

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH  
PROACTIVE ADVISING EFFECTS ON RETENTION

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the academic, proactive advising experiences of online students' and the effect on their retention in an online degree program. The theory and conceptual framework that guided this study are Tinto's student integration model and Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering. For this study, I conducted a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study to understand the personal experiences of proactive advising among online students. This study was conducted with 10 students attending an online university. The data was collected through individual interviews, hypothetical letters, and focus groups. Three themes were identified; overall online experiences, barriers to online education, and proactive advising and four subthemes; helpful/detrimental advice, more needed support, lack of social interaction, online academic supports. These themes and subthemes unveil the importance having a proactive academic advisor for online students.

*Keywords:* retention, proactive advising, higher education, online education

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Face-to-face (F2F)

First Generation College student (FGCS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS)

National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)

Online Learning Advising Model (OLAM)

University Innovation Alliance (UIA)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Chapter One provides a background of the historical, social, and theoretical context of proactive advising in an online education setting, as well as the problem, purpose, significance of the study, and a set of research questions. A list of definitions related to the student will culminate Chapter One.

### **Background**

For many years, there were two routes to higher education for high school graduates: They could go to their local community college or get an education at a four-year institution. Over the years, institutions have created online courses, and eventually online programs, where students could complete their degree without ever stepping foot on a college campus (Kentnor, 2015). Online education continues to grow as an increasing number of students are choosing this option (Seaman et al., 2018). Although more students are choosing online education, retention in online education still presents a problem for colleges and universities (Seery et al., 2021). According to Aulck et al. (2016), close to 30% of first-year students studying at a four-year institution do not continue their education their second year. Previous research shows that students taking online courses have anywhere from 5% to 35% lower retention rate than students who study at a traditional on-ground institution (Glazier, 2020). With these numbers, it is important to understand how colleges can positively impact online degree retention. One area to consider is the college student advisor, who plays a strong role in the course selection process and provides support for the students as they integrate into the college setting. Proactive advising plays an important role in helping and supporting students throughout their time in their online programs. This phenomenological study examined the proactive advising experiences of online

students who take online-only classes.

Although online education started in the 1980's, it has grown significantly within the last decade (Kentnor, 2015). After the surge of COVID-19, 31% of students are finding it safer to stay at home and continue their education online (Zaman, 2021). Students have also found that online education has been the better option for them as they are faced with other priorities and commitments in their lives (Herguner et al., 2020). Even though students feel safer staying home, students found it harder to learn online. Students find themselves under more stress learning online, they do not always understand the professors' expectations, and find that they lack motivation (Dvoráková et al., 2021). Darkwa and Antwi (2021) conducted a case study at the University of Cape Coast that found their students learned better through face-to-face learning. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) reported that the number of undergraduates enrolled in fall of 2020 decreased 3.6% from 2019. Those students were finding it hard to stay enrolled online because of financial disparities, fewer resources, and mental health reasons (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Transitioning some courses to an online platform does not fit the learning standards for all students. Students also found that learning from home could pose a challenge as there are many more distractions (Martin, 2021). Although in theory, online education sounds like a good option for some, many struggle from the lack of support they receive from their institution. Institutions need to connect students with an advisor who can be proactive in helping students through their education and someone who can point them in the direction of resources available for success (Jackson-Boothby, 2017).

### **Historical Context**

In the 1980s, businesses started using computers to educate their employees (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). However, the first university to present online education in the United

States was the University of Phoenix in 1989, using a program called CompuServe (Kentnor, 2015). In 1991 after the Internet was created, the University of Phoenix moved its platform online and was able to service students through that forum (Carlson & Carnevale, 2001). As online education continued to grow, a private company, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation ([www.sloan.org](http://www.sloan.org)), began conducting research and offering money to improve online education for students. Other major universities joined in as they saw the benefits of adding the online option (Kentnor, 2015). These universities found that they could add more students to their universities by offering an online option so that students could take classes without having to attend them on the physical campus (Kentnor, 2015). For a long time, many universities saw a decline in students choosing online education because of the lack of training the faculty and staff had in teaching and creating an inclusive environment for online students (Marcus, 2004). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, professors were forced to move their classroom to a virtual setting. This led to professors needing to seek out professional development to learn how to effectively teach online. In May 2020, 39% of faculty members found online learning to be an effective way of teaching. By August 2020, 49% felt confident teaching online (Lederman, 2020).

Academic advising began in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and was conducted at the colonial colleges when presidents, faculty, and some staff academically advised students throughout their program (Cook, 2001; V. N. Gordon, 2004). According to Rudolph (1962), the first recorded faculty advisors were at John Hopkins University in 1887. In the early days, institutions were small and therefore advisors were able to advise students and build relationships. As institutions began to grow, they needed to find new ways to be able to help students. The schools created different divisions such as first-year experiences and vocational counseling, as well as other

student services. Many schools created specific cohorts of advisors to work with the different colleges (V. N. Gordon, 2004). Most institutions have academic advisors in some capacity; however, advising may look different at each school.

As universities started to include online coursework in their programs, there was a need for academic advisors to transition online as well. According to Steele (2005), “an overview of the academic advising field suggests many institutions have a long road to travel before they can offer successful distance advising programs” (p. 5). The effectiveness of online advising is still being studied as it evolves. Online students have a wide range of needs that may differ than a traditional student (Brown, 2017). As more studies are being done on undergraduate online advising, research has shown that students prefer to work with an advisor (Fiore et al., 2019; C. S. Gordon, 2020). Successful traditional advising methods and research are a good starting point; however, more research needs to be conducted on successful advising methods for online students (Delich, 2021).

### **Social Context**

Online learning has been on the rise as many people find it easier to fit in with their daily lives. Some people choose to complete a degree while working full-time, while taking care of children, or just not having the means to travel to an institution. These students are not restricted to a time or location and can complete assignments in their free time (Muljana & Luo, 2019). In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone, and students often feel safer while studying and completing their degree at home. With the influx of online learners, it is important for institutions to create an inclusive educational environment completely online. Many institutions had advisors who guided students through the on-boarding process and getting them set up with their first semester of classes, but then did not connect with students after that



(Jenkins et al., 2020). Jenkins et al. (2020) also explained how important it is for institutions to restructure their model to help students. Advisors must be experts in the degree the student is entering into and able to help students with a plan for success. These plans must go beyond the first semester. Online advisors must check in with students frequently to ensure they are successful throughout their time at the institution (Jenkins et al., 2020). This study will be beneficial to students seeking to complete a degree fully online. In addition, this study will be beneficial to anyone who has never completed an online degree because it will give them insight on how helpful an academic advisor can be. Academic advisors who work with students studying entirely online will also benefit from this research.

### **Theoretical Context**

Tinto (1975) conducted a significant amount of research on student retention. He is best known for his student integration model. Tinto noted that social and academic integration and student commitment is key to retention. He found that students are often detached and work as an individual unit instead of using their peer groups to integrate into the classroom to be successful (Tinto, 1997); he also described how important it was to redefine classroom and university experiences to higher student retention rates.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering relates to students who are experiencing transitions and whether they feel they can depend on somebody during this transition. Academic advisors should be mentors to students, and someone students can depend on to guide them into fitting into the college culture. Advisors should help students feel as though they are important to the institution. Schlossberg's theory reiterates how important it is to communicate with all students, no matter if they are on a college campus or continuing their education online. Her theory of marginality and mattering studies the importance of connecting

with students and guiding them through higher education, as well as making them feel like they belong (Schlossberg, 1989, 2011). Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering will guide this study to better understand the importance of proactive advising for retention in online students.

Soden (2017) conducted a study on the perception of academic advising and student retention. She used Tinto's theory to better understand why students were dropping out of an institution and not staying retained. Soden explored students and academic advisor's perceptions on effective advising strategies. She found that advisors had a positive impact on students in regard to students deciding on whether to stay or leave the institution based on the support the advisor gave them. Phillips (2016) did a study on advising support with online students using Tinto's (1975) student integration theory; her study found that students wanted to meet with their online advisors and build relationships. Although the students appreciated the advice the advisors had for them, they found that the advisors did not go off script and truly answer some of their questions and did not build deep connections with the students. This played a role in whether the students felt connected to the institution and wanted to stay or not.

Cody (2019) looked into a group of African American male students' sense of belonging at a university while working with an academic advisor. Cody used Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering to determine how these students felt during their time at the university. His study found that all the men felt a sense of belonging and excelled in their studies with the support of an academic advisor. In another recent study, Hathaway (2021) looked at a minority group of students at a predominately white institution. She used Schlossberg's marginality and mattering theory to determine if the students felt like they belonged even though they were a part of the minority. She found that students with an assigned advisor were able to feel as though they

belonged to the university, which helped them succeed while they attended the institution. These studies show the importance of an academic advisor and how they can be imperative to student retention.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is whether proactive advising for online students can lead to student retention. Online education has become extremely favored over the last couple of years, but online student retention continues to be a problem (Seery et al., 2021). Some of the biggest factors in student retention come from the demands of time, commitment, and the skills a student has with the use of technology (Seery et al., 2021). In the past, a person may not have entertained getting a degree because of the proximity of the institution or time constraints; now online education allows students to get an education on their time and from the comfort of their homes without ever having to step foot on campus (Jackson-Boothby, 2017). In theory, this sounds like the best avenue to education for many people. However, once students begin their program, they often find themselves struggling to navigate online education with little support from the institution they are enrolled in, which can lead to them dropping out of their program. Research indicates that it is important to be proactive in advising methods, rather than reactive (Burge-Hall et al., 2019; Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Studying proactive advising methods is important when it comes to student success and support. It is vital to understand students' backgrounds and what barriers they may face in order to proactively advise them with the support that best fits their needs (Madi-McCarthy, 2018). While there is some research about this topic, detailed questionnaires would better help understand what advisors can do for students to lead to higher retention rates and better academic success (DeGeare, 2019).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program. At this stage in the research, proactive advising is generally defined as advising students at the beginning of their program to guide them in being successful throughout their program. The advisors build a relationship with students and continue to proactively keep in touch to reduce any barriers the students may face. The importance of this study was to gain insight into students' expectations when working with an online advisor. Students' experiences help universities understand students' support needs to be successful in the online setting. Consequently, advisors can be more adequately prepared to provide effective proactive advising online sessions when meeting with online students in the future.

### **Significance of the Study**

This phenomenological study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance, which are each reported in Chapter Five. This study builds upon prior work by scholars studying online education and retention. Results of this study could be used for online academic advisors working with online students to support online education and student retention.

### **Empirical**

Empirically, this transcendental phenomenological study will provide a voice for online students that seek the support of a knowledgeable and caring academic advisor to lead them to retention and graduation (Kitchen et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). It is important for academic advisors to make meaningful connections with online students to gain trust and help these students understand the advisor is there to help them be successful (Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Madi-McCarthy (2018) conducted a study to discuss the impact of a relationship between

an online student and their virtual advisor for students taking two or more courses online. She found that students found the interaction to be positive. Her study did not directly focus on students in an online only program, however. The lack of research for conducting proactive advising for students in an online only program creates the need for further research on this topic.

### **Theoretical**

Theoretically, this transcendental phenomenological study will add to the understanding of the student integration model and show how important student retention is between a student's freshman and sophomore years (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2017; Blue, 2018; Tinto, 1975). The theory of marginality and mattering is an important theory to understand how proactive advising leads to student retention (Schlossberg, 1989). Through the lens of online students, this study provides a great backdrop to fully understand what a student expects of an online academic advisor and how proactive advising can lead to student retention.

### **Practical**

Practically, this study will assist online academic advisors improve proactive advising strategies to retain students in an online program. Brown (2017) suggested further research should be done with traditional students on what these students need from their academic advisors to be successful. Using qualitative data is important to interview students using open-ended questions that will clearly define what supports students are lacking to be successful. With these questions, I was able to analyze and find common themes among what the participants are saying to pinpoint deficits in the academic supports offered at a university. Madi-McCarthy (2018) suggested future research should be conducted on proactive virtual advising. With students being online, the advisor needs to be a clear presence in the students' education. By

conducting qualitative research, I (as researcher of this project) suggested academic supports early on in their college experience and observed these supports in action to determine if they are productive to the students.

### **Research Questions**

One research question and three sub-questions guided this qualitative phenomenological research study on the experiences of college students who were in a completely online program. The central research question focused on the experiences of online college students working with an academic advisor. The first sub-question focused on the advising experiences of online college students and how proactive advising supports their retention. The second sub-question focused on the most beneficial advising practices the online students feel they have experienced. The third sub-question focused on how retention was affected when given poor academic advice. The research questions are as follows:

#### **Central Research Question**

How do college academic proactive advising experiences of online students affect retention?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How can advisors provide effective proactive advising sessions to meet the needs of online students?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

What are considered the most beneficial advising practices experienced by online students to help them complete their program?

#### **Sub-Question Three**

How has poor academic advice affected online undergraduate students in regard to their retention in their program?

### **Definitions**

1. *Proactive advising* - Deliberate intervention to enhance student motivation, using strategies to show interest and involvement with students, intensive advising designed to increase the probability of student success, working to educate students on all options, and approaching students before situations develop. (Varney, 2012).
2. *Retention* - Continuous enrollment of students from one fall semester to the following fall semester (Braxton et al., 2007).
3. *Online courses* - Online learning includes courses that have at least 80% of the content delivered in an online format, which makes online courses different from traditional, web-facilitated, and hybrid courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

### **Summary**

Within this chapter, I provided a background of online education and the importance of having a proactive advisor. The examination of the current literature shows that there is a gap in the literature regarding proactive advising and what advisors can do to help students be successful (Jackson-Boothby, 2017; Madi-McCarthy, 2018). The problem that this study was designed to address is whether proactive advising for online students can lead to student retention. Although many students are choosing online education for personal reasons and more flexibility, there is still a low retention rate and this problem needs to be solved (Bawa, 2016). To understand this research, it was important to know that most online students want an advisor who can help them with many aspects of being an online college student (Jenkins, 2018). In this study, I examined the experiences of online students and learned how proactive advising can

help them succeed. I looked at what support students receive in their online education and what they wish to receive to be successful. This research will potentially help with online retention rates. This research was conducted through online social media groups consisting of students taking courses completely online.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A review of the literature was completed to evaluate the relationship between academic advisors and students completing a degree completely online. An overview of the research was provided. The theoretical framework section addresses the student integration model as developed by Tinto (1975), as well as Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. Both theories connect the relevance of student retention and how students need to be integrated into the institution to stay retained. Beyond the theoretical framework, the literature review focused on understanding the history of online education. The literature then reviewed student retention and how it relates to online education, barriers to retention, and how retention can be improved in online education. Academic advising was thoroughly reviewed, including online academic advising, proactive advising, and how proactive advising can be beneficial to online students. The review of literature surrounding proactive advising with online students showed evidence of the need to study this in an effort to improve retention in online education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects of research in the dissertation. It is the foundation of how the research study will be constructed. The theoretical framework will provide the groundwork, or base, for the literature review, methods, and analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Much of the research done on retention is grounded in the theoretical model of Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Tinto's student integration model explores college dropouts and what caused them to drop out. By studying this, Tinto was able to determine that students need the institution to be committed to students, committed to ensuring students are receiving everything that they need to be successful, and that the community is

supporting the students as they integrate into college life. Tinto's student integration model relates to this research by showing how students in online education need to fully integrate into their academics to remain successful throughout their time at the university. An academic advisor can ensure that online students are able to integrate their studies by being proactive and working with students every step of their journey. Academic advisors can ensure that students are integrating into an online university using Tinto's model. Tinto studied and researched the best ways to retain students in higher education and prevent them from dropping out.

For the past 45 years, Tinto has been studying the persistence of college students. He found that even though the college classroom is a place where students should be involved, they are often detached and uninvolved, taking each course as one unit, separated from content and peer groups (Tinto, 1997). He found that students in online education often leave because they feel isolated. He also found several characteristics that contribute to students dropping out. One characteristic that discouraged students from finishing these programs entails work and family obligations. This includes the family's economic status. Often families with lower economic status have a higher dropout rate (Tinto, 1997). Another characteristic Tinto found was that students who did not do well in high school also struggled in college. He found that their past educational experiences could potentially determine how well they would do in college. Tinto also found that goal commitment played a factor. If students set their goals and stuck to them, they had a better success rate than those who did not follow a set of goals they created for themselves. Most students who leave an institution early do so by withdrawing or dropping out without ever reaching out to an institution for help (Tinto, 1997). This results in a low retention rate in online programs (Lakhal et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021). Tinto believed that it is

important for students to learn how to merge their academic and social lives so that they can manage and be successful in both aspects of their lives.

Tinto (1997) developed the student integration model based on Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, which discussed that the lack of student retention is because of a lack of social and academic interactions. Durkheim's (1961) theory expanded on his earlier work and focused on morality and ethics, wherein he found that individuals were likely to commit suicide if they were not integrated in the fabric of society. Tinto agreed with Durkheim and believed there were two forms of integration that were important to the retention of students. Moral integration was the first form which had to do with values and convictions of students. He also found that it was important to have sufficient collective affiliations. Relationships with faculty, staff, and students are crucial in student retention (Tinto, 1997), and even more crucial in online student retention since everything is virtual. Although Tinto does not directly look at students in online education, his theory still succinctly provides a framework on what students need to be successful and deter them from dropping out of an institution.

