “Smart Start” model employed by the college. Participants cited experiences with adult students overwhelmed by the enrollment process who became very anxious while contemplating all the necessary steps for successful enrollment. One participant summed up the process of building anxiety and pressure perfectly:

“….if they’re coming back here as an adult learner…they have just faced more obstacles, so they are just coming a little more….strongly opinionated, I guess. I don’t know if that’s the right word. Um, but they’re coming with more cards stacked against them and I think they feel the weight of that. So they tend to be a little more anxious, a little more nervous because there’s just more on the line for them.”
Perceptions of Student Barriers

Participants identified numerous potential barriers their students faces. Table 7, shows the ten descriptive codes within the perceptions of student barriers category. As shown, a total of 47 segments were coded within this category representing a total of 13.92% of all coded passages. Despite the fact that a total of 10 descriptive codes were represented within this category, participants identified barriers in the areas of technology and childcare with the greatest frequency. The technology barrier encompassed numerous technology areas ranging from apprehension with general technology – internet, email, etc. – to apprehension with more sophisticated college technology – blackboard, DegreeWorks, etc.

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<th>Coded Segments</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Work Schedule</td>
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<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Finances</td>
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<td>0.30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
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<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Knowledge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic Issues</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic History</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Perceived Barriers

Participants discussed a range of technology concerns. In some instances a lack of technology skills prohibited adult students from accessing important information. For example, adult students often request a hard copy of the academic catalog. However, the college catalog is no longer available in print for distribution to students. Instead, it is available only online. Thus, any student uncomfortable navigating the college website may be unable to access critical information regarding program requirements and college policy. In other instances, the lack of
technology skills within a group setting heightened anxiety and fear of stigma. One participant stated that computer skills were integral in determining how students fair at Smart Start group enrollment events.

“I think their computer skills greatly determine their comfort in Smart Start. I had to show a woman how to open the internet on Saturday. And that was a rough place for her to start.”

Additionally, one participant highlighted the important role of the advisor as technological one-to-one aid. With an advisor by their side, she described adult learners as much more willing to engage technology:

“And, you know, a lot of older students or adult students I should say…they do like to come in and sit with you, you know at times. You know, they’re more kind of……with the technology….you know some may not be as astute about using it and clicking on things and being comfortable just clicking wherever just seeing what pops up. So they do like the, “let’s sit down with you and let’s do it together,” approach better.”

Still another participant hammered home both the importance of technology use as well as the common mentality of adult students when forced to engage technology:
“The technology piece I think is huge. Um…they’re really apprehensive that they’re going to break something or that they’re not going to do it right.”

Beyond limitations to information access, technology apprehension may be hurting MWCC in other areas as well. Multiple advisors discussed the difficulty enticing students to attend the many workshops associated with their advising curriculum. Given the technology apprehension advisors described seeing at the college, and the fact that adult students were described as more likely to take technological risks when engaged in individual advising interactions, the technology-heavy, group instruction model of their workshops may prove problematic for the adult learners constituting just under half of their student population. Workshop and/or event attendance is an ongoing issue at all community colleges given the student population and drive-through campus culture at many such institutions. However, MWCC may be creating an unintentional barrier to attendance at such workshops for adult learners by holding many of them in computer labs around campus. A thorough review of curriculum documents and workshop protocols revealed workshops on academic planning, transfer information, satisfactory academic progress (SAP)/financial literacy, and Selective Health Programs, required computer labs for effective delivery. Given the prevalence of technology concerns described by participants, alternative delivery models may be worth exploring as a means to increase attendance.

Beyond technology barriers, participants described childcare as a common barrier to success for their adult students. Despite the presence of the only federally funded Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) grant program within the state of Massachusetts, childcare remains a perceived issue for students among the participants in this study. Some
participants described the challenges of attempting to deliver quality academic advising to a student whose child is present at the meeting. Additionally, they discussed times when other advisors in the office had provided a distraction for children in attendance such as games, toys, or conversation so that the advisor and parent could meet with limited distractions. Said one participant bluntly:

“Um, so I would say particularly at Mount Wachusett some of the biggest problems are childcare, transportation, and financial issues. And, I think that’s the same for non-traditional, and….adults and straight out.”