Students' initial integration into higher education is important in their first years of study (Schaeper, 2020). While considering integration, the university must understand both students and the environment in which they operate (Kyndt et al., 2017; Schaeper, 2020). The student integration model continues to examine the relationship between the social and academic integration to determine the results of dropout rates. The first-year student has a greater chance of dropping out because of the impact of the academic integration (Noyens et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975, 1993). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), about 63% of students who began a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution completed it at the same institution within six years. The graduation rates were higher for females than for males. About

17% of these students were taking courses and completing degrees completely online. Bailey et al. (2018) found that by addressing common trouble spots, students in online education can succeed. This included retention coaching and dedicated online tutoring for online students, as well as early alerts and predictive analytics to help faculty and online advisors support online learners (Bailey et al., 2018; Jokhan et al., 2019). Based on this data, integrating students academically into the university based on Tinto's student integration model will increase online student retention.

To have successful student retention, students need to be fully involved in their learning. Schlossberg (1989) developed the theory of marginality and mattering. This theory focuses on transitions and whether the student can feel as though he or she has someone to depend on during the transition (Patton, et al., 2016; Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg described four aspects of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. Schlossberg (2011) helps college academic advisors understand the transition for students, and to determine to what extent the advisor can support the student. Schlossberg (2011) identified four main categories while advising students: situation, self, support, and strategies. Situation refers to understanding the transitions of college for the student. Self refers to helping students understand their feelings. Strategies refer to the importance for the advisors to assist the student in making decisions. Finally, support refers to how students can use advisors for support (Schlossberg, 2011; Workman, 2015). Academic advisors can positively or negatively impact a student's educational experience (Workman, 2015). The transition into the university can impact all students, but historically, some populations struggle when transitioning into universities, including first-time college students, minority students, or those who start their academic journeys later in life (Bailey-Taylor, 2009; Cox, 2013) Schlossberg's theories connect with academic advising as it

provides a unique approach of helping students throughout their transition in the university setting (Bailey-Taylor, 2009).

Schlossberg (1989) theorized that students feeling marginalized could potentially affect the outcome of whether they stayed enrolled in college and received a degree or not. These were the same thoughts Tinto (1993) had that many times students struggle to fit in and this may be even harder in the online setting. The adjustments and dedication online students need to complete their degree can be challenging. If nontraditional students experience engagement and connection during their time with an institution, those can improve their outcomes for success, such as retention (Tinto, 1993). Schlossberg (1989) noted that students do not often feel as though they matter when they are in the college setting. Having a sense of belonging can occur easier in an online setting when students are surrounded with like peers. To create an environment that clearly shows students that they all matter will enhance greater involvement (Schlossberg, 1989). Institutions that focus on mattering and promote greater student involvement will be more successful in creating an online environment where students want to learn, where retention is increased, and where effort is invested in students' short- and long-term futures (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

### **Related Literature**

The review of the literature expands upon the advising experiences of students who take online-only classes. According to Miller et al. (2019), institutions can adapt the advising initiatives used at on-campus traditional institutions to fit students taking online education. This literature review contains a variety of sources. It entails a review of the current literature on students, online learning, online support, retention, and academic advising. The literature review

provides the foundation of the rationale for this research and explores the gap in the understanding of the advising experiences of online college students.

### **History and Background of Online Education**

Online education can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1800s, some children were unable to attend their local schools for various reasons. Reformers were alarmed at the limited educational opportunities to children, especially in the low-income areas (Cain & Laats, 2021). Instead of having a school with several rooms with a teacher in each room, Joseph Lancaster, a young teacher in London, developed a school that took place in an open room with hundreds of students and one teacher (Cain & Laats, 2021). This was considered innovative for the times. In 1906, a new way of learning was developed. The University of Wisconsin-Extension started a radio station dedicated to teaching and learning (Pregowska et al., 2021). Teachers would lecture over the radio for their students to hear. This was also a good way for teachers to get news to students, as newspapers were not always easily accessible (Pregowska et al., 2021). In the 1950s, many schools were overcrowded and underfunded and failing many students. Schools started putting teachers on television. Reformers thought this was a good way to extend educational opportunities to students who may not have had other opportunities (Cain & Laats, 2021; Pregowska et al., 2021). By 1965, the Ford Foundation spent more than \$70 million on this type of education; however, research found that this was not any better than in-person teaching (Cain & Laats, 2021).

As new technologies emerged, new ways of teaching emerged (Kentnor, 2015). By the 1980s and 1990s, there was a big shift in technology and online education began to emerge. The University of Phoenix began the first online degree programs in 1989 (Harasim, 2000; Kentnor, 2015). It used CompuServe as its online provider; however, the World Wide Web took over in

1991. New York University unveiled its online component of the university in 1998 (Kentnor, 2015; Palvia et al., 2018). As other colleges and universities heard about this type of education, they started following suit by adding online courses and eventually online programs to their universities as well (Kentnor, 2015; Palvia et al., 2018). Online education made it possible for students to gain a degree without being face-to-face at a traditional institution (Kentnor, 2015).

Throughout the years, there have been some successes and failures trying to create effective programs completely online. These failures brought other modes of teaching, such as a blended or hybrid option. This option allowed students to receive some in-person learning, followed up by learning online (Palvia et al., 2018).

Online learning can also be classified as asynchronous or synchronous learning (Pregowska et al., 2021). Asynchronous learning is conducted when a student learns from instructions on a paper, listens to or watches a pre-recorded lesson, and does not have real time interactions. Synchronous learning is when students listen to a live lecture or interact in real time with professors and students (Pregowska et al., 2021). Naturally, synchronous learning is an older model than asynchronous learning. These options make it helpful for any type of student to potentially be successful. Online education has also made it more feasible for many students to gain an education, since they do not have to pay extra expenses such as room and board, travel, and other fees associated with a residential campus (Harasim, 2000; Kentnor, 2015; Palvia et al., 2018). As online education continues to change and transform, students need the support that will yield the educational outcomes that both the students and the universities are looking for. Colleges and universities must continue to find innovative ways to support students with their success throughout these online programs (Harasim, 2000; Palvia et al., 2018).

In 2019, Seaman and Seaman reported that the United States had 3,483,061 students who were taking all courses completely online. They calculated that this was a growth of 32% since 2012. Nationally, 14.4% of students take their college courses strictly online (Seaman & Seaman, 2019). Most students seeking a degree online attend a private-for-profit university (71%), followed by through a private not-for-profit (19%), and a public university (10%); the numbers for enrollment of undergraduate students increased 32% from the fall of 2012 to the fall of 2019 (Seaman & Seaman, 2019).

### **Online Student Enrollment**

Since 2002, online enrollment has increased. Questions regarding online educations impact—such as retention, completion, and student performance—continue to grow (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002; Frydenberg, 2007; Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Jordan, 2015; Kemp, 2002; Nistor & Neubauer, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011, 2013, 2014). Many previous studies have focused their learning outcomes on progress in and completion of online courses, but more recent studies focused on student performance outcomes and compared how online students performed versus students taking face-to-face courses (Bettinger et al., 2017).

From 2002 to 2012, online and overall enrollments at higher education institutions have increased; however, since 2012, online education enrollments have steadily increased (Seaman et al., 2018). From fall 2015 to fall 2016, online education grew by 5.6 %, with the number of students taking at least one online course increasing to 6,359,121 (Seaman et al., 2018), which accounted for 31.6 % of students at an institution. Seaman et al. (2018) found that nearly 15% of students took all of their courses online consisted at that time: about 3,003,080 students. They also reported that private, for-profits schools saw student enrollment decline, whereas private non-profit and public institutions saw enrollments increase. In 2012, 12.6% of students were



pursuing their education in an online-only degree program, and that number increased each year such that in 2016, 14.9% of students were enrolled in an online-only degree program (Seaman et al., 2018). These increases occurred both in undergraduate and graduate education. Of all students in an online-only program at that time, 84.2% attended a public institution, 35.5% attended a private not-for-profit institution, and 16.5% attended a private for-profit institution (Seaman et al., 2018).

### **Student Retention**

Student retention, persistence, and graduation are always at the forefront of university matters, and are ongoing issues that universities seek to solve (Manyanga et al., 2017). The earliest studies of student retention in the United States date back to the 1930s, when student mortality was the focus (Berger & Lyon, 2005). In 1938, John McNeely collected data from 60 institutions to examine student demographics, characteristics, social engagement, and reasons for leaving an institution (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). This study paved the way for groundbreaking future studies in student retention. By the 1960s, they reported that there was rapid growth in students attending institutions across the country. This increase in enrollment brought a more diverse population of students. Many students who were considered low-income or underserved populations were more underprepared and not well-equipped for college (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Retention became a big concern and theorists Alexander Astin and Alan Bayer began comprehensively studying student attrition (Berger & Lyon, 2005). The retention struggles prompted higher education institutions to begin using research and develop activities designed to understand and support retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011).

Spady (1970) conducted research during the 1970s on why students dropped out of college and found that student retention is based on two factors: a student's academic and social life. These issues affected students in both face-to-face classrooms and the online setting (Fraser et al., 2018; Manyanga et al., 2017). Spady based his research on Durkheim's (1951) suicide model that was widely used in student retention. Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011), suggested that five variables contributed to social integration and could be linked to the decision to drop out. Those variables were academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. As the 1980s approached, student enrollment in higher education institutions started to decline (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). During this time, the emblem of retention was the development of enrollment management as a practice, which became a field of study within higher education institutions (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Bean's (1980) research stressed the importance of background characteristics—such as previous academic performance, socioeconomic status, and the distance they were away from home—and the student's satisfaction, in determining the student's departure from the institution. Citing Astin's (1984) model of student involvement, Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski identified similar outcomes as Bean's research in determining that a student's choice to stay at an institution was influenced by student demographics and prior experiences; experiences students encounter during college; and students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

By the 1990s, much of the literature around student retention focused on students of color, underrepresented populations, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Many of the students focused on ways to embrace diversity and promote multiculturalism within the campus culture (Swail, 2004). Tinto continued his studies on retention during the 1990s, studying minority groups and adult and transfer students with

unique experiences that required group-specific interventions (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). This era also focused on the first-year experience and providing quality support services to focus on retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Anderson and McGuire (1997) and Tinto (1999) stressed the importance of academic advising, and how imperative it was to student retention because it keeps students motivated and helps support students. As the 2000s approached, retention became the forefront of institutions' focus (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011); many institutions took a holistic approach. Much of the research in retention since has focused on cross-departmental institutional responsibility for retention (Kadar, 2001; Keels, 2004; Lehr, 2004; Salinitri, 2005; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2000; Walters, 2004; White, 2005). Habley (2004) found that students' experiences both inside and outside the classroom are imperative to their retention. All departments across campus need to work together to help students stay retained and be successful during their time at an institution.

Student retention is a national issue, and universities are always looking for ways to support student success (Manyanga et al., 2017). Many universities can recruit students to attend, but keeping them retained from the first year to the second year is often fraught with challenges (Burke, 2019; Manyanga et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2019). Student retention is key to the success of a university. The higher the retention rates of students, the more the university will flourish in all aspects. Although retention has always been an important component to university success, research or data on this was not known until the 1970s (Burke, 2019; Manyanga et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2019; Seery et al., 2021). At that time, universities began to look at retention models to keep students in school and graduating within a timely manner (Burke, 2019; Manyanga et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2019; Seery et al., 2021). The main issues institutions addressed to keep students retained related to the relationship between the university and the student (Burke, 2019;

Manyanga et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2019; Seery et al., 2021). Many things could play a part in a student dropping out of the university; however, the first step to ascertaining the best retention strategies is ensuring that students trusted that their university was willing to work with them for their success. A key finding to student retention is that when student engagement increases, the attrition or dropout rate decreases (Bowman & Culver 2018; Forrester et al., 2018; Weaver et al., 2017).

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Tinto's (1975) student integration model discussed that students drop out of higher education because they lacked academic and social integration. In a recent interview, Tinto expressed that a student's decision to drop out may be a bit more complicated (WGU Labs, 2021). He also suggested that the model has evolved with a deeper understanding that students may decide to remain at their higher education institute based on the meaning of interactions and their experiences that support the sense of belonging to the community. Gabriel (2008) suggested that the first week of classes is key to student success; professors should create a welcoming and inviting environment and lay out the expectations to set the tone and climate of the course. This also rings true for online students, who find it important to find a sense of belonging. The major difference is that online institutions have a bigger responsibility to build this sense of belonging (WGU Labs, 2021).

### **Retention Rates of Online College Students**

Over the past 20 years, the number of students taking online courses has increased substantially (Lakhal et al., 2021). Allen and Seaman (2010) reported that in 2010, over six million students were taking at least one online course. In 2024, Hamilton reported that about 10 million students were taking at least one online course. Levy's (2007) study found that students at a lower level had a harder time being successful in online courses and ended up dropping out,

whereas students at an upper level were more likely to stay in the course and be successful. Xu and Jaggars (2013) did a comprehensive study on a Washington State community and technical college and found that taking a course completely online decreased the likelihood of persistence. These students scored seven percentage points lower than students in an on-campus course and it lowered their grade by about .3 points. Breit and Schreyer (2018) conducted a study using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data, which showed that students exclusively enrolled in distance education courses had a negative impact on retention rates. The data showed that institutions that have students taking both online and in-person courses had a retention rate that is 1.1% points higher than institutions that have 1-10% of students taking fully online classes, and 2.1% points higher than institutions that have 11-20% of students who are taking completely online courses (Breit & Schreyer, 2018). Students find many benefits to taking courses online, such as flexibility and price; however, the persistence rates for online learning remain low (Lakhal et al., 2021; Xavier & Meneses, 2020; Laurie et al., 2020).

Seer et al. (2021) documented that online courses have a 10% to 20% higher failure rate than students who receive a traditional face-to-face education. They cited that some literature suggested that online institutions should be more selective when admitting students, whereas others suggested that online student retention depends on institutional commitment and student support. Others have found that the student's sense of belonging with regards to the community, engagement, and interactions with faculty members, played a role in online retention (Seery et al., 2021; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Students are often left to figure out how to navigate online education with little guidance. Professors need to integrate goals, social aspects, and academics (Seery et al., 2021; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017).

## **Barriers to Retention Rates**

James et al. (2016) reported that retention rates at four-year institutions were 60-65% for fully online students, whereas students taking hybrid or in-person learning were at 75-80%. Studies showed that the majority of students graduating college are White students. Over the years, the growth of other racial populations has made our schools more diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Despite our college populations becoming more diverse, institutions still struggle to retain students, especially students of color. The national data regarding six-year completion rates at a four-year institution documents that African American students are least likely to graduate, followed by Hispanic students (Shapiro et al., 2017). Historically, only 45% of African American students and 55% of Hispanic students typically graduate from college; White students have a graduation rate of 67.2%, and Asian students have the highest graduation rate at 71.7% percent (Shapiro et al., 2017). Banks and Dohy (2019) pointed out that it is important to address the opportunity gap within races to pinpoint what students of all races need to be successful.

Many barriers lead students to dropping out of college. A student's motivation, satisfaction, and stress of having to juggle all the requirements of online education, can determine if a student decides to drop out or not (Seery et al., 2021). Faculty and course design are other barriers. It is often hard to find effective strategies for students and faculty to interact through an online course (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021; Wingo et al., 2017). If faculty members and institutions do not create effective learning communities for students and faculty members to engage in meaningful learning, students may not be receptive to fully understand the curriculum (Lakhal et al., 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Although receiving an online education seems logical for some, outside factors can become a major barrier to obtaining their degree. Work obligations, family life, childcare arrangements, and finding uninterrupted time to study are often barriers students do not think about when first seeking out an online university (Lakhal et al., 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021).

Although students in the current generation have become technologically savvy, technology can become a major barrier to student retention. Students need to learn and understand the technology systems used by the university to convey the class materials. Not understanding how to use the system can lead to anxiety and create a negative impact on how the student may perform (Lakhal et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021). It is also important that there is good internet connectivity so the student can readily send or reply to an email, complete an assignment, or access the week's module. Sometimes, technological problems can happen within the learning management system itself where a student may not be able to gain access to the module in the time they allotted for themselves to complete their work (Lakhal et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021).

Retention rates in online education can be determined by three factors: student, environmental, and program factors (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2019). Age and the student experience were found to be factors of students dropping out; students' grade point averages also played factors in online retention (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2019). Students' interest in the courses they were taking were also a major factor in whether the student dropped out (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2019). Environmental factors such as external attribution and social integration, also play a major role in the online retention process. Bornschlegl and Cashman (2019) found that insufficient time, unexpected events, and distractions were reasons students did

not stay retained. Program factors also plague retention; lack of relevance to course content and the programming of the course material contributed to students dropping out of their programs (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2019; Kamble et al., 2021).

### **Solutions to Improving Retention in Online Education**

The solutions for improving retention in online education are ever evolving. Park et al. (2011) concluded that retention is a student's conscience choice to remain in school and accomplish their goals towards academic success. One recommendation for effectively improving online retention is to have a user-friendly learning management system (Lakhal, 2021; Seery et al., 2021). Often universities change the learning management system they are using, making it hard for students to keep up with the different features of the technology they need to use to learn and complete assignments (Lakhal, 2021; Seery et al., 2021). Course development in online education is very important since students must do a lot of the learning on their own. The courses should have effective assessment procedures, places for feedback, video lectures, information presented in multiple ways, and other resources to help the student in any way possible (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021; Stone, 2017). Professors' meaningful feedback on class assignments can help students improve in areas they may be deficient in (Seery et al., 2021). Peer-led interactions within the course development over time can increase retention rates (de Freitas et al., 2015).

According to Risko et al. (2013), in order to create life-long learners and students who want to pursue graduate school, the learning pedagogies need to transform and update. These learning management systems should be crafted with a student focus. Universities should consult with experts and stakeholders to ensure they are always improving the standards and creating effective content for online learners (Stone, 2017). These systems should make it easy for



students to engage with each other and their professors as if they were sitting in the classroom (Jokhan et al., 2019). Social engagement within the virtual classroom is important and vital to retention. Faculty should encourage ways for social engagement, such as using blogs, chat rooms, videos, and mini-lectures (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Seery et al., 2021).

Student success supports have proven to be an effective retention strategy (Seery et al., 2021). These supports consist of outreach services, life and career planning, financial aid, support systems, technology support, strategic partnerships, and transition support (Milman et al., 2015). These early intervention tools can help advisors work with students to ensure they are getting the support they need, whether it is a tutor, peer mentor, liaison between the student and instructor, or other interventions.

The advancements of technology have made it to where students can receive tutoring completely online through artificial intelligence, so they do not even have to meet with an actual person. These are computer-based tutors that have domain knowledge of the subject and can help the student (Rosi et al., 2000). There are also sites such as tutor.com where students can interact with a live person and get the help they need for their specific class without ever leaving their home or computer.

According to Hardt et al. (2022), online peer mentoring positively impacted student success. The peer mentors were experienced online students who helped their mentees with study behaviors, study skills, and self-organization. These mentors were able to work with their cohort to positively affect their motivation and study behavior which in turn helped with passing courses; since students in online degrees completed their classwork in isolation, peer mentors were there to motivate them and help create good habits to be successful.

Universities may also consider adding online support for students, such as first-year experience programs and tutoring services for those who cannot go to a campus setting (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Pratt et al., 2019; Seery et al., 2021). Bawa (2016) suggested making these first-year experience or orientation courses mandatory, so faculty and students understand the facets of online learning and are prepared. Using early intervention tools is imperative to intervene and help students build skills and engagement (Stone, 2017). Freshman orientation or first-year experience courses have also been found to aid in retaining students (Burks, 2022). Freshman seminars help enhance scholastic achievement, improve persistence, and increase graduation rates (Black et al., 2016; Sobel, 2018; What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). These courses are important in assimilating students with college life, since most come straight from high school. These types of courses help first-year students gain success strategies, such as prioritization, study tips, career preparation, cultural etiquette, personal development, and information about the resources that can be found around campus (Barefoot & Fidler, 1992). These types of seminars have repeatedly shown increased student retention (Krahenbuhl, 2012; Laudicina, 2014; Wycoff, 2014) and engagement (Krahenbuhl, 2012; Laudicina, 2014; Lynn, 2008).

First-generation college students (FGCSs) is one population that struggles with retention. Approximately 20% of the college population are FGCSs, defined as students whose parents did not attend college (Pratt et al., 2019). About 71% of FGCS students are likely to leave college in their first year. Because of this, FGCSs have a lower, five-year graduation rate (Pratt et al., 2019). Some recommendations to improve FGCS retention are implementing mandatory midterm grade reporting, increasing faculty engagement with students, and providing proactive academic advising (Pratt et al., 2019). Pratt et al. (2019) reported that a first-year experience type course and increased tutoring support improved retention rates. They also realized how important

it was for FGCSs to find a campus that was a good cultural fit, a way to include their family in the institution (as FGCSs often feel guilty leaving their family behind), and a feeling of inclusiveness. FGCSs must overcome several obstacles when attending college. To retain these students, it is important that the institution promotes a healthy self-esteem and well-being of belongingness, competence, and security (Ryan & Deci, 2016) so that the FGCSs' emotional welfare is taken care of to give them the opportunity to succeed.

Muljana and Luo (2019) and Seery et al. (2021) identified that online students often feel isolated, and one important solution to retaining students in online education is by creating spaces for social and emotional engagement. Students need to feel a sense of belonging, even though they may not physically be on campus. It is important for the institution to create opportunities for students to feel as though they are still a part of the university even if they are miles away (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021). Because students are being taught through a screen, it is important for the instructor to know who their students are (Stone, 2017). As such, professors should do a little research of the background of their students—such as age, gender, equity status and other demographics—so they know the type of audience they are working with (Stone, 2017). To create a more inviting environment there should be a “teacher-presence” (Stone, 2017). Instructors should add information to their online course modules, such as personal introductions, being responsive, and giving feedback in a timely manner. They should also be willing to assist students when problems arise and know who to refer students to if those students need assistance beyond what the instructor can help with (Stone, 2017).

Although students are not spending money on travel or room and board, tuition for online institutions can be pricey (Newton, 2018). These institutions should have special financial incentives dedicated for online students who need financial support; perhaps certain scholarships

available only to online students. Students need financial incentives to continue their education and to be successful (Astin, 1984; Collier et al., 2020; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021).

### **Importance of Academic Advising**

Academic advising first started at Ohio State University and Harvard University in the late 1800's (Cook, 2001). In 1873, the Ohio State president would meet with students to acclimate them to university life (Cook, 2001). The first system of faculty advisors was set up at John Hopkins University in 1886 (Cook, 2001). Over the next few years, Ohio State, Harvard, John Hopkins, and the University of Chicago continued to define what academic advising was and how important it was to incorporate it into their respective universities (Cook, 2001). The first written reference to academic advising was in 1902 at Ohio State and was written into the university catalog under the College of Engineering, in which students were invited to speak with a professor for consultation or information regarding work in any class, as well as filing petitions, course changes, or adjustments to schedules (V. N. Gordon, 2004). Four years after the first written mention of advisors, the other colleges followed suit and added them to their colleges. Ohio State announced that there would be a system of advisors who would help the undergraduate population in choosing studies that would result in a well-rounded course section (V. N. Gordon, 2004); it also promoted that advisors would promote relationships between students and instructors and help students in all matters connected to university life. In the early 1900s, more colleges and universities—including Columbia University, Oberlin College, and Brown University—added advisors, as well as introductory courses and freshman week for advisors to help promote the university and help students become acclimated with the universities (Cook, 2001). By the 1960s, enrollment numbers were low, and students were not staying in college, so academic advising was reexamined to figure out how to best help students

(Cook, 2001). Once the 1970s came along, there was a more diverse group of students entering colleges (Cook,2001). The universities began to link student retention with academic advising (Cook, 2001). Conferences and organizations, such as National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), began to form to help academic advisors best understand different strategies they could use to help students be successful. These conferences and organizations are still in operation today continuing to help academic advisors learn the best strategies to help their students stay retained and be successful during their time at their higher education institution.

According to Larson et al. (2018), academic advising is important since it applies knowledge to a cohort of students to empower them, as well as campus and community members, to navigate academic integration within the institution. Although academic advisors help students choose their classes and advise them throughout their program, they are so much more than that. Advisors can also help students make financial choices, manage crises, and navigate personal issues. Academic advisors are not usually formally trained in student financial matters or counseling services; however, they have those resources at their fingertips so if they cannot answer the question, they know who to send the student to for answers and help to questions they have (Kitchen et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2018). Academic advisors can be extremely powerful in providing critical support to college students. Some are concerned with understanding how academic advising can provide positive outcomes and highlight the value of different approaches to advising (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Lowenstein, 2009; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019), but the evidence regarding what constitutes prime academic advising remains sparse (Museus, 2021).

Advisors help students academically, but they are known to wear several hats that go beyond the job description. Advisors often find themselves offering advice to students beyond

academics, advocating for students to help with their success (Kitchen et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2018). Advisors not only advise students on academic program requirements but also follow the students through their journey each semester. Many advisors conduct things like mid-semester grade checks, which gives the advisor and student the opportunity to discuss their progress, reflect, and decide if further actions need to be taken to ensure academic success (Kitchen et al., 2021). Overall, an advisor is a mentor guiding students through their academics, pushing them to be successful and graduate.

Cross (2018) examined the perceptions of 165 graduate students who used an online advisor. He had the students rate their advisor regarding communication and knowledge, and tracked whether each had an academic advisor or faculty advisor. The results provided that the academic advisor rated higher than faculty advisors as they were more timely and helpful to the student and their progression through their program.

For years academic advisors have played a major role in student retention (Bohl et al., 2017; DeLaRosby, 2017). The Virginia Community College System administered a study using advisors for student success (Burge-Hall et al., 2019). It found that advisors were necessary for students' success, and that consistent, personalized advising; early identification; monitoring; helping students beyond advising; using effective planning tools; and helping students become organized, were critical factors that led those students towards success (Burge-Hall et al., 2019; Kitchen et al., 2021).

Academic advising is a high-impact practice that affects student retention in institutions. The effect of advising is seen as a necessary component to getting results of success among college students (Larson et al., 2018). An effective academic advisor not only mentors students on academic progress, but also should increase students' satisfaction with their education and

student retention (Loucif et al., 2020). Soria et al. (2017) conducted a study on strength-based advising, including how and whether that helped student retention. Their results rendered that advising relationships with students and advising using their strengths to advise students helped students pick their major and be successful in their program of choice.

Student retention is important to higher education institutions, and academic advisors help in that venture (Ismail et al., 2021). Academic advisors have several interactions with students throughout students' time at the institution and create connections which help students' academic development and progression through their degree program (Elliott, 2020; Ismail et al., 2021). Many of these interactions can include early alert systems so that advisors can help students proactively when they know a student is struggling (Ismail et al., 2021). Upcraft and Kramer (1995) described factors of advising and student success as "a systematized intrusive advising program and academic support service are key factors in any effort to combat rising attrition, declining enrollment, and decreased fiscal appropriations" (p. 189). Students who are satisfied with their academic advising experience may also lead to pursuing other degrees and furthering their education (Ismail et al., 2021). Satisfaction with academic advisors could also lead to the students staying retained at the institution and not transferring to another (Elliott, 2020).

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has been the leading organization in training and preparing academic advisors to be effective. The purpose of NACADA is to promote effective academic advisors in higher education institutions and support professional growth of academic advisors (Beatty, 1991). NACADA (2017) put forth seven core values that are important to academic advising: respect, inclusivity, commitment, professionalism, empowerment, integrity, and caring. These core values justify the importance of

having academic advisors at all institutions. Academic advisors should be inclusive to all students as they will come in contact with students from all walks of life, as well as respect them, maintaining a student-centered approach (NACADA, 2017).

Academic advisors are committed to being dedicated to excellence in all that they do when working with students and always strive to be ethical and professional. It is important that they motivate and empower students and build relationships, as students are more willing to open up and work with an advisor when a relationship is built (NACADA, 2017). NACADA reviews its values often to ensure that those are aligned with helping students to the best of their abilities; it always strives to stay informed on the best strategies in helping students be successful throughout their time at an institution. Academic advising is a key piece in helping students stay retained and graduate.

### **Online Academic Advising**

Academic advising has been around for many decades, but little research has been done on online academic advising (Delich, 2021). Tinto was one of the first professors who showed the significant impact an academic advisor can have on the retention of students (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). Many advising models exist; however, they are mostly implemented in the face-to-face setting (Delich, 2021; Ohrablo, 2016). Virtual or online advising can be defined as an advising process where an advisor will assist, support, coach, mentor and empower a student through the use of technology (Méndez & Arguello, 2020).

The early stages of online advising were simply advisors emailing students back and forth (Miller et al., 2019; Ohrablo, 2016). Online advising has started to evolve. Emails are still a way for communicating with students during advising; however, distance advising has become more personable since (Delich, 2021; Ohrablo, 2016). For successful online advising, a



systematic approach is recommended so roles can be well defined, expectations can be set up, and ways of communicating can be established for consistency to maintain a virtual advisor and advisee relationship (Simpson, 2018). Studies have shown that students want to be able to connect with their advisors (Delich, 2021; Ohrablo, 2016). Videoconferencing has become a popular way to communicate with online students (Brown, 2017; Delich, 2021; Ohrablo, 2016). Students and advisors can use technology through videoconferencing to make the meeting like an in-person meeting. Advisors also found that proactive advising was very important for these students (Cross, 2018; Delich, 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Advisors need to be proactive in reaching out to these students and providing resources early on. Delich (2021) created the online learning advising model, which has given online advisors a guide to follow when advising online students. She noted the 5 Cs are key to being a successful online advisor: connect, create, challenge, collaborate, and commit. According to Lorenzetti (2004), the connection between an online advisor and student is critical because it is the primary connection between the student and the university.

As our nation entered the Covid-19 pandemic, online advising was studied more, since most institutions had to transition to a virtual model. The Online Learning Advising Model (OLAM) was created as a custom-made model for the online learning experience (Wiley University Services, 2021). This model aligns with four elements. The first element is the shame resilience theory. At some point throughout the student's program, he or she may not complete an assignment or they miss a deadline. Since it is harder to create connections online, students feel shameful and get down on themselves, which could even lead to dropping out. It is important for online advisors to be the support system and advisee's "cheerleader" to build his or her confidence to lead to retention (Wiley University Services, 2021); it is also important for

online advisors to instill resilience as second nature to these students. The second element of OLAM is proactive advising. It is important for online advisors to be proactive with their students and show these students that they always have a support system; this is especially important for those students who do not always advocate or speak up for themselves (Wiley University Services, 2021). Institutions must have monitoring technologies to help online advisors know when a student is not doing well so they can reach out immediately. Online advisors should be reaching out often to build relationships with students, so these online students understand they have someone to go to whenever a problem arises (Wiley University Services, 2021). The third element of OLAM is cognitive behavioral theory. Online advisors have an important duty to spot warning signs that a student may be losing confidence (Wiley University Services, 2021); this relates to the importance of advisors knowing their students. This type of advising, especially in an online setting, can be challenging; however, it is important for advisors to be able to spot challenges and help students adapt to those challenges (Wiley University Services, 2021). Finally, the fourth element OLAM focuses on is appreciative advising, which helps students identify their natural talents to help counteract their skill gaps, as well as helps students learn how to tackle situations using skills they already have and compensate for any weaknesses (Wiley University Services, 2021). It is so important for online advisors to truly understand what online students go through, as their experiences are so different from students who study on a campus. The OLAM approach focuses on helping online students be successful so they, too, can gain college degrees.

### **Proactive Advising**

Proactive advising integrates collaboration between the advisor and student on course selection, choice of major, career goals, college adjustment, academic planning, personal issues,

time management, and strategies for achieving success (Kitchen et al., 2021). It is not a form of “hand-holding,” but rather a way for an advisor to guide a student by finding proactive ways to ensure their success, such as assisting them in finding services to improve their academic skills (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995). Earl (1988) described it as a concept based on deliberate intervention to identify a problem the student may be facing. He used proactive advising with students at Old Dominion University by sending them a letter and having them meet with their advisors deliberately throughout the year. He found that this method helped students positively in their academics (Earl, 1988). Varney (2012) stated that Robert Glennen first introduced intrusive or proactive advising in 1975, and explained it as advising that anticipates students’ needs, reaches out to students proactively, provides them information before they even request it, and focuses on developing a relationship with the student. Glennen conducted intrusive advising studies at both University of Nevada (Las Vegas) and Western New Mexico University, where student retention rates dropped from 66% to 48% in the first year of conducting proactive advising (Schwebel et al., 2012). In the second year of operating with proactive advising, dropout rates dropped even more to 25% (Glennen & Baxley, 1985). After Glennen found success with this model, he became the president of Emporia State University, where he continued to have his advisors use the proactive advising model and he continued to complete research on it (Schwebel et al., 2012). He completed a survey and found that between 75 to 85% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the proactive advising services (Schwebel et al., 2012).

If an advisor uses the proactive approach, he or she would meet with the students several times during the semester, track students’ progress, check student’s mid-term grades, discuss ways to improve academically, and make referrals to other departments if the student needs help beyond advising (C. S. Gordon, 2020; Kitchen et al., 2021). This type of advising gives advisors

the opportunity to reach out to a large number of students who may not have otherwise sought out academic advising (Ohrablo, 2017). By intentionally contacting students, academic advisors can engage students in early interventions to be proactive instead of reactive (Ohrablo, 2017).

Proactive advising is a very hands-on approach to advising. The importance of proactive advising is being proactive to reduce probation, withdrawals, or even dropouts (Museus, 2021). Museus (2021) researched proactive advising in racially diverse student populations and determined that proactive advising involves advisors assuming responsibility to actively connect students with resources that can help them thrive. The advisor must find supports within the academic community for students who do not have much support in their personal lives. Proactive advising can provide humanized and holistic support to a diverse group of students (Museus, 2021); it often leads to students' satisfaction, knowing they have the support needed to be successful during their time at the institution (Kitchen et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Proactive advising leads to creating connections with students, which helps them trust that the advisor will steer them in the right direction for success (Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Lowenstein (2020) explained that proactive advising creates opportunities for coaching. He explained that through coaching, advising helps the student make sense out of their whole journey, similar to the way a professor coaches a student through a course. By taking a two-pronged approach with both pro-active advising and institution-initiated efforts, the institution can create student success and retention (Ohrablo, 2017).