Another participant moved a step beyond that describing the difficulties students have balancing their multiple life roles:

“Um….I think they’re…one of struggles for some of them might be balancing. You know, their work life with their home life with their….social life with school. So coming up with a balance. Making sure they have the support they need if they have children at home.”

Participants perceived great challenges for adult learners in areas of balancing their many responsibilities and life roles – student, worker, parent, caregiver, etc. Ironically, balance could be better achieved via the incorporation of increased technology into their academic plan via less time spent physically on campus by taking hybrid and/or online courses. One wonders if
addressing the common perceived barrier of technology could have an immediate impact on the second most common perceived barrier.

**Student Outcomes**

The final category emerging throughout the first two cycles of coding related directly to the research questions informing this investigation. This research sought to explore how academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College defined successful academic advising for adult learners. This category carries particular weight given the challenges defining the term academic advising within the industry.

Numerous descriptive codes and coded segments of the research documents informed this category. A total of ten descriptive codes are housed within the Outcomes category. These codes span the advising continuum ranging from those typically associated with personal development and counseling outcomes, to those associated with learning, employability, and cognitive skill gain. Some descriptors such as “timeline to completion,” “institutional connection,” and “satisfaction,” are more directly tied to corresponding student success measures. A total of 37 segments were coded with any one of these codes covering a total of 10.95% of all coded segments of the research. Ultimately, three types of overlapping outcomes emerge – cognitive development outcomes, personal development outcomes, and student success related outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<th>Coded Segments</th>
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<td>Outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Problem-Solving Skills</td>
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<td>Happiness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timeline to completion</td>
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<td>Self-Advocacy Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
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<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Connection</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.48</td>
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</table>
The most frequently described outcomes referred to counseling principles. The researcher applied codes such as confidence, personal growth, and emotional outcomes such as happiness to numerous passages within this category. This important finding shows the firm counseling foundation within the professional advising community at MWCC despite the institutional focus on the teaching and learning paradigm. Participants most frequently referenced confidence when discussing potential outcomes for successfully advising adult learners at MWCC:

“I hope they just get confidence out of it. I think that they should just leave here feeling awesome about changing their life. More important than, you know, “oh, I have a schedule that works for me,” is knowing that in two years “my whole life will be different, and that’s why I’m here.”

Said another participant:

“I think successful advising for older students is really guiding them and leading them through that process of getting them to that level of confidence where they can do it themselves.”

Yet another participant stated:
“I hope they feel like they walk away with some…um…encouragement and the ability to think they can do it. Um, and I understand that that’s something that in just one advising session you cannot just completely change them. But, I hope that I’m part of that…um….at least that I can help them to start feeling more positive and feel like they can do it.”

However, that confidence goes beyond recognizing one’s own ability to achieve success. One participant described the confidence she sought to build in her adult students as one of confidence in the face of commonly held stigma surrounding adult students. She specifically referenced the community learning environment and its diversity:

“And so it’s about reassuring the student that education is open to anyone at any age. And building the confidence that it’s okay to be here if you’re forty-five…..that’s young (laughing).”