### **Proactive Advising and Online Retention**

As institutions continue to find the best ways for proactive advising and online retention, it is so important that they have an effective approach for outreach. This can be done through the method of outreach students on residential campuses receive; however, all the information

should cater to the online student. This outreach can be done via email and phone calls (Cross, 2018; Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Advisors should reach out to students, often leaving open lines of communication so students know they have a caring and dedicated advisor who is there to help whenever needed. Advisors should take good notes in case another advisor needs to step in. This will help the new advisor already know the student's story and help them effectively help the student (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017). Kalamkarian and Karp (2017) found that students sought an interactive relationship with their advisor to help them towards success. Students looked to their advisors to help them make academic decisions. Students also appreciate and find it more helpful to move through their programs when their advisor is prompt with their responses, knows about their programs and institutional policies, assists the students throughout their program, and has a positive behavior when working with students (Cross, 2018; Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017).

Donaldson et al. (2016) conducted a study on proactive advising by interviewing 12 students who worked with a proactive advisor during their time at a university. The students found great benefits in having mandatory advising sessions and felt they were encouraged to stay on track with their degree program. Creating the relationship with their advisor and being able to discuss their degree plan often with their advisor gave them the support they needed to stay retained in their program (Donaldson et al., 2016). Méndez and Arguello (2020) found that best practices of online advising include when students respond to accessible support, empathy, flexibility, and innovation, proactive and frequent contact with their advisor, goal setting strategies, encouragement, and reinforcement, being guided to additional services, and when the advisor interacts with the student in various ways. Getting an education can be daunting. Completing it entirely online can bring even more stress to the equation. Having a caring advisor

who will be proactive and cater to students' needs to walk them to the finish line is important for online student success and retention.

As retention continued to be on the forefront of higher education, a proactive advising project was funded by the U.S. Department of Education for researchers working at Georgia State University. This project was called Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS; (Alamuddin et al., 2018). It was designed to address the higher education issue of retention by enhancing and bringing intensive and proactive coaching interventions (Alamuddin et al., 2018). These proactive interventions were created to increase student retention. Georgia State University and 11 other participating universities formed the University Innovation Alliance (UIA) for this project (Alamuddin et al., 2018; Burns, 2022). A total of 10,499 low-income and first-generation students were chosen for this study. The MAAPS intervention plan offered students intensive and proactive outreach, degree planning activities, and targeted interventions from MAAP advisors (Alamuddin et al., 2018). The MAAPS advisors worked with students on creating personalized academic plans, choosing major and course selections, conducting registration reviews, and reaching out when early alerts were activated.. The advisors would also use evidence-based personalized and targeted interventions. Many of the participating schools did not see a change in the first year; however, Georgia State University saw that the students who participated accumulated 1.20 more credits and had a 3-percentage-point higher credit success rate and a 0.17-point higher cumulative grade point average in their first year (Alamuddin et al., 2018). This project was going to continue to gain more data to see if other universities had success in future years; it was evaluated after four years.

The MAAPS study was an initiative-scaled, proactive, predictive, analytics-enabled advising for first generation students and students who received the Pell Grant, conducted

between 2016 and 2020 (Burns, 2022). This study assessed the university's organizational structure and advising culture and reviewed the use of degree plans and academic mapping, to ascertain whether those were being used effectively (Burns, 2022). It also investigated the data-driven tool that helps advisors guide students and wanted to ensure advisors were dedicated to delivering targeted support. Finally, this study ensured that there was ongoing leadership and support, and an investment was made to best education advisors to be effective. The results were positive, showing that proactive advising can raise graduation rates and reap financial benefits for both student and institution. Proactive advising may look different at each institution. It needs to be personalized to best help the students at each institution.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the key components of the theoretical framework that guide this study were outlined. In the literature review, a gap in the research was identified—specifically, that there was not a clear understanding of the proactive advising experiences of students in an online college program. It was clear that the existing literature fails to fully explain how proactive advising can better help and support online students to keep them retained in their online programs. Tinto's (1975) student integration model was discussed as the theoretical foundations to understand the research on student retention and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering was discussed to understand the research on academic advising and to better understand how feelings of mattering and how these topics are important in this study. In the review of the literature there was research on nine topics related to this phenomenon: (a) history and background of online education, (b) online student enrollment, (c) student retention, (d) retention in online college students, (e) barriers to student retention, (f) solutions to improving

retention in online education, (g) importance of academic advising, (h) proactive advising, and (i) proactive advising and online retention.

Online education has played a vital role in educating students over the last two years; however, retention rates continue to remain low (Lakhal et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021). Students find themselves hitting barriers while trying to get their online degree, which makes them not continue with their studies, whether it be due to family issues, work-related issues, or financial issues (Lakhal et al., 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021). Students also found themselves struggling with the learning systems the institution uses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021; Wingo et al., 2017). Another barrier students expressed was not creating relationships with faculty and staff, leaving them feeling isolated and like they were completing their degree completely alone (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021; Wingo et al., 2017). Academic advising has been around since the late 1800s, but it is ever-evolving. This study will be designed to improve the proactive advising policies at online institutions to fully support students as they navigate their way through online education.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program. This study examined the lived experiences of online students working with their academic advisor. This chapter details the chosen research design, site, participants, procedures, data collection and analysis methods, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations for the study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is important to educational research because it helps explain the “how” and “why” of research questions and warrants an in depth understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context (Cleland, 2017). Questions that cannot be easily put into numbers to understand human experience can be explained in qualitative research (Cleland, 2017). As researcher of this study, I used field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to truly understand the participants in their natural setting (Erickson, 2011). Although there are several qualitative research designs, phenomenology is the best design for this study. A phenomenological research design describes the common themes and meanings for several participants’ lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is a need to better understand the importance of proactive advising for retention in online students; therefore understanding experiences of this phenomenon of these students requires a qualitative phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program. According to Moustakas (1994), a transcendental phenomenological study is used to understand experiences and collect data from

several people who have experienced the same phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology attempts to eliminate any bias and strictly elicits and reports the participants' lived experiences. For this study, the student integration model and the theory of marginality and mattering formed the theoretical framework (Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1975). The student integration model explored what causes students to drop out of college (Tinto, 1975) and the theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) focused on transitions and what support students need when transitioning into higher education.

Moustakas (1994) credited Edmund Husserl for pioneering new realms of the conceptual framework of transcendental phenomenology; however, the term “phenomenology” was used by Hegel as early as 1765. Hegel referred phenomenology to knowledge as it appears to the mind, and described it as what one perceives, senses, and knows (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is a good starting point for investigation. Unlike hermeneutic phenomenology—in which the researcher interprets the experiences—transcendental phenomenology has the researcher strictly analyze the data and without interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To conduct this transcendental phenomenological study, I did not use my biases or preconceived ideas, and only focused on the data from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology was selected for this student in order for me to fully understand the personal experiences of proactive advising among online students.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, the questions researched revolved around finding the experiences of online students when working with an academic advisor. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program.

These questions helped to understand the students' experiences with an advisor while completing their degree completely online.

### **Central Research Question**

How do college academic proactive advising experiences of online students affect retention?

### **Sub-Question One**

How can advisors provide effective proactive advising sessions to meet the needs of online students?

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are considered the most beneficial advising practices experienced by online students to help them complete their program?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How has poor academic advice affected online undergraduate students in regard to their retention in their program?

## **Setting and Participants**

This section explains the site where the research was conducted. It is important to understand where the data came from and what demographic was researched. The second part of this section explains the participants who were included in this study, and how these students were strictly online students to better target the correct demographic for this research.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted using social media, and more specifically Facebook. To ensure confidentiality, the Facebook groups used will not be mentioned. Facebook has a wide range of groups and the ones that were used were groups that target online students from specific online-

only universities. These groups each had several thousand student members. Students ranged from all different degree programs, but all their programs were taught completely online. These groups were created so students who are completing their online education can connect with other students at their university.

All students who are part of these Facebook groups have an online advisor. These online advisors serve as counselors to the students, trying to connect them with the university from afar. The advisors who serve these students are typically available to students throughout the day so the students can reach out whenever they need support. Because the students conducting these online degrees are non-traditional students, they often need to speak with an advisor beyond the normal workday. Many of their advisors work different hours throughout the week to be able to accommodate their students. Not only do they need to accommodate students who also work full time, but they also need to accommodate students who are in different time zones. Many students attending these online universities often do not live close to the university. The advisors work different hours to be able to accommodate these students no matter what their hurdle may be. Facebook was able to provide access to a wide range of students in many different online universities, as well as different stages on their program.

### **Participants**

For this study, I recruited all students who take only online classes to participate in the research through social media platforms such as Facebook through a participant flyer.

Polkinghorne (1989) recommends researchers interview five to 25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Qualitative research studies only require a few participants but collect extensive details about those individuals' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ten students were recruited who attend an online-only university.

As researcher of this study, I used purposeful homogeneous sampling, which allows for rich information to be selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since there are more than 10 online students completing an online degree at institutions across the United States, homogeneous sampling allowed me to choose the specific subgroup of participants who are identified as online students.

### **Researcher Positionality**

After completing my first degree on campus, I decided to pursue my graduate degree online. After finishing most of my master's degree, I found myself in a place where I was struggling in a class and the professor was not helpful, which made my experience terrible. After that, I felt as though there was no one to reach out to for help or support. After several years of putting off finishing the degree, I finally decided that I did not waste all that time and money to fail, so I decided to re-enroll in the program. Knowing that I had to re-take the class for the third time worried me, but I was happy to see I did not have the same professor from the previous times. The class was restructured, and I sought help from a friend and was able to pass the class and finish the rest of the degree. After this experience, I became interested in online learning and how I could help other students not have the same poor experience that I had. Leaving elementary education and now working in higher education, I was able to pinpoint that students need supportive mentors and advisors. As an academic advisor currently working with students mostly completing their degree online, I realized it would have been so helpful if I had someone from the university cheering me on and helping me through my struggles. Although my experiences were as a graduate student, many students are looking to complete their undergraduate degrees online. It is essential that they are given the support they need, not only through an advisor, but through other university supports to help them succeed. To conduct this

qualitative research, I used the postpositivism interpretive framework to gather data on multiple participants. I used the philosophical framework to direct my research to come up with non-biased conclusions.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework for this study is postpositivism, which encompasses several perspectives and does not just look at a single individual (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach has elements of being reductionistic, logical, empirical, cause-and-effect, oriented and deterministic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The postpositivist framework asks questions, collects data, finds results, and arrives at a conclusion about the phenomena explored. This interpretive framework depicts the systematic procedures of the analytic data analysis steps in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

In this qualitative study, I used interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters to collect data and find the conclusions directly from the participants in order to eliminate biases and subjectivity. Using the postpositivism framework helped this study in arriving at conclusions from the participants' data by interviewing several participants, as opposed to just a single individual. This framework also related to my study as there was rigorous data analysis to better understand how the participants view pro-active advising.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are important in qualitative research as they help direct the research goals and outcomes. The philosophical assumption shapes how the problem and research questions are formulated. They are also rooted in all the research used throughout the study. There are four philosophical assumptions a researcher ponders over to decide which is best for their study. These are beliefs in ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the

knowledge and how the claims are justified), axiology (the role of values within the research), and methodology (the process of research, which is explained in Chapter Three below; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Ontological Assumption***

In a postpositivism framework, the ontological assumption tells us that a single reality exists beyond ourselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I understand, with this research, that students will have their own feelings and opinions that will influence their experiences. Each advisor is different in their approach to the student, and each student will have a different experience. This research provided me the opportunity to share students' proactive advising experiences with others in hopes those will shed light on what students need. Understanding their reality helped reduce any biases I may have, and I focused on reporting the facts based on the data. This study uses various methods of data collection to show how the multiple participants view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption in qualitative research discusses what counts as knowledge, how claims are justified, and the relationship between the researcher and study being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of qualitative research is subjective and comes from the experiences of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a current academic advisor, I can see the problems students face if they do not have an advisor that is helpful. This study was conducted in hopes of helping academic advisors understand what their students need and are looking for in their advisor. We continue to see the poor retention rates of online students. They are dropping out of their online programs because they do not feel like they have the support of the university to be successful. Many students see online education as the only option they have,

due to a myriad of issues that may prevent them from attending in person, but not everyone is prepared to be successful in online education. This topic is close to me personally, as an academic advisor currently working with college students, as well as an online student myself, which introduced this epistemological assumption. Being close to this topic provides a deeper understanding of both the advisor's perspective and the participant's perspective, and a deeper connection to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The axiological assumption in a postpositivism framework defines the researcher's values that mold the narrative, and includes personal interpretations that are similar with those of the participants' (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All researchers have morals and values when conducting research, but it is imperative that in qualitative research these values do not affect the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took data from the online students and found common themes and phrases. Every student's experience is different and diverse, so I did not use any bias and only analyzed the data collected. When reporting the findings, I was responsible for ensuring that the data reported represents only the information directly from the participants (Denzin, 1989).

### **Researcher's Role**

As the researcher, it was important for me to be compassionate and receptive to the needs of the students who agreed to participate in this study. At the time of this study, I was employed as an academic advisor at a residential campus, so I would never have advised any of the participants in this study. For the importance of this study, I ensured that all students were online students enrolled at an online institution and not face-to-face campus students.

As a student who attended a university completely online, I can personally understand the struggles and the need for proactive advising. In my current role as an academic advisor working



with freshmen and sophomore students on campus, I understand how important it is to work with and closely monitor these students for academic success. I want to continue to study these two areas that I am passionate about in online education and academic advising. Therefore, I chose phenomenological research to better understand the participant's personal experiences with online proactive advising. I hoped to find better practices in online proactive advising to help improve student retention. To address any biases, I used bracketing and set aside my experiences as much as possible to use a fresh perspective when learning about the participants experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Procedures**

The first step in the process was to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After I received IRB approvals from Liberty University (Appendix A), participants were selected through Facebook. A flyer (Appendix B) was posted on several Facebook groups that were identified as being comprised of students who were only seeking an online degree.

After identifying potential participants, I sent out emails and consent forms to each person individually inviting them to participate in the study. Purposeful homogeneous sampling was conducted based on the student studying online, and students were chosen at random. Those students who were not chosen were sent an email thanking them for their willingness to be a part of the study. Ten participants were selected from those who met the criteria and there were two participants on standby in case a chosen participant dropped out. I was sure to include on the consent form that a participant could drop out at any point of the study without repercussion. The participants were sent an email with instructions on how one-on-one interviews would be conducted via an online platform (such as Microsoft TEAMS). In the email, I also explained how focus groups would be conducted and how those would be recorded via the online platform. Data

collected from the one-on-one interviews and the focus groups were transcribed using Dovetail or through Microsoft TEAMS transcriptions. Participants were provided written documentation about their conversations and experiences when they met with their online advisors.

### **Permissions**

As researcher of this study, I requested permission from Liberty University's IRB (Appendix A) to conduct the study. After obtaining permission from IRB, I attached the request for participation in the study letter and consent form. I requested permission to complete one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters from students who were completing their degree program completely online.

### **Recruitment Plan**

For this study, the sample pool was students in an online program through Facebook groups. According to Padilla (2003) and Polkinghorne (1989), a sample pool could be anywhere from one to 325 participants for a phenomenological study. Once a potential participant completed a Qualtrics form on the flyer indicating they wanted to participate, they were sent an email with a link to make an appointment for the individual interview. In that email was also an implied consent form (Appendix C). Participants were instructed if they still wanted to participate after reading the implied consent, to make an appointment. Once participants completed the individual interview, they were sent another email with the implied consent (Appendix D) for the focus group and that was scheduled with the participant's permission. The participant was also sent an implied consent form (Appendix E) and a Qualtrics link to complete the hypothetical letter. The smaller sample size for qualitative data allowed me as the researcher to gain extensive details from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For my sample size, I narrowed my participants down to 10-20 participants to conduct the extensive research needed.

The sampling was purposeful homogeneous sampling. This means selecting the same type of student to collect the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample was online students pursuing a bachelor's degree through an online university, who met with an academic advisor. The data collection was conducted after IRB approval and implied consent was gained by providing each participant with all the pertinent information about the study. This information included the right to withdraw at any time without repercussion, the purpose of the study, the expectation of maintaining complete confidentiality of each participant, potential benefits of the student, and a signature from each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Collection Plan**

Multiple methods of data collection were used in this study to fully and accurately understand the importance of proactive advising for retention in online students. It is imperative to collect data through multiple methods to fully understand the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, participant interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters were used. Microsoft TEAMS was used for interviews and focus groups to gather rich meaningful data from participants' personal experiences. Since these were online students who are not centrally located and their education is in an online environment, I chose to conduct the interviews and focus groups in the same manner. Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach is presented by using one's experiences and collecting the data from multiple participants. Triangulation was used by completing the one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters for validity and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data was synthesized with an unbiased perspective to find common themes within the data.

## Individual Interviews

Individual participant interviews are very important to qualitative research. Individual interviews utilized open-ended questions (Table 1) that asked about the participant's experiences over his or her actual beliefs or opinions (King et al., 2019). The interviews provided feedback from the participants on their personal experiences of working with an academic advisor online. I conducted these semi-structured interviews via Microsoft TEAMS. These interviews were recorded with the Microsoft TEAMS software and transcribed after each interview, fixing any errors. After transcribing the interviews, I sent the transcription back to each respective participant for review and to ensure accuracy.

**Table 1**

### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. Please describe what year you are in your program and why you chose to pursue an online education. (CRQ)
2. How long have you been enrolled as an online student, or have you been a student at any other colleges? (CRQ)
3. Describe your experience working with an online academic advisor and if they have been proactive or reactive in helping you achieve success. (CRQ)
4. Describe how you sought out their (academic advisor) help or do you only respond if they reach out to you first? (CRQ)
5. Describe what academic supports your academic advisor has referred you to for you to be successful and was this before or after you realized you needed the support. (SQ1)
6. Describe how your academic advisor could be more proactive to support you academically. (SQ2)
7. Describe the barriers you have faced as an online college student that may cause you to drop out. (SQ3)
8. Describe what academic supports could help you overcome these barriers leading to retention and ultimately graduation. (SQ2)
9. Describe any advice that has been detrimental to you or your program. What advice do you know of that others have received that has been helpful or detrimental? (SQ3)
10. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your barriers with online education that we haven't discussed? (CRQ)

Interview questions 1 and 2 were asked to build rapport with each participant to encourage an open dialogue (M. Patton, 2015) and give a better understanding of how the student chose online education and where they are in their program. By starting the interview with question 1, students reflected on their current status and what drew them to online education. Question 2 helped them reflect on their online experience thus far and if they had any experiences at another institution drawing off personal emotions towards their current situation.

Questions 3 through 6 provided important information from the participants on their experiences working with an academic advisor and how they have or have not helped the participants. Much research has been done regarding proactive academic advising in a traditional setting and how it impacts student retention (Donaldson et al., 2016; Drake, 2011; Soria et al., 2017). These questions however, examined the experiences with online advising working with online students and whether students' interactions with their online advisors were useful or not. The interview process in phenomenological research provides a "comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The data gained from these questions created a comprehensive depiction of the participants' experience with online academic advisors.

Questions 7 and 8 asked participants to reflect on barriers that online students have faced that could potentially make them drop out, and what supports can help them not drop out. Students reported there are many factors that can be barriers that they face in online education, including work obligations; family life; childcare arrangements; and finding free, uninterrupted time (Lakhal et al., 2021; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021). Some factors cannot be controlled; however, there are several that can be with the help of the university. These questions

explored the perception of what barriers students find the hardest to face that would keep them retained in their program and what supports helped them overcome these barriers.

Questions 9 and 10 allowed the participants to explain the types of advice they had received that may have been detrimental or helpful to their program. This also gave participants the opportunity to add anything that they may not have added previously about barriers to their education. These two questions were value questions (M. Patton, 2015), and allowed participants to provide advice about online programs that could be beneficial to other participants experiencing the same phenomenon.

Interview questions 1 through 3 were asked of all participants. These questions were important to understanding why participants chose an online program and what the university, specifically the advisors, could do better to support the student. Questions 4 through 11 were asked of all participants to shed light on their experiences with their advisor and barriers they face. These interviews were one-on-one, wherein the interviewer asked the questions and the interviewee answered them. As the interviewer, I spoke as little as possible and listened to the interviewee to ensure reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These questions better helped me understand what made the students choose an online education and how, if any, their online advisor helped them throughout their academic journey. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and coded through NVivo to help organize the research and develop themes.

### **Hypothetical Letter**

After conducting the individual interviews and focus groups, each participant completed a hypothetical letter in Qualtrics to a future online student, offering advice for working with academic advisors. This letter identified the participants' experiences working with an online advisor and what they thought future students should know about utilizing their academic

advisor for success. The hypothetical letter gave participants a chance to write down their honest feelings about their experiences working with an advisor, and is beneficial to qualitative research as it allows for a deep investigation of the phenomenon being researched. The letter allowed me to see what the participants thought were most important for others to know about working with an advisor, to help with overall academic success and retention as an online student. Participants submitted their hypothetical letter via Qualtrics within one week of the focus group. The expectation for this hypothetical letter exercise was that participants would write at least two paragraphs to a future online student (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Hypothetical Letter Prompt*

Please write a hypothetical letter to a future online student who will need to seek academic advice. Provide at least two paragraphs of text that may include examples or advice that you would have liked to have received prior to utilizing academic advising. Based on your experiences throughout your time as an online student so far, what advice would you give to future online students for working with an academic advisor? What stories or examples would you share with them to prepare them for the challenges they may face as an online student? What questions would you suggest they ask their academic advisor so that they have a better chance of being a successful online college student? Would you recommend they did things similarly or differently than you did as a college student and would you recommend, they become more or less involved with their academic advisor?

Once the hypothetical letters were completed and collected, they were inputted into NVivo software to code them and keep them organized. The letters were fully read to ensure all

content was understood. After the letters were fully read, common words and phrases were coded and organized into themes like other qualitative data analysis methods (Labuschagne, 2003). Once themes were identified, they were put together to find the most common answers and organized into a table (see Table 5).

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups were also used in data collection for this study. These were extremely helpful, as participants interacted with each other and discussed their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These focus groups allowed participants to discuss their experiences and create a meaningful dialog that may not have happened in the one-on-one interview. The focus groups answered more questions that the participants may not have thought about before (Table 3), as they interacted with one another. These groups consisted of two groups of six participants. The groups were randomly selected from the group of participants from the study.

### **Table 3**

#### *Focus Group Questions*

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and share your academic background. (Background Knowledge)
2. How has your overall experience been in an online education program? (Background Knowledge)
3. What are some experiences you have had with your academic advisor and explain how they were helpful or detrimental? (CRQ & SQ3)
4. How could your experiences with your academic advisor been more productive or more beneficial? (SQ2)
5. What do you wish you knew before meeting with your academic advisor for the first time? (SQ1)
6. What are some academic supports your academic advisor suggested that the university offers to keep you retained in your program? (SQ2).



Questions 1 through 4 provided the group members the opportunity to introduce themselves and give their experiences with working with an academic advisor and pursuing an online program. Asking these questions in a focus group setting allowed the participants to respond and interact with their peers about their lived experiences working with an online advisor. These focus groups were structured and focused on discussions which complemented the other methods of data collection (Gundumogula, 2020).

Question 5 allowed participants to think about what type of questions they wish they knew to ask their academic advising when meeting for the first time. This gave students a chance to reflect on things they wished they knew before starting college and working with an academic advisor. Reflecting on this will help future students better understand what questions to ask when meeting with their academic advisor and beginning an online program. This question gave participants a chance to tap into their feelings about the phenomenon being studied and how it has impacted their lives (M. Patton, 2015).

Question 6 encouraged students to discuss the supports that they have used that their academic advisor has suggested. This allowed them to express whether their academic advisor even gave them any suggestions for supports and provide constructive feedback to benefit future advisors in how they could better help students stay retained in their program. This question gave students the opportunity to express their own opinion on whether or not the academic advisor was helpful in suggesting academic supports for future consideration of the phenomenon (M. Patton, 2015). Bettinger et al. (2013) researched how academic supports such as academic mentoring, and tutoring were beneficial in keeping students retained. This question allowed them to vocalize their experiences and whether these types of academic supports also helped them or not.

The use of this kind of questioning is important and appropriate for the interaction of focus groups and gives an in-depth diverse perspective about the phenomenon (M. Patton, 2015). It is important for the participants to interact and build upon each other's responses.

These focus groups were imperative to use to compare participants' experiences (Morgan, 1997). Participants logged into a Microsoft TEAMS meeting that was recorded. The researcher asked questions and the participants discussed their answers with each other. The participants were able to talk back and forth amongst each other in normal conversation while answering the question and explaining their experiences. Since these meetings were recorded via Microsoft TEAMS, they were automatically transcribed. I listened back over the focus group videos and ensured the transcriptions matched verbatim and made corrections where needed. The transcriptions were then be sent back to the participants to ensure the validity of the transcripts. According to Moustakas (1994), data analysis should begin with epoche, then phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. I focused on the focus group transcripts known as bracketing, then looked at the reduction known as horizontalizing (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed the transcriptions with an open mind and no bias. I then took out any statements that were redundant or did not pertain to the research, leaving only the horizons of the transcriptions of this focus group (Moustakas, 1994). The horizons or codes were then grouped into themes and organized into a textual description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I analyzed that data by looking at the focus group answers through different lenses, vantage points, and angles (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Synthesis**

After the data was collected, recurring themes that emerged were extracted from within the data. The one-on-one interviews were transcribed using the Microsoft TEAMS transcript.

The transcripts were re-listened to and compared to the transcription, correcting any errors. Once those were fully transcribed, common themes were found among the interviews using NVivo. The focus groups data was then transcribed in the same manner using Microsoft TEAMS's transcription feature, and common themes were found among those transcriptions after putting those transcripts through NVivo. Finally, the hypothetical letters provided by each participant were read and common themes and statements made in the letters were extracted. All transcriptions and documents were re-read to find themes and subthemes within all the data. Moustakas (1994) stated that horizontalization is used to find all significant statements that are relevant to the study, and they were given equal value. I used my own experiences and compared them with the common themes from the data using thick rich descriptions known as bracketing. Horizontalization was used to provide an understanding of the participant's experiences. After reading the transcripts several times, I listed all the statements that were relevant to the phenomenological study since all statements carry the same weight for this analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Horizons were identified from statements gathered and collected. Statements that were irrelevant or repetitive were omitted. Completing this analysis helped me better understand what is experienced by each of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed the concept of trustworthiness to a study, which sets in motion the rigor in a qualitative study. Ensuring the trustworthiness of a study is important not only to the study but to the participants in the study. To achieve a study that is truthful throughout the data analysis and synthesis process, several precautions were taken to address the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for this study (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Previous research on this topic helped develop practices to improve the standard and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is determined when the researcher can understand and recognize the experiences of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This study involved triangulation to collect various sources of data to maintain consistency from each of these sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In transcendental phenomenology, it is imperative to use bracketing to ensure that personal opinions do not taint the validity of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Throughout this study, member-checking was used to ensure credibility and confirmability of all the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). The participants were able to opt-out of the study at any point without repercussion and there were backup participants to continue to study effectively if necessary. This process also allowed participants to offer feedback to the researcher regarding their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). Triangulation was used in data collection, and continued and sustained commitment to the field of higher online education also provided credibility to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007).

### **Transferability**

Transferability offers the researcher to provide thick-rich descriptions so that others who want to transfer the findings can do so (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When conducting phenomenological research for transferability, the research focuses on human experiences and uses that data as it is, instead of creating a picture of what the researcher thinks it may be (Moustakas, 1994). The transferability in this study ensured that participants were anonymous, but detailed descriptions were used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pseudonyms were used for all

participants and the location the study being conducted, at but all other information such as the participant's age, student status, and reasons for the site selections remained the same.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is important in showing that if this study was repeated, using similar data and methods that similar results would be the outcome (Shenton, 2004). Someone attempting to replicate this study should be able to use interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters to gain similar results as this study. For this study, all details involving the entire process of the study were provided, such as sampling process, selection of the site, collection of informed consent, selection of participants, and all data collection methods. Member-checking was used to ensure dependability of the data gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). This process also allowed participants to offer feedback to me as the researcher regarding their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that an inquiry audit must be conducted by an outside person to ensure the dependability of the qualitative study. This was done to ensure the research has not been identically replicated by another researcher.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is to ensure the data has come strictly from the participants and that the researcher has not used any biases (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, audit trails are important when reviewing interview notes and transcripts. This was confirmed using triangulation among the study. Triangulation is important in phenomenological qualitative studies as it cuts down on any researcher's bias, therefore, making the study more reliable (Shenton, 2004). Member-checking was used to ensure credibility and to allow participants to offer feedback about their experiences. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are important to all research. It is imperative to obtain IRB approval before any of the data collection can begin. Seeking approval through IRB means that proper guidelines were taken to conduct ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After permission was granted, a flyer was posted on Facebook to solicit potential participants.. If they chose to participate, it was made known that they can opt out at any point without repercussion.

To ensure the study was conducted ethically, implied consent was gained by providing each participant with all the pertinent information about the study. This information included the right to withdraw at any time without repercussion, the purpose of the study, the expectation of maintaining complete confidentiality of each participant, potential benefits to the student, and a signature from each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

It was important to gain written consent from each participant since the study will contain information about their life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was also important that all spaces were comfortable and that all participants felt comfortable throughout the process. To maintain confidentiality, no names were used; pseudonyms were used instead, and data was kept confidential. In the focus groups, names appeared, but I asked participants not to share any information with anyone else. The documents were all under password-protected software so no one else had access to the research.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program. A transcendental phenomenological study is disciplined and systematic to set aside any prejudice and prejudgment regarding the data being studied (Moustakas, 1994). To be free of prejudice and prejudgment, I

was open, receptive, and naïve to listening to the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Chapter Three included the justification of using the transcendental phenomenology design and how it aligned with one central research question and five sub-questions. The site and participants were used for the study and data collection was described.

The researcher positionality detailed a postpositivist interpretive framework and three philosophical assumptions (ontological, epistemological, and axiological) and how these assumptions align with the qualitative method. My role as researcher was described in detail. Next, the procedures were outlined to show how the researcher gained permissions and created a recruitment plan for each participant. The details for each of the three data collection methods and data analysis were provided according to phenomenological studies. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study was explained by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to conduct a trustworthy study. The conclusion of Chapter Three emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations when conducting a research study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program. Chapter Four begins with an analysis of the lived experiences of 10 participants, all of which are online students completing their degree fully online. All the institutions that the participants are attending are four-year institutions with degrees that are offered fully online. The experiences were collected through individual interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters. The three main themes that appeared from the data collection methods were identified in Chapter Four, along with using transcendental experiences. Outlier data was also included, as well as a discussion of the central research question and three sub-questions which can be found at the end of the chapter followed by a summary of the chapter.

### Participants

To gather participants, a flyer on Facebook was posted with information about the research and how to participate using a Qualtrics survey. Once participants completed the survey, purposeful homogeneous sampling was conducted based on participants' answers. The sampling resulted in emailing 34 potential participants, of which 16 did not respond, four were ineligible, and 14 were interested in participating in the study. Of the 14 interested participants, four made an appointment for the interview but did not show up, so only 10 completed the study. Of the 10 participants, three were male and seven were female. All participants took courses completely online and worked with an online advisor. **Error! Reference source not found.** (page 90) describes the research participants with pseudonyms used.



**Anthony**

Anthony has been a student at his online university for about three years. He had some courses transferred over from a previous institution and was able to get some credit from those courses. He considers himself a junior; his plan is to graduate in 2025. Anthony chose to pursue an online degree because he is working full-time, and he chose his specific online institution because his employer is paying for him to go to school there. He was promoted and his job is dependent on this degree. Anthony's experience with his online advisor has been a positive one. He said his experience at this institution with his advisor was a lot more favorable than his previous institution. He said his advisor was extremely helpful getting everything set up initially, as he had those several credits that transferred over and had a lot of paperwork to complete in the beginning. When he first started, his advisor consistently reached out to ensure he understood how everything worked and to make sure he did not need help or have questions. He explained that at this point in his degree, he now only reaches out to his advisor anytime he needs anything, but his advisor will also reach out periodically to ensure everything is going well. Anthony mentioned that his advisor did provide him with academic support, such as referring him to the writing center. He described that he did not face too many barriers when it came to online education, it was just the fact that he needed to learn how to balance everything in life while also completing his education. He mentioned that his advisor told him about Sophia Learning, which was something he had wished he knew about sooner; however, it was helpful to get some of his general education courses out of the way. One thing Anthony found detrimental was reading negative Facebook comments about his university and the support or lack of supports people felt like the university had to offer. Overall, Anthony's experience has been a positive one with his academic advisor and his online university.

**Betsy**

Betsy is in her second year at her current online institution. She previously attended another university. She chose online education because she works full-time and lives in a small town that does not have a local institution. Betsy stated that in her first year at her institution, her advisor was very involved, contacting her every week. She said that was very helpful in keeping her retained because her advisor was very supportive, helping her every step of the way. She said now that she is in her second year she will only talk to her advisor when needed; however her advisor is always available. Betsy described that her advisor has directed her to academic supports, such as how best to reach out to advisors and the student success center that houses the library, writing center, and financial aid. She feels as though her advisor is her biggest cheerleader when it comes to cheering her on to be academically successful. Betsy explained that one of the barriers to online education are not having relationships with classmates and instructors. Being an introvert, sometimes it is hard to make those connections virtually. She ended with saying that she thinks Facebook groups can be a blessing and a curse as she has found good advice on there but also has seen the negative comments which can become overwhelming.