Further, participants described the importance of stressing “process over product.” This attitude encompasses advisor skills, traits, behaviors, teaching strategies, outcomes, and interactions. The focus described by all participants is one in which students move forward, and regardless of the outcome, the growth and development are celebrated. Many participants described difficult conversations with students regarding continuing their education. In some of these cases, student decisions would not represent the typical formula of “successful” advising. The student decided to stop out, the student withdrew from the class, the student registered for six classes while working full-time, etc. However, in many of these scenarios, advisors praised
students for the process by which they came to these decisions. The information they gathered and analyzed prior to charting a course of action. The critical thinking and problem-solving skills that informed a difficult decision and perhaps most importantly, the control they took in their education and life planning to make an informed decision about what was best for them and their future given their current goals. Autonomy was only mentioned once as a perceived outcome of advising adult learners. However, all of the elements most often mentioned by participants contribute to an autonomous learner and productive and confident member of an educational community and larger society.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the data collected throughout the research project. The data reviewed included audio recordings, college policy documents such as the academic catalog and student handbook, curriculum documents, and enrollment and workshop documents. These documents revealed important information regarding the perceptions of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College regarding the needs and challenges of adult learners as well as the professional responsibilities associated with their roles as advisors. Specifically, emerging patterns regarding their expected behaviors, fluidly changing roles, and complexities of the students they serve provide insight to the challenges facing advisors within this community college. Some emerging patterns represent consistencies with the literature while others highlight unintentional ineffective practice when it comes to serving adult learners.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

This research explored the perceptions and practice of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College (a rural, public, open access, 2-year institution) as it pertains to their experiences with adult learners. This research explored the perceptions of academic advisors, the alignment of advising theory and practice at one Massachusetts community college, and the various theories that have emerged within the adult learning, academic advising, and student success landscape. The researcher collected and analyzed multiple forms of data throughout this research, using numerous qualitative research and analysis techniques. The following research questions drove this inquiry:

- **How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College perceive the advising needs of adult learners during their first semester of enrollment?**
- **How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College alter their practice to meet the unique needs of adult learners?**
- **How do academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College define successful academic advising for adult learners**

This chapter describes the conclusions of the researcher, how those conclusions relate to the larger problem under investigation, and suggestions for further research.

Discussion

The stories of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College are stories of committed and challenged helping professionals. Even the most dedicated and informed professional advisors at MWCC found themselves pulled in numerous directions by their
institution, their profession, and the students they serve. Ultimately, their challenges and frustration impedes their ability to do that which they covet most; help the student sitting in front of them.

This research began as an exploration of advisor perceptions of adult learners at one Massachusetts community college. The research questions focused on the perceptions of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College regarding the needs of their adult students. Participants described powerful moments between themselves and their adult advisees. They shared laughter regarding the often comical stress associated with their expected duties. They provided a window into their successes and failures as professionals working in high stakes positions where failure to perform your duties profoundly impacts those they serve. As they told their stories, the qualitative nature of this case study informed its evolution. By the time the data was collected, reduced, and analyzed, a very different story emerged. What had started as an exploration in advising adult learners at one community college had become an exploration in the demands and tensions within the advising profession among a small group of dedicated advisors at one community college. A story of the vexing lives of Mount Wachusett Community College academic advisors. A story of qualified and skilled professionals confused by the ever-changing landscape of their profession within the context of their community college. A story of committed helpers lacking a clear definition of their roles within the larger context of their institutional existence. Through the exploration of the participants’ experiences with adult learners, this research captured a snapshot of the complexities of the Mount Wachusett Community College academic advisor.

Three major areas of confusion emerged from the categories identified through second cycle coding and data reduction. Participants identified confusion around (1) Role (2) Service
Delivery, and (3) Purpose. In all of these cases participants identified and spoke of the micro issues informing their confusion. However, the researcher’s depth of exploration provided the larger lens and scope through which to review these issues. Given these areas of confusion the researcher identified three essential questions that each academic advisor at Mount Wachusett Community College must address prior to assuming their role as a professional advisor and throughout their advising interactions with adult learners at the college. Institutional context and additional factors may ultimately influence their answers. However, prior to incorporating things like student population, advising mission and vision, service delivery model, and institutional mission, advisors must first address these questions internally and within the scope of their professional context.

Three Essential Questions framing Advisor Interactions:

1. Who am I?
2. How am I?
3. Why am I?

These essential questions get at the major areas of conflict identified in the literature and the stories of the participants.