**Arianna**

Arianna is in her first semester at her institution, so the whole process of online education is fairly new to her. She has, however, attended another university in the past. She expressed that her academic advisor has been helpful; however, he only typically reaches out if she needs something. Although her advisor does not reach out frequently, whenever she reached out he answers her questions. She stated that he has not really pointed her in the direction of any academic supports; however, she does not feel like she needs any. Arianna said there have not

really been any barriers so far and her online classes are going well. Most of the information she had received had been positive and she could not think of anything that was detrimental to her program. She explained that her advisor registers her for all of her classes based on her degree, which was different from her last institution where she was able to choose the classes she wanted to take. Her advisor, however, was always accessible and would change classes if she requested it. She has felt somewhat indifferent about her experience and has considered switching schools but was going to give it a little more time before she made her decision.

### **Steven**

Steven said he has about 81 credits which would suggest he is a junior. He said he has attended three different institutions. He chose online education because he has a family that takes up a lot of his time as he volunteers with the Boy Scout program. Steven has had a good experience with his advisor so far; however, he said it was still early to tell how proactive they actually were. He stated he thinks they only reach out consistently if your grades are slipping or you have an attendance problem. The advisor will reach out to him, but mostly he needs to make an appointment to have a longer conversation. Steven mentioned that this university does put more emphasis on student retention by offering seminars and extra resources for the student to be successful. He thought it would be helpful for his advisor to reach out to him a little more proactively. Some of the barriers Steven faced were the financial implications of going to college. He had a sponsor helping him, but the sponsor just stopped paying. The biggest advice Steven would give a student is not to procrastinate and be sure to fully read the syllabus and know when things are due. He also mentioned that he can appreciate an ebook, but he likes to have the option of a hard textbook as well.

**Katie**

Katie stated that she was in her third year of her program. She explained that online education was best for her because she works full-time and is a mom, so the brick-and-mortar did not work with her life. Katie had attended a couple other institutions before attending her current one. She had a similar experience to some of the other participants with her advisor reaching out and being very proactive in the beginning. As she progressed in her degree program, her advisor would only reach out if they felt like they had information to share. As the semesters went on, she had a disagreement with her advisor, and she no longer heard from her. She felt like after that she was bounced around to different advisors, making it somewhat hard to feel comfortable working with an advisor. After her poor experience, her advisor began to be present again, but Katie feels like she does best advocating for herself and finding the resources on her own. She did ask for help and her advisor pointed her in the direction of the writing center and the resource center when she was looking for an internship. She feels as though she finds out the best information by talking to her peers and professors. Some of the barriers she faced were having imposter syndrome and not feeling confident she could finish her degree. Katie felt like faculty members should be more involved in the online process and connecting with students to also help them stay retained.

**Kelly**

Kelly has pursued an online education for about two years. She chose online education because she is a stay-at-home mom. Kelly went to another institution before her current online institution. She stated she has had two advisors since beginning her online journey and they have both been amazing and very hands-on. She has had to take breaks throughout her educational journey, and they support her and continue to stay in touch with her to ensure she gets back on

track once her break is over. She feels as though they truly care about her as a person and not just there for her academically. If Kelly has questions, she knows she can email or call her advisor and they will get back to her almost immediately. Her advisors supported her in ways she did not even realize she needed by giving her resources for different scholarships and grants. Kelly said because her advisor always goes above and beyond, she does not think there is anything that she could do better. When Kelly got pregnant, she feared continuing her education would be out of reach, but her advisors stayed with her every step of the way, ensuring she took the time off she needed but also got back on track and did not just drop out because of the baby. Kelly does not feel like she has received any detrimental advice and when she was failing a specific class her advisor helped her get connected with a tutor and other resources to help her be successful. She did say that online education is not for everyone. Many people need to be in a classroom with a professor that lectures in front of them. If you do not keep up with the assignments and have self-discipline you can fall very behind but it has been a great experience for her.

### **Ruby**

Ruby was in the last few weeks of her online journey until she graduated. She also stated that she was a mom and online education was the best option for her. She stated that she had also gone to college several years ago and then went to another university, then got pregnant and dropped out, then finally decided once and for all that she was going to finish her degree. Ruby said since she started college, her advisor at her current institution has been the most helpful. She is like a concierge service. Ruby stated her advisor is always checking up on her and calls her to make sure everything is going well. She was not sure how she is going to get through her master's program without her. The online advisor for Ruby is always there for things that not only fall under academics, but she is also there for emotional support as well. Sometimes Ruby

feels as though a professor may not be treating her fairly in class or she gets a bad grade, and she knows to always go to her advisor to make sure she stays on track and let her know everything will be okay. Ruby feels as though her advisor gave her support because in the middle of her degree program, she decided to change it to best follow the path she wanted after college and her advisor was able to talk her through it and explain it would all be okay and even better in the end after she graduated. Ruby's institution has an IA chat bot that also likes to stay involved, and Ruby once told the chatbot that she was overwhelmed. The chatbot then told her advisor and her advisor emailed her. Although she was grateful for the quick response, Ruby wished that she would have called her to talk it out. Ruby felt as though the biggest barrier to her online experience was how complacent the professors can get. She often felt like they just showed up for a paycheck and did not actually care about the students or giving meaningful content. She feels as though even though it is an online education, she wishes there was more human interaction, and she feels as though they would keep more students retained. Ruby mentioned that she just feels as though the professors at her institution are not happy with their lives and they sometimes can take it out on the students instead of being there for the students.

### **Pamela**

Pamela has been completing online classwork at her institution part time for about three years. She mentioned she has recently gotten out of a troubled marriage and wanted to learn more about what went wrong. She went back to school to find herself and learn more about mental illness. She chose online education for convenience. She had gone to another institution several years ago. Pamela called her advisor the best kept secret. She said her advisor was wonderful and she had heard bad comments about advisors at her institution, but she was glad she did not listen to them because she has had nothing but a good experience. Pamela said she

reaches out to her advisor when she needs something, but her advisor will also reach out to her first. She has to go out of time for weeks at a time for her job and her advisor always helps by making sure she can take the time she needs but also stay on track. The online writing center and online library are resources Pamela's advisor let her know about that were helpful to her. Pamela said there was nothing her advisor could do that could be more helpful. He calls her about once a week to ensure she is staying on track. She also mentioned that some of what could prevent students from dropping out is more human interaction. In her opinion, the professors are not very responsive at times and do not try to connect with their students. She wished that professors were held more accountable to sticking to rubrics and being up front with the expectations of the coursework.

### **Jose**

Jose is in his third year of his online journey. He needed to have the flexibility of online learning and was using his GI Bill. He originally was taking some classes in-person and some online, but changed his major which was only offered completely online. Previous to pursuing an online education, he did attend two other universities. Jose has had an excellent experience with his online advisor. He credits still being enrolled in his institution because of his advisor. He said he reaches out to his advisor when he needs something, but she is always reaching out to him as well. He thinks sometimes she knows that he needs help before he realizes it. Jose said his advisor always talks him through whatever process he is going through at the time, and she is thorough, so he rarely has questions. He does not think there is anything that she could do to be more proactive. He, like many others, feels the only downside to online learning is the human connection and networking. Jose states he does not feel like he was really ever given any

detrimental advice. He said it is so important to stay on top of deadlines and ensure that family matters do not take away from getting schoolwork completed.

### **Tammy**

Tammy is in her third year at her current online institution. She went back to school after she was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and could not continue her current job. Tammy had been enrolled at another university for her first degree that was in-person; however, with this degree, the online component was ideal for her current health problems. She said her advisor has been extremely helpful since she had transfer credits. Her advisor made sure she was given credit for everything she had already taken, then helped her get on track with what she needed to take to finish this degree. Tammy said she had heard horror stories about online advisors, but she has gotten lucky as hers has been great and very responsive. She said her advisor reaches out during the financial periods to ensure she has everything in order. Since Tammy is far along in her degree, that is really the only time her advisor reaches out unless, of course, Tammy needs something. Tammy said she has not really needed any academic support since she has already been through college before. She did have a concern with a math course and her advisor did direct her to taking courses through Sophia Learning. Tammy said she has not had to really reach out to her advisor for anything other than the usual things, but she does not feel as though her advisor could do anything more for her. Tammy's health problems sometimes cause her to face barriers with retention, but her advisor ensures she stays the course. Tammy tries to be proactive with her professors about her health challenges, and if she ends up in the hospital or has to go to rehab, she communicates with her professors to ensure she can turn things in late or to let them know why her assignments may not be what they should be. She said so far, her professors have been responsive in working with her. Tammy found comfort in connecting with one of her



professors who also had the same health problems she had. That really helped her continue to work hard and stay in her program.

**Table 4**

*Student Participants*

| Pseudonym | Years in online program | Works with a Proactive online advisor |
|-----------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Anthony   | 3                       | Yes                                   |
| Betsy     | 2                       | Yes                                   |
| Arianna   | 1                       | Yes                                   |
| Steven    | 1                       | Yes                                   |
| Katie     | 3                       | Yes                                   |
| Kelly     | 2                       | Yes                                   |
| Ruby      | 4                       | Yes                                   |
| Pamela    | 3                       | Yes                                   |
| Jose      | 3                       | Yes                                   |
| Tammy     | 3                       | Yes                                   |

All participants answered yes to the questionnaire, which would mean they were eligible for the study. One participant did not meet all the qualifications; however, that student was still used in the study. The participation qualifications were taking classes online, being 18 years or older, completing less than 120 credit hours, and working with an online advisor. Implied consent was provided to each participant before the interview, focus group, and hypothetical letter was administered. A Qualtrics survey (Appendix C) was used to administer the survey for participants to complete to determine if they were eligible. All individual interviews and focus groups were virtually conducted using Microsoft Teams. Qualtrics was used to distribute the hypothetical letter prompt (Appendix F).

The 10 participants shared their experiences in their online education journey and working with an online advisor at their institution. The participants were on average in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year at their respective institutions and all but one had a positive experience working with their online advisor. All the participants had attended a university previously. Some attended a traditional on-campus university, while others completed credits towards a degree at another online institution. The data analysis was performed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological research methodology, which describes the lived experiences from several people that have experienced the same phenomenon. Throughout this data analysis Tinto's student integration model (1975) and Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering (1989) resonated through the research as these theories focus on what prevents a student from dropping out and their sense of belonging within the institution. Throughout this research, participants were analyzed as to what would make them drop out and how they felt connected to their institution based on how their advisor interacted with them.

### **Results**

The analysis and data triangulation of three data collections methods include individual interviews, two focus groups, and a hypothetical letter to future students. All 10 participants were assigned the same individual interview questions, which consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The participants in the interviews were broken up into two focus groups and asked six questions. Only eight participants logged in to the focus groups with two participants not attending either group. Each participant was given ample opportunity to respond and build off of other participants' answers. Once the focus groups were completed, the participants were emailed a hypothetical letter prompt. In this prompt, participants were asked to write two paragraphs and answer four questions to future students about their experiences with academic

advising. From these three methods, relevant words, phrases, and sentences were coded (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Eight participants participated in the hypothetical letter with two participants not responding after several attempts of reaching out to them. The tags which were pulled from the data analysis were used to identify themes and subthemes, which provided the framework for the phenomenon of addressing participants experiences working with a proactive advisor in online education (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dovetail software was used to tag the themes and subthemes from the individual interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters which identified the tags and then grouped into categories based on related responses. Transcripts from interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters were analyzed to draw out significant phrases and responses from the participants' lived experiences. These responses were identified using Dovetail's tag features to categorize the like statements.

**Table 5***Themes and Subthemes*

| <i>Theme<br/>Subthemes</i>          | Description  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Overall Online Experience</b>    | The overall online experience students have when attending an online institution.  |
| Helpful/Detrimental Advice          | Advice that a student receives throughout their experience that is helpful or detrimental to their experience. This could be the reason they stay retained in their program or ultimately drop out.      |
| <b>Barriers To Online Education</b> | Barriers that a student may face when pursuing an online education. These could be personal barriers such as family, financial, or professional commitments.   |
| More Needed Support                 | Students face many challenges when pursuing an online education and not being at the institution in person can be a challenge alone. More support is needed for these students that are from a distance. |
| Lack of Social Interaction          | Students are not at the brick-and-mortar location of the institution so they often do not get the same social interaction. This could often lead to a lack of sense of belonging.                        |
| <b>Proactive Advising</b>           | Proactive advising is when an advisor has a cohort of students they build a relationship with and check on often to ensure the students success.   |
| Online Academic Supports            | Online students need support just like any other student. Online institutions need to provide support to students that can be accessed solely online.  |

**Overall Online Experience**

All participants experienced a positive overall experience in their online institution. Some found the experience sufficient, whereas others truly enjoyed their experience and felt like they were a part of the institution and were proud to get their degree from that institution. The

participants credited their overall experience to their proactive advisor. Many of the participants admitted they were a little nervous going back to school and were not sure what to expect, but overall, they were surprised by their positive experience.

Participants reflected on their overall experience in the focus group. Katie said, “My program ... now has been phenomenal ... in every way, shape and form.” Anthony reflected on his hesitation at the beginning of the program and how he felt now stating:

The first couple weeks of class, I had an enrollment advisor reaching out to me all the time. What surprised me was I didn't expect to have somebody just so invested in making sure that I was actually doing school things. I was happy to have it.

These are the first impressions that these students had that led them to continue to stay in their program and continued to help the overall experience of being at their institution. Students need to feel as though they have all of the tools to succeed and if they do not, they want to know they have somewhere to find them. Betsy stated, “I feel like my institution gives you so many tools to succeed.” This speaks to the importance of having a positive overall experience. The participants felt like they could succeed because of the institution investing in their success. Although many students felt as though they had a good overall experience, some of the students did express some concerns they had throughout their program; however, they decided to push through to continue to be successful. Ruby was discouraged by the instructors at her institution stating:

I definitely miss the connectivity and, um, I think my institution is going through a growth, a growing pains, you know, some of the instructors are new and so there's a lot of errors and you have to be really vigilant to say, oh, well, I did do this assignment.

Comments like this can be discouraging to students, but that student found the other positives to keep going and continue on in her program.

### *Helpful/Detrimental Advice*

Throughout the participants' time in their program, they were all given both helpful and detrimental advice from professors, advisors, or other people who may not understand online education. Sometimes detrimental advice can outweigh helpful advice, so it is important that advisors are positive when giving advice. Jose and Steven described that some helpful advice they received was to not procrastinate so they could keep up with their deadlines. Steven stated:

Don't procrastinate in the online, uh, setting. Um, yes, you can look at your syllabus and all that stuff but you, I don't know exactly how intense each assignment is going to be.

Don't wait until due date or the day before to start.

Jose's reflected that "the best advice that came from my advisor is just staying proactive with the deadlines." Personal lives can get the best of us and these participants really took it seriously, knowing they needed to be proactive and set time aside for their assignments. Tammy had been dealing with a lot of health issues and was finding it hard to continue on amidst several hospital stays. She found a professor who had similar health issues and that professor was able to give her helpful advice and show her that it was important to keep pushing, because it was possible for Tammy to remain in school. Tammy stated:

I have gotten some really good advice. My professor for the class before I'm taking now also has an autoimmune disorder. Um, she's told me to, you know, stay the course, look at the end goal, you know, it seems pretty like textbook advice but knowing somebody has kind of what you have.

Kitchen et al. (2021) and Larson et al. (2018) found that academic staff often offer advice to students beyond academics and advocate for students to help with their success. Tammy found

someone at her institution who could relate to her and ensure she was getting the helpful advice she needed to stay the course.

Many online students would be more successful and stay retained if they were only receiving helpful advice. One of the major places students find detrimental advice is through social media. Anthony and Betsy both expressed how they had to delete several groups because of the detrimental advice they were receiving from students on social media sites. Betsy detailed that people would trash talk the institution, the professors, and the work. When students find themselves caught up in this, it makes it easy for those students to want to leave because they do not want to get that “bad” professor or have to do that “awful” assignment. Anthony added, “I see, uh, on Facebook groups, people advertising tutoring services that are actually cheating. Um, so it's like Yes, I'm a tutor. I'll write your paper for you.” If students were to take the advice of these people, they could very well find themselves expelled from the institution. Katie mentioned that she has had friends who were told they were not good enough for the program they were in. Every student should feel good enough and be encouraged by their institution, not discouraged by anyone.

### **Barriers to Online Education**

All students face some kind of barriers to education, whether it be mental health, health problems, doing poorly in courses, or having a hard time fitting in. Lakhali et al. (2021), Muljana & Luo (2019), and Seery et al. (2021) described barriers being work obligations, family life, childcare arrangements, and finding free uninterrupted time. Students in online education have fewer interactions and resources at their disposal, potentially making it even harder for them to be successful in their degree program. Although many of the participants had positive interactions with their online advisor, some did not have as positive of an experience with other

aspects of their program. Pamela noted:

Professors or instructors for the most part are, um, they're not very receptive. I've only had one the whole three years that actually gave me her phone number was texting me at 10, 11 o'clock at night, you know, talking me down from the ledge for this paper we had. Ruby and Betsy also felt similarly about their professors not being assessable or approachable. There has been a lack of effectiveness in online teaching, which really serves as a disadvantage to the students trying to truly learn.