The existential question of “who am I” proved critical to the participants within this research project. They often described being caught between the worlds of counseling and the worlds of teaching and learning, in some cases rhetorically asking the question, “am I a counselor, or am I a teacher?” Many voiced displeasure with the shift away from their backgrounds as counselors. Despite often recognizing the importance of the teaching and learning paradigm, many participants expressed resentment for the paradigm shift. Some
questioned the motives of their leaders in developing and implementing such a drastic shift – pointing to the need for faculty validation of advising work as a driving force for this unwanted and somewhat unwelcome change. The confusion and tension between the paradigms cannot be ignored. Despite some participants voicing displeasure regarding the shift, many characterized academic advising as a teaching and learning interaction. The stories of Mount Wachusett Community College academic advisors embodied confusion regarding the primary role of the academic advisor at the college.

As the participants within the research attested, they clearly operate within both the counseling and teaching and learning paradigms. Why, then, does the profession so often ask advisors to apply one or the other approach to their practice? Hemwall and Trachte (2005) capture this mentality perfectly while discussing 10 organizing principles of the “advising as learning” paradigm, pitting it distinctly against the counseling paradigm. The participants in this study described themselves as counselors, teachers, and learners. The goal of any organization and of the profession must not be to force professionals within the field to align themselves with a particular paradigm, but rather maximize the ways that their skills interact with the full spectrum of theories, paradigms, service models, and professional frameworks. Thus, the profession can assist them in understanding the appropriate ways and means with which to use their diverse skills to further the success of their students and their institutions.

When addressing this question, advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College must fully understand how their various skills fit into the roles they occupy throughout the advising process at the college. Once they understand who they are and who they will be, they must maximize their skills to effectively engage students within each of the many roles they occupy. At Mount Wachusett Community College, participants described ways in which they effectively
accomplished such tasks on an informal level. This research ultimately identifies a process through which these advisors can clearly see how their entire skill-set applies to both the counseling and teaching and learning paradigm to assist their adult students.

Advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College must also address the essential question of “how am I?” This question focuses on the delivery of academic advising services and the various means with which a professional advisor at the college must engage students. Once the advisor deciphers the appropriate role for a given interaction (understanding the fluid nature of the advising experience) the advisor then must align that role with a given delivery strategy and the skills necessary to create an effective interaction given that role and delivery method. For example, an advisor sitting with an adult student assessing and concluding that the student requires services steeped in the counseling paradigm would apply techniques aligning with that assessment, including probing questions and active listening strategies. On the other hand should a student present areas more directly related to the teaching and learning paradigm such as program requirements or financial aid policy, the advisor should start thinking about the necessary tools to deliver effective instruction within the content areas identified by the student, including appropriate technology, graphic organizers, and tactile learning opportunities for quality instruction and student learning within a particular content area.

Thus, the question of “how am I,” requires constant reflection from academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College. At any given time and place, the techniques applied to an advising interaction may change given the initial and ongoing role assessments performed by the advisor. Thus, as their role may change throughout an advising appointment, so too will the means with which they interact with their advisee.
Finally, advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College must consider their purpose. At various points within an advising interaction the advisor must reflect on the purpose of their actions and adjust their techniques or lens (paradigm) accordingly. Addressing the question of “why am I” provides structure for the advisor to clearly identify the purpose of his or her actions. At Mount Wachusett Community College, advisors work to align their actions within the framework of these three major questions.

However, the stories of academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College reflect, at times, incongruence between the actions of advisors and their answers to these major questions. At the institutional level, Mount Wachusett Community College structures advising activities very deliberately within a teaching and learning paradigm. However, at the student level, individual advisors at the college describe interactions and outcomes steeped in the counseling paradigm. This contradiction proves problematic for a number of reasons: (1) It increases confusion among professional advisors at the college regarding the purpose of their job (2) It increases resentment among those advisors at the college with counseling backgrounds, and (3) It creates a disconnect between institutional and individual definitions of advising, adversely affecting student outcomes.

This exploration revealed a number of effective practices incorporated by individual advisors throughout the college when working with adult students. Many advisors described strong commitment to addressing the perceived challenges of their adult students as well as a deep understanding of the unique challenges they present. However, their practices described to address these challenges lacked structure, uniformity, and formalization. As such, their inconsistent application created variable advising services for adult students, depending on the advisor seen.
In order to maximize the skills of their professional advisors and best serve their roughly 2,000 adult students, Mount Wachusett Community College must identify a method for advisors to utilize their entire skill-set within the preferred paradigm of the institution. Thus, the foundation of the helping/counseling mindset of the advisor must be preserved within a delivery mechanism consistent with departmental and college-wide objectives of measureable student success within a teaching and learning paradigm. This represents the formula described by practicing advisors within this environment and it addresses the needs of the case under investigation.

The figure below outlines the interrelationship between the counseling and teaching paradigms at Mount Wachusett Community College. The contemporary debate within the advising literature approaches these two paradigms as unique entities often at odds with one another regarding techniques and outcomes associated with practice. However, as this research has supported, these two paradigms rely very heavily on one another when advising adult learners. Due to their heightened emotional state and previous academic and life experiences, adult learners require the academic advisor at Mount Wachusett Community College to seamlessly transition back and forth between these two paradigms, reconfiguring appointment materials and restructuring appointment goals and objectives as needed.

<table>
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<th>Andragogical Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Probing questions</td>
<td>1. Formative assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Empathy</td>
<td>2. Tactile/hands-on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Observation</td>
<td>3. Visuals/graphic organizers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Active listening</td>
<td>4. Instructional Pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Referrals</td>
<td>5. Incorporation of life experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Counseling and Teaching Paradigms
For instance, an advisor may informally conduct a technology assessment on an adult learner during an advising appointment focused on academic planning, and internally identify that content area as an objective for the appointment. However, while conducting the formative technology assessment the student displays behaviors and emotions indicating unrest and stress due to their apprehension about accessing and successfully engaging with college technology (a commonly cited barrier to adult student success in this research). In such a situation, the advisor must circle back and re-assess their role, transitioning seamlessly from the teaching and learning paradigm to the counseling paradigm in an effort to stabilize and re-generate the safe environment necessary for both effective counseling and effective teaching. Participants of this research described similar situations requiring them to make andragogical adjustments to the pace and/or content of their instruction while incorporating greater elements of counseling into their appointment. Below, Figure 2 represents an image displaying this continual process of assessment and role/andragogy adjustment as well as the interconnected nature of the three major elements of an advising appointment (role assessment, andragogical practice, and outcomes) with an adult learner at Mount Wachusett Community College.
As shown in figure 2, the process for effectively advising adult learners at Mount Wachusett Community College includes a number of interrelated and fluid elements all driven by student need. While initially sequential, advisor role selection, andragogical practices, student barriers and ultimate outcomes (both individually and programatically) can and do change throughout the advising process based on the evolution of the interaction and the re-assessment and repositioning of the advisor. This re-assessment and repositioning requires constant attention to the needs of the adult learner, who may quickly vacillate from one paradigm to the other depending on the content area of the session and the andragogical practices employed by the advisor. The advisor must be nimble and alert in their efforts to build a safe and productive environment that ultimately leads to credibility among adult students. This research supports the
notion that advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College describe better advising relationships with their adult learners when those students perceive that advisors are invested in their personal lives and their unique challenges. Participants in this research described a myriad of ways in which they effectively communicated their level of investment in the individual adult learner. However, regardless of the method, participants described similar outcomes associated with successful advising when their adult learners believed the advisor was invested in their success.