Participants also found that a major barrier to online education is the lack of social interaction with faculty and peers alike. It is human nature to want to be able to discuss assignments or thoughts about a particular class with their peers and taking online-only classes causes a major barrier to do that. Ruby mentioned that "there is a big gap between human interaction in academia." Katie added that "there is a lack of presence and responsiveness." Since there is little human interaction, Jose mentioned that:

The downside to being online is the networking. We don't have that availability to be able to network, especially with those groups and face to face because most people only know each other from a picture that we have on a profile based on the discussion, et cetera."

Although the human interaction piece seems to be one of the biggest barriers, Steven mentioned how financial restrictions are also a barrier. He stated, "Financial seems to be an issue sometimes; that's what it was the first time." Students do not always realize how much it costs to take courses at an institution. Online students are often not eligible for the same scholarships and grants as residential students. These barriers can make it very hard for students to continue. They may need to work extra hours to pay for their courses, and in turn, spend less time on their course work.



### *More Needed Support*

Many of the participants expressed that their institution gave academic supports to help them succeed; however, some participants felt as though their institution could do better. Ros expressed how her school did not have tutoring for the specific major she chose. This was discouraging to her because she did not have anywhere to turn for help. She also expressed how the faculty at her institution were not very receptive, as well as her feelings on needing more support by saying, “I’m really astonished by how complacent the university or, you know, my school got with allowing a professor to just put something in a virtual environment and then grade them and then those people get a degree.” If a student could not go to their instructor and there was no tutoring, they really felt as though they had no one to turn for help. Institutions should have tutors in all subjects to fully help all students no matter the degree program. Bettinger et al. (2013) suggested academic supports—such as academic mentoring, and tutoring—were beneficial in keeping students retained. If an institution is not supporting students in this way, it could lead to students dropping out.

Although many of the participants had a positive experience with their proactive advisor, one participant did have a subpar experience. Katie expressed:

I think just more involvement would have been nice, you know, not checking in because you're required to by your job description to check me off of a list that you contacted me for the quarter. But to actually like, you know, remember how to pronounce my name maybe. But um I don't know, I just, I just think that I was just a name on a list that she had to check off for each quarter, you know, so be more involved, be reach out a little bit more.

Not having a proactive advisor that one can go to or feel comfortable with can be detrimental.

Advisors should be a student's first line of defense, personally vested with each student so students do not feel like they are just a number. An advisor is often a student's lifeline and if students do not feel like they have that support, then it may be hard for them to seek out more supports. Not having the support of an advisor was an outlier in this study. Most participants felt supported by their advisors. Many of the comments that were about the lack of support were participants not feeling supported by their professors, rather than their advisors.

### ***Lack of Social Interaction***

Most students do not truly understand what it means to be an online student. The participants in this study had many reasons why online education worked best for them. Many of them did, however, express the lack of social interaction with peers and professors when pursuing an online education. In the focus groups, the participants discussed how they have to do discussion posts (as required by most online programs). As to the lack of actual interaction that came with such discussion board assignments, Anthony stated,

There's discussion posts, um like discussion questions. At my school every course, has 1 to 2 of those every week. There's a, there's a prompt, you respond to the prompt and then you have to submit some minimum number of replies. The replies are almost universal.

Hi. I found your response very interesting.

The participants found that they were not actually getting to know their peers, and became frustrated because they felt the discussion board requirements were just robotic exercises for students to complete their assignments. Ruby had similar feelings, stating:

Just adding more of the interaction to allow students to feel like they are actually at school learning and in an environment where it's not so much about good or bad grades or, you know, but like learning, it's, it's more about learning.

Seery et al. (2021) and Sorensen & Donovan (2017), found that the student's sense of belonging with regards to the community, engagement, and interactions with faculty members, played a role in online retention.

Although it can be challenging to find ways for students to interact while in an online environment, one participant did mention that he participated in a group project. The group was required to meet virtually to complete their project and he felt as though this was a great way to truly get students to interact with each other and feel like they were more than just a body in a classroom. Anthony described his positive experience:

There was one class I had that had a group project and I worked very closely with the somebody actually I was happy for that. Um I worked with somebody very closely for over the course of five weeks on this project. And um that was actually a positive experience because that was the first time I had in actual interaction with the student.

These are the types of interactions that students need to have to feel as though they belong to the institution. For the most part, the participants continued to express their frustration over the lack of social interaction with not only their professors, but peers as well. Betsy felt intimidated when doing the discussion posts because she was not sure if she would offend someone. If online student had more actual interaction with these students, they may better understand their peers.

### **Proactive Advising**

Museus (2021) studied proactive advising in racially diverse student populations and determined that proactive advising involves assuming responsibility to actively connect students with resources that can help them thrive. Much of this research was based around whether proactive advising truly helps students stay retained in their online programs. The participants had a lot to say about their advisors, including whether their advisors were proactive. Nine out of

10 students had a reoccurring positive experience with their online advisor. Proper proactive advising leads to student satisfaction; knowing they have that support helps them be successful during their time at their institution (Kitchen et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Proactive advising leads to creating connections with students that they may otherwise not make with anyone else at their institution, which helps them trust that the advisor will steer them in the right direction for success (Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019).

Katie said her experience was positive in the beginning, but after she and her advisor had a disagreement, the communication began to lessen and the experience was not as positive. Arianna stated that her advisor reached out to her three times within the first few weeks of starting her program; she also sent him emails during that period and he was very responsive. Katie, Ruby, Tammy, and Kelly all reminisced on their experiences with their advisor. Katie called her advisor to a concierge service, detailing that “she always calls to check up on me. She's always available if I need her, she stays up on my stuff for me. I mean, I have no worries because of my online advisor. She's amazing.” Another participant, Kelly added:

My experience has been amazing. I've had two advisors and they have both been very hands on. Well, I need to take a break. They're like, ok, well, we're just going to make sure that we keep up with you so we can still keep you enrolled, but you need personal time, then you can have that. So they're very honest, I feel like they're very involved with what's going on with me, not just with school.

Tammy had the same sentiment, stating she feels as though she should get her advisor a fruit basket for the things she has done her. The participants connected with their academic advisor and most of them experienced relationships that went beyond just checking up on how they were doing in their classes. They felt as though their advisors cared about them as a person and their

success as a whole. This helped these participants feel a sense of belonging and want to keep pushing through even through the tough times.

### *Online Academic Supports*

Proactive advisors not only make sure that students are in their classes and doing the work, but they are also often the first point of contact when a student needs some kind of help. Part of an advisor's job is to know which direction to point a student in when they may need help beyond the scope that the advisor can help them in. Many participants spoke of how their advisor offered them online academic supports, such as the writing center, tutoring center, and online library through their institution. These are all ways that students can virtually receive help in their online studies. Pamela mentioned this about her advisor and how he points her to academic supports: "He's always been an advocate for the online writing center in the library tutoring and to, you know, uh for the feedback." Betsy also had good advice from her advisor about academic supports: "Number one would be, of course, the course instructors. Uh, number two, the student success centers like the library or the writing center or um financial aid." Upcraft and Kramer (1995) described that a systematized, intrusive advising program and academic support service are key factors in any effort to combat rising attrition, declining enrollment, and decreased fiscal appropriations.

Bettinger et al. (2013) was convinced that academic supports such as academic mentoring and tutoring play a major factor in keeping students retained. Betsy agreed, as she was told about her academic supports during orientation and it stuck with her, plus her advisor reminded her throughout the semester about these supports. She described it as:

Like a one-stop-shop resource for, you know, like library services or uh financial aid or, you know, if you, if you're struggling with stress from school and work and family, you

know, they have resources there...this resource is there, that resource is there and just, you know, the advisor keep reminding you that, you know, there's help available with pretty much anything.

Another academic support students mentioned was taking courses outside of their institution, such as on a site called Sophia Learning. This was beneficial to both Anthony and Tammy, since they took some general education courses and got those out of the way so they could focus on their major courses and finish their degrees. Tammy used Sophia to take a math course because math was not her best suit, so she wanted to be able to take the course at her own place. This type of support may not have been specifically through their institution, but it was a support that helped them be successful in a course they may not otherwise have done well in. As institutions continue to strengthen their online programs, it is imperative that they look at all avenues and types of supports that will help students be successful and know they have a place to turn to, whether they are struggling mentally or academically.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

An outlier in qualitative research can be defined as an unexpected theme or finding that represents a variation in the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection explored the lived experiences of online students working with an online academic advisor. Participants interacted with a person during their advising sessions. One outlier in the data collection could be the subject of future research studies.

### ***AI Chatbot***

Ruby referred several times to an artificial intelligence chatbot called Penny. She said that this chatbot often asked her questions throughout her program to gauge how she was doing. This was an extension of her advisor, and it was helpful because the results went to her advisor.

Sometimes, Ruby did not want to bother her advisor and the chatbot was able to give her basic answers. This was a way for her advisor to check up on Ruby even when she may have felt like she did not need it, but really did. Ruby mentioned that Penny the chatbot initially “ratted her out,” but overall, it was positive since this tool was beneficial in letting her advisor know her concerns, so her advisor could reach out and help as appropriate.

### **Research Question Responses**

One central and three sub-research questions guided the research of this study. These questions were constructed to explore the lived experiences of online students’ experiences with a proactive advisor. The goal of these questions was to examine the participants’ experiences with their proactive advisor and determine if those led to student retention, as well as understand the experiences of students taking classes in a fully online learning environment (Jackson-Boothby, 2017; Madi-McCarthy, 2018).

#### **Central Research Question**

How do college academic proactive advising experiences of online students affect retention? The participants described that proactive advising experiences were instrumental in keeping them retained in their program. All but one participant had an above-average experience working with their online advisor. These participants described rich, detailed accounts of how their advisor helped keep them involved and retained in their online program.

Almost all of the participants explained how from day one of starting their online program, their online advisor was supporting them. The advisor reached out to the participants often; most of them recollecting that their online advisor was very involved in the beginning of their program offer a lot of support. Although many of the participant said that their advisors do not reach out as often since they have been in the program for a few years, their advisor is always

available and ready to answer any questions the participants asks. Ruby summarized the sentiment that most of the participants in this study shared regarding their online advisor:

She always calls to check up on me. She's always available if I need to cc her. She stays up on my stuff for me. I mean, I have no worries because of my online advisor. She's amazing. I don't know how I'm going to get through my master's without her.

Two of the other participants—Jose and Tammy—had been going through many personal struggles. Being online students made it easier for them to be able to attend an institution, but because of their personal struggles, they often felt as though they were drowning personally, which made completing their education hard. Although they were going through personal issues, they both were able to stay retained with the help of their proactive advisor. Jose explained:

I had three deaths in my family and I even went through a divorce and some of the classes, I failed some classes. I just didn't even log in, I didn't even do any work. And I got, um, I'm finally catching back up with my GPA and Patty has been outstanding the whole time. She's always believing in me. I've lost my financial aid as well because I was getting F's and I wasn't able to, I wasn't finishing and within that time frame, Patty has sent a lot of SAP appeals so I can get my financial aid.

The other participant, Tammy, went through severe medical problems and struggled to keep up with the work because of having to be in and out of the hospital. She stated that her advisor had been great:

She's been super proactive. She has every concern and I ask a lot of questions. So every concern as far as like transferring my credits from my other degree to um making a payment from education to like a health degree. Um She is so good at responding like I



told her literally a couple of days ago, I felt like I should send her like a fruit basket or something because if I email her, she'll email me right back.

Katie stated that her experience started out great; however, it changed when she and her advisor had a disagreement about something. That student will reach out to her advisor if she needs something but tries to find answers on her own term. This, however, has not deterred her from continuing in her program. Most of the experiences have been positive, which points towards the fact that students need that extra support when entering into an online institution. Online academic advisors should be there for the students to use as a resource, to point them in the right direction and help their students feel like they have someone to go to when they need academic help or support.

### **Sub-Question One**

How can advisors provide effective proactive advising sessions to meet the needs of online students? Many advisors look to help their students any way possible. Some online advisors have specific tools to ensure they are meeting with each of their advisees at certain touchpoints throughout the academic semester. Others will just be there for students when the student feels like they need help. Waiting to hear from their students could pose a problem, since the student may not realize they need help until it is too late.

One student stated that he had a good experience with his advisor so far; however he pointed out: "I think they only really are proactive if your grades or your attendance is starting to slip and then they'll be all over you about it." Although it is proactive that the advisor is keeping up with the student's grades and ensuring that he is staying on track, this may not be helpful if the student was struggling in other aspects. It is important that the proactive advisor is reaching out to ensure the student is doing well as a whole, not just getting the desired good grade.

Throughout the interviews, many participants had great things to say about their proactive advisors. Betsy stated:

We had scheduled meeting um, every week, whether it was email or by the phone. If something came up in between that time, I could of course, reach out to her. And I think there were a few times that I did, especially when it came to, you know, not being able to, to, you know, figure out how to um access the resources that I need.

Although not all advisors have the time to reach out to every student weekly, Betsy found it so helpful to know she could reach out to her advisor even before her scheduled meeting and the advisor would respond.

Online students' schedules are often different than the traditional student studying at a brick-and-mortar institution. It is important for advisors to be readily available to these online students. Many of the participants work full-time or have families to take care of, so they needed an advisor who was available to speak with them outside of the regular business hours or days. They found that their advisors were readily available, within reason, and got back to them as soon as possible, which made these participants feel as though someone cared and was invested in helping them be successful.

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are the most beneficial advising practices experienced by online students to help them complete their program? Students in online education often are not only going to school, but they are also working full time; raising a family; and dealing with the daily lives of being a parent, spouse, and active member of their community. It is often hard for them to dedicate and devote the time they need to fully invest in their education. It is even harder when everything is

online and they are not attending their courses in person and interacting with classmates and professors face-to-face.

Many of the participants expressed how important it was for their advisor to just be their cheerleader. They wanted their advisor to be the person they could go to for their successes and failures. They wanted someone who would cheer them on, but also help them get what they needed to be successful. One of the participants got pregnant and did not know if she would be able to continue her schooling after she had the baby, but stated about her advisor:

If I didn't have her, I would have been out because I, I told her at one point I want to withdraw. She's like, no, no, no, you're so close. You only have, I don't remember how many classes I have left right now. Um, she's like, you're so close, you're almost there.

This is exactly what this student needed to continue her studies even after having the baby. It may not seem like very much from the advisor's standpoint, but it was just what the student needed to keep pushing. Students in online education often feel very isolated, as they do not have the same interactions as students who attend a residential campus. Pamela stated that her advisor "has been proactive. He is my best kept secret. He has been absolutely wonderful. Um, with contact response uh information. He's, he's just been amazing." When a student feels as though they have made a connection with their advisor and their advisor truly cares, they are more apt to complete their program. As these participants' responses about their academic advisors demonstrated, just being a positive presence for these students when they needed them did incredible things for these online students. These students wanted to stay in their program and not only graduate, but truly excel in their program, because their advisor made them feel as though they could do it and will do great things post-graduation.

### **Sub-Question Three**

How has poor academic advice affected online undergraduate students in regard to their retention in their program? For the most part the participants had favorable experiences in their online journey in relation to their advisor. Several participants did share their concern with the lack of response and rapport with their professors, however. These participants attended their institutions to learn, and they felt as though many of the professors were working just to collect a paycheck and did not have the student's interest at the forefront.

Many of these students had a lot of personal stressors, so they were yearning for caring and competent instructors so that they can take their degree and put it to use. These interactions can be very detrimental to the students. Ruby stated, "I mean, it's just, you have some teachers that just aren't happy with their lives, and they take it out on you." These participants found it hard to truly want to continue in their program, knowing they may have these instructors for more than one class. Katie said she had not received detrimental advice, but many of her friends had: "They have been told by advisors that they're not equipped to be in the field and that they shouldn't be in the field because they obviously cannot handle their course load." It would be very hard for many students to continue in the program if they did not feel like they belonged and were being told that.

Another issues that participants mentioned could be detrimental to them continuing on in their program is the lack of knowledge of how everything works. Betsy stated:

Last year, I was not able to complete one of my classes. And so, uh, when I talked to my mentor about that, she said, oh, it, it would just automatically roll over into this term and it, it wouldn't be an issue. Well, it was an issue because she had to go back in and add it to this term and then I had to meet with the instructor and it's like that whole process. It

was like she made it sound like that nothing would have to be done on her part or my part. And that just wasn't the case. So, you know, it would have been nice if she had been more aware of what that whole process was because it caused me, you know, a little bit more stress having to deal with that. So, I'd say kind of the same thing, my issues have been, uh, like my administrative issues have been pretty much just systemic.

Students feel as though if something unpleasant is happening to them, it is probably happening to other students, too, which could easily cause students not to want to continue in their program because of the stress.

### **Summary**

By conducting individual interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letters, 10 participants described their lived experiences of completing a degree at an online institution and working directly with a proactive advisor. Three themes emerged from this data: a) overall online experience, b) barriers to online education, and c) proactive advising; as well as, four sub-themes: a) helpful/detrimental advice, b) more needed support, c) lack of social interaction, and d) online academic supports. There was one outlier in which a participant spoke about an artificial intelligence chatbot that would check up on her as another form of support. The chatbot was able to ask and answer questions on a surface level to where students could get answers immediately without having to wait for their advisor to get back to them.

The central research question and sub-questions were answered, emphasizing the need for proactive advising in online education. The data confirmed that online students thrive and stay retained when they have a caring and helpful proactive advisor working with them. Furthermore, there is a greater need for all online institutions to enforce proactive advising guidelines.