The process detailed in figure 2 provides a structure for academic advisors at Mount Wachusett Community College to maintain their counseling principles within the institutional environment of teaching and learning. The act of constant assessment of student need, advisor role, and andragogical technique, provides advisors the necessary means to move fluidly between the counseling and teaching paradigm while addressing the unique and personal needs of the adult learner in front of them, increasing that students perceived level of advisor investment in them.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

While this research identifies critical areas of advising at one Massachusetts community college, its limitations (including sample size, and generalizability) inform the need for additional research in these areas. Particularly, additional research is suggested in areas associated with adult learners at community college. Research in the areas of student perceptions of the advising experience are needed to compare and contrast the perceptions of advisors with those of the adult learners they serve. Additionally, research exploring the blended paradigms of counseling and teaching and learning is needed. Participants in this research expressed differing
and conflicting views and emotions around the teaching and learning paradigm. Research exploring its place as the predominant advising delivery paradigm is needed to further identify its effectiveness. One must question its applicability across all institutional contexts given the strong feelings of participants within this study despite their alleged support of the institutional shift to the teaching and learning model.

Further, additional research regarding the learning styles of adult learners within the advising interaction is needed. Given the unique characteristics of the advising interaction (location, content, advisor history, student history, etc.), questions regarding the learning habits and styles of adult students abound. This research used Knowles’ adult learning theory to analyze the case of the adult learner and advising at Mount Wachusett Community College. However, given the additional stressors of college enrollment within this environment, further research regarding effective learning strategies within this context is needed. Further, given the advising-based curriculum Mount Wachusett Community College has developed and implemented over recent years, additional research related to effective instructional techniques associated with the unique content areas and delivery mechanisms of that curriculum is needed.

**Summary**

What began as an in-depth exploration of advisors’ perspectives at Mount Wachusett Community College regarding a specific student sub-population revealed a much broader and critical issue at the institution and within the field of academic advising. This exploration uncovered the lingering effects of an institutional advising paradigm shift that has affected the nature of advising at the college. This particular research looked only at those advisors and advising interactions focused on the adult learner. However, the resounding message delivered to
the researcher was one of identity and role confusion and a palpable internal tension between advisor as counselor and advisor as teacher at Mount Wachusett Community College. Despite great efforts to foster an inclusive and participatory change process, the paradigm shift has accentuated existing tensions at the institution between labor and management as advisors felt disconnected from the decision-making process regarding what’s best for their students as a whole, and specifically adult learners.

The emergent design of the qualitative research methodology allowed for the evolution of this research, which began focused on advisors’ interactions with the students they serve within a community college context. However, through the research process, the focus of the research shifted from that focusing on advisors interactions with students, to that focusing on the contradictions and incongruences present in their daily professional lives. The realities of serving many masters, so to speak, and the impact that has on their day-to-day work lives.

This research proves critical to practitioners and administrators, especially those embroiled in any form of institutional change project or those working specifically with academic advisors, particularly those assigned to adult students. All participants stated they believed academic advising to be a teaching and learning interaction, so Mount Wachusett Community College succeeded in altering the perceptions of the nature of academic advising at the institution. Given the institutional context, administrators and staff members involved in the Title III project should take great pride in bringing about such change. However, where the advising component of the project failed, was in its ability to provide academic advisors the appropriate means with which to maintain their counseling heritage within an institutional advising environment positioned squarely within the teaching and learning paradigm. Participants expressed understanding and appreciation for the institutional transition to the
teaching and learning paradigm. However, participants mostly described informal teaching techniques associated with their practice that were delivered largely within a counseling framework. The college has not provided the appropriate guidance to their advisors, allowing them to maintain their counseling identity within the teaching and learning environment of the college. While this research addressed specific questions regarding the advisors of Mount Wachusett Community College and their perceptions of adult learners, its evolution into an exploration of the complex world of advising community college adult students provides important insight to the field of advising while providing the research site with a tangible model for increasing the effectiveness of adult advising practice.
References


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