Although many of these participants had a good advising experience, they did note instances

where their advisor may not have been as proactive as they would have liked. Universal online advising guidelines would create better advisors across the board in online education.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program (Cross, 2018; Delich, 2021; Miller et al., 2019). The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of participants in a completely online college program, as well as their lived experiences working with proactive online advisor to evaluate whether the advisor was helpful or detrimental to the participant and their online program. Chapter Five begins with an interpretation of the findings in this study, which details the three main themes and four sub-themes. Chapter Five also includes the implications for policy, practice, theory, and methodology, as well as limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

This section discusses the themes that emerged while examining the participants' interactions with a proactive advisor in online education and how their interactions were helpful or detrimental to their progress in their online degree. The participants all found that proactive advising helped their impact on retention. Yet, there was a gap in the literature addressing what the best form of communication is and how much or little advisors should work with their students. The research suggested that online students benefit from a proactive, caring academic advisor who is present while they are attending the institution.

The themes and subthemes uncovered the importance of online institutions having an academic advisor for students to feel connected to and be able to go to with any problems or questions that may arise. Effective communication between the participant and their advisor was key in their success, as well as the advisor being proactive and ensuring that the student had all

the tools they needed to be successful. Three data collection methods were used—individual interviews, focus groups, and a hypothetical letter writing prompt—which were analyzed, resulting in three main themes which aligned with Tinto’s (1975) student integration model and Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. The summary of thematic findings is the justification for using Tinto’s student integration model and Schlossberg’s theory of marginality and mattering, by explaining that students need a sense of belonging and a proactive advisor to be successful in their studies. This helped guide the themes and subthemes of the study. This section begins with the summary and interpretation of the findings, pointing out the three main themes, followed by the implications for policy, practice, theory, and methodology; limitations and delimitations; and finally the recommendations for future research. The participants’ experiences reiterated the importance of having a proactive advisor who works with an online student every step of their academic journey in online education.

### **Summary of Thematic Findings**

Three themes were identified in this study. The themes include overall online experience, barriers to online education, and proactive advising. These themes were essential in discussing the experiences of online students proactive advising experiences and whether these experiences helped students stay retained in their online programs ultimately leading to graduation. Additionally, these themes identified some of the barriers students face in online education and the importance of offering academic support services to students in the online education space similar to the academic supports students receive at residential institutions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of students in an online program working with proactive online advisor and whether this helped



the student stay retained in their program and ultimately graduate. The results of the study provide valuable insights for understanding how important proactive advising is to the online student to help them progress and stay retained in their program. The notable discovery of these findings include: overall online experience influences academic performance, barriers to online education challenge positive academic performance, and proactive advising is critical to creating a positive online experience. These three points may contribute to improving the overall online academic experience for students in a completely online program and help improve proactive advising in the online setting.

### ***Overall Online Experience Influences Academic Performance***

As the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, students were required to learn how to learn in a different way. Online education was already established; however, it needed to continue to mature as everyone was switching over to online education. As students started to head back to the brick-and-mortar schools, institutions realized that online education was here to stay. Institutions started expanding their online programs and offering more online options to students at residential institutions. Although the initial thought of going to school online is appealing to most because they can do it from the comfort of their own home, it is really a different experience. Many begin to realize that attending school online is a lot about being given information and having to teach yourself. Students find out very quickly that it is not always as easy as it sounds. Many institutions also find that it is an easy way to generate money, but some institutions do not always put enough emphasis on the experience for the student to ensure they are getting the same or similar experiences as someone attending school on a campus.

Tinto (1975) acknowledged that academic and social integration were important factors in whether a student stayed retained or dropped out. He also realized that first-year experience

was key to the student's overall experience at an institution. The academic experience should be as robust for online students as for residential students. All students, including online-only students, should have a positive academic and social experience and feel as though their institution is invested in making them feel as though they belong. Furthermore, online institutions should have a robust first-year experience for online students so those students can gain resources and meet people virtually to help build community and a sense of belonging, in accordance with Schlossberg's (1989) emphasis on the importance of these factors. If online students do not feel like they belong or are part of the institution and its community, they become stressed and doubt their value. Students crave a sense of belonging to be successful in their online education, including connecting with their faculty members as if they were sitting in front of them in a classroom (Seery et al., 2021; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017).

In this study, many participants expressed the need for their institutions to create a better sense of belonging. Although many of them had a positive experience with their proactive advisor, they expressed that they did not have many other positive interactions with others. Students felt siloed by not having positive interactions with peers. They described, for example, having to complete discussions posts, with other students not actually engaging in the discussions and not creating meaningful conversations. The participants also all suggested that many of their instructors were just there to earn a paycheck and did not care to interact with the students. Participants wanted to ask questions to truly understand the material, which they felt was hard because they did not have a positive experience with the instructors so they either would not ask the questions or often would never hear back from the professors. Furthermore, institutions in general need to do better to make their students feel as though they belong and are a part of an institution that truly cares about their success.

### ***Barriers to Online Education Challenges Positive Academic Performance***

Lakhal et al. (2021), Muljana and Luo (2019), and Seery et al. (2021), described barriers to online education being work obligations, family life, childcare arrangements, and finding free uninterrupted time. Additionally, many students face barriers such as few academic resources, financial instability, and anxiety of having to teach themselves material in the online setting. Normal everyday life can be stressful; adding school work in the mix can make things more stressful, and invariably, schoolwork is the first thing that a student would neglect. These barriers can cause students to not do well in their academics because they are focused on things that they find more important. When a student is just trying to keep their head above water by working, taking care of their family and themselves, often the things of less importance such as school work get pushed to the side and quickly students find themselves not doing well. Most participants in this study had families and work obligations on top of their schoolwork, and they expressed the challenges in finding time to complete their classwork. Participants stated they would stay up late after their kids went to bed to complete their work; however, this caused them to neglect time for themselves and their spouse after a long day. It is crucial that students plan out their days to be able to include everything that is required of them, but also give themselves some time to recharge so they do not get burned out. When students do not have the academic support they need from the institution, the barriers they are already facing grow and poor academic performance can ensue. A student's motivation, satisfaction, and stress of having to juggle all the requirements of online education can determine whether a student decides to drop out or not (Seery et al., 2021). Overall, online education is not right for everyone. It takes a strong person to be able to juggle all of the barriers they may face. It is imperative that the online institution has support in place to help students overcome barriers.

### *Proactive Advising is Critical to Creating a Positive Online Experience*

Proactive advising is defined by Varney (2012) as the deliberate intervention to enhance student motivation, using strategies to show interest and involvement with students, intensive advising designed to increase the probability of student success, working to educate students on all options, and approaching students before situations develop. It is critical that students feel as though they belong to their institution; one of their first interactions is most likely with their advisor, leaving the responsibility on the advisor to make the student feel welcomed.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering is an important theory to understand how proactive advising leads to student retention. Students want to feel as though they matter, and the proactive advisor has the power to help with that. Proactive advising often leads to student satisfaction, knowing they have the support needed to be successful during their time at the institution (Kitchen et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Although the student may not have a positive experience with other parts of the institution, at least they feel like they have someone in their corner cheering them on and helping them to the finish line. Many of the participants in this study were not happy with the way their institution was run and the support it offered them; however, all had positive experiences with their proactive advisor. The participants were able to still have a positive experience knowing that they could reach out to their advisor for help and support when they felt alone in the process. Proactive advisors create a connection with the students, and students learn to trust them knowing that they will point them in the direction of success (Hu, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Despite not having a positive experience with their institution all around, the participants could all attest that they were still at their institution because they felt support from their advisor.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This study suggests policy and practice implications for addressing the inequities among the academic supports, including academic advising, leading to recommendations for leadership and supervisors in online education to implement additional reform initiatives. This section includes and encourages how online leadership and supervisors can integrate and implement reform policies to support students in an online-only program where the students never step foot on a campus and complete all their studies from their own home. Additionally, this section provides recommendations for policymakers, online leaders, and educational stakeholders in higher education on policies and practices to take on the systemic inequalities among online student support and narrow the academic achievement gap between online students and residential students.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The study's findings have policy implications. In exploring the academic experiences of online students that worked with a proactive advisor, the research findings suggest that policies in place may lead to not all online students having access to the same type or level of services. The results also show that not all online institutions provide the same type of online academic supports for students to help them through their academic journey be successful. There are no policies in place that every online institution must follow to ensure they are providing students with a proactive advisor and online academic supports. As a result, some of the participants did not feel as though they were receiving the full help they needed to be successful in higher education. Participants confirmed that having their institution provide a proactive online advisor and several forms of academic support was crucial to their retention and success.

In this study, participants expressed the importance of having a proactive advisor who

continued to be their support and push them. Every participant had attended an institution previous to the one they were currently attending, and they expressed differences in their experiences when working with a proactive advisor versus not working with one. Additionally, some of the participants had positive experiences with the academic supports available at their institution, while others did not. Therefore, a policy suggested for all online institutions would be to implement proactive advising. Institutions can follow existing studies on such models to implement this and ensure that advisors are creating touchpoints for their cohort of students to ensure they are being successful. It is imperative that students feel a sense of belonging and have someone they feel comfortable talking with about their academics. An advisor also acts as a liaison to many other departments for the student and helps the student connect with other departments they may need help with.

Another area of concern is the lack of online academic supports at some institutions. All online institutions should create a policy ensuring they are providing students with critical academic supports they need, such as tutoring, peer mentoring, disability services, financial aid services, and a full online library. These policies would improve the academic performance of online students and help ensure they feel a sense of belonging at their institution. Having these academic supports would help the student feel more confident in advocating for themselves and gain the help they need to be successful as an online student. This policy would give students a point of contact they know they can always reach out to in their proactive advisor and known resources that can help them with academic success.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Based on the findings, this study also has practical implications. It was evident throughout the study that proactive advising influenced many of the participants' progression

throughout their degree program. Although one participant said she felt it was her responsibility to push herself through her degree program, most of the other participants expressed the need for a proactive advisor to be there for support throughout their time at the institution. Many participants expressed how their advisor not only pushed them academically, but was also there for them whenever they had a question or a situation arose. Establishing a universal proactive advising model across online institutions will ensure that all online students are getting the academic and emotional support they need to be successful in their online program. With these proactive advising models, advisors should have touchpoints with their students throughout the semester to ensure they are doing well academically and beyond. These touchpoints will give the advisors the opportunity to possibly prevent students from dropping classes or feeling like an outsider, and ultimately keep students retained to finish their degree.

Similarly, online institutions should provide adequate online academic supports, such as tutoring, writing center help, peer-mentoring, student and faculty discussions, and library services. Many of the participants named a couple of services they had, but were also not always happy with the services provided. One participant explained the available tutoring does not go beyond general education courses. Another explained that she feels like faculty members do not care about the students. These online institutions need to hire content area tutors to help students with their major courses. They should also have robust online writing centers and libraries for students to use at any time of day. Peer mentors should be utilized more, as this gives students not only a person to speak with who understands exactly what they are going through, but also serves as another support system for the student. Finally, institutions must enact a policy where instructors hold office hours, so students feel as though they can effectively communicate with instructors. It is imperative that instructors become more hands-on, even though in an online

environment. These practices would increase students' sense of belonging immensely.

While it is evident that additional new initiatives, advising, and academic support programs need to be created, providing students with a memorable online experience as if they are part of something is important. Administration needs to be put people into place who have experience working with the online population and understanding what they need to be a successful student. To keep online students retained, institutions need to hear what students need and act on it so that the students feel like they are a part of the institution and not just a "number" paying tuition.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

The importance of the lived experiences of online students working with their online academic advisor prompted themes to emerge from this research study that aligned with Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering, and empirical works that were imperative to the framework of this study. Theoretical implications include the validation that a student will stay enrolled in their program if they feel a sense of belonging among their institution and online community. Empirical implications imply that an online student's overall academic experience and the reality of staying retained in his or her online program can be influenced by that student's online proactive advisor. This study also contributed to the literature by providing valuable information from the participants' perspectives as online students and what barriers they faced, how proactive advising was beneficial in their journeys, and how the overall online academic experience could be improved with the correct online academic supports.

#### ***Empirical Implications***

Throughout this study, participants emphasized the need for more academic supports in



online education, as well as a proactive advisor to help them through all the good and bad in online education. All the participants were pursuing their degrees online. Over the past 20 years, the number of students in an online program has increased significantly (Lakhal et al., 2021). Online education has come a long way and is incredibly more feasible for many students to gain a degree since they do not have the added expenses such as room and board, travel, and other fees associated with being on a campus (Harasim, 2000; Kentnor, 2015; Palvia et al., 2018). Many of the participants also had families and other obligations to consider, which made the online path more accessible. Although these participants found it easier based on personal lives to pursue their degrees online, student retention pursuing an online degree is a national issue (Manyanga et al., 2017). Participants like the ones in this study often begin their academic journey online; however, it is often hard for institutions to keep such students retained from the first to second year (Burke, 2019; Manyanga et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2019).

Students often find challenges not only in their personal lives, but also with the institution itself. Faculty tend to be a major barrier for students; many do not find effective online strategies to teach the students and instead just post assignments online and minimally interact with students (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021; Wingo et al., 2017). To add to online students' stress, online institutions after change their learning management system so students need to learn a new technology system each semester (Lakhal, 2021; Seery et al., 2021). The participants in this study echoed the literature in often finding it hard to stay engaged in their classwork. They were very disappointed by the faculty interactions they had and often felt the faculty members were only teaching to collect a paycheck. This is problematic because if the study participants feel this way, there are probably thousands of students who also feel this way. It is imperative for online instructors to make their students feel as though they are learning

something, and for such instructions to make themselves accessible to students the way that a faculty member would be on a residential campus. These faculty members should go through rigorous training and learn up front what will be expected of them. It seems as though some institutions do not care and continue to hire the same type of disengaged faculty members who chose not to interact and engage with students in a meaningful way. These online institutions should be student-first institutions, consulting with experts and stakeholders to ensure they are improving their standards and creating a positive and effective online learning environment (Stone, 2017).

According to Larson et al. (2018), academic advising is important as this process empowers a cohort of students with knowledge they need to equip them on how to navigate academic integration within their institution. Many of the participants in this study expressed how their proactive advisor was largely responsible for the fact that these students were still enrolled at their current online institution. Their proactive advisors used techniques that integrated course selection, choice of major, career goals, college adjustment, academic planning, personal issues, time management, and strategies for achieving success (Kitchen et al., 2021). Many of the participants felt as though they could go to their advisors about anything. Research shows that students seek out interactive relationships with their academic advisors to help them achieve success (Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017). All online institutions should provide advisors to their students in cohorts so that the student can go to the same person and build a relationship with that person. The research and study proved the importance of having students work with a proactive advisor to help the students stay retained and be successful throughout their studies.

### *Theoretical Implications*

There were two theoretical frameworks that led this study. The first was Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Tinto studied why students drop out. In this research, it was clear that many of the participants had dropped out of previous institutions for several reasons, but there was a reason why they stayed at their current institution. Most students who drop out of an institution usually do so early in their program and they rarely asked for help before they dropped out (Tinto, 1997). The first-year student has a greater chance of dropping out because of the impact of the academic integration within the online setting (Noyens et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975, 1993). This is why the retention rates in online education are low (Lakhal et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021).

Additionally, many of the participants discussed that they had thought about dropping out of their current institution for one reason or another; however, they said working with their academic advisor to find ways around the barriers that were causing them to think about dropping out helped them stay in their program. Proactive advising is imperative to student retention because it keeps students motivated and students feel supported (Anderson & McGuire, 1997; Tinto, 1999). Tinto's overarching goal was to ensure students were engaging in their institutions to help them feel a sense of belonging and not have the urge to want to drop out. To help with this, institutions have put academic advisors in place to be the first point of contact with students and help them if they can or help them connect with the person that can help them. Tinto (1975) found that social academic integration was key to keeping students retained. In online education, social integration can be harder to do since students do not have the same interactions with their peers and professors. It is important that institutions find ways for students to interact with their peers in the virtual classroom, whether it is through group projects or online

forums where students can truly engage with each other. Online institutions need to do a better job at vetting their prospective instructors and ensure their instructors go through a rigorous training on best-practices in online education. Instructors must have several touchpoints with students so that the students can get ahold of their instructors and so the instructors ensure that the student is understanding the material and feels integrated and engaged.

The second framework used in this study was Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering. This theory relates to students who are experiencing transitions and whether they feel they can depend on somebody during this transition (L. D. Patton et al., 2016; Schlossberg, 1989). The participants in this study all felt as though they had someone they could depend on as they were learning the ways of online education. They all relied on their advisor to be able to guide them through the ups and downs of their program and how best to move forward. Schlossberg's (2011) theory identified four categories' advisors should focus on; situation, self, support, and strategies. All of the participants expressed their feelings about their advisor and how they felt their advisors helped the student make the best decisions for themselves and their program and how their advisor supported them beyond just their academics (Schlossberg, 2011; Workman, 2015). Their advisors helped them feel as though they mattered and as one participant described it, they felt like a concierge service.

Online institutions that focus on mattering and promote student involvement will be more successful in creating an online environment where students want to learn and stay retained in their program (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Participants pointed out that they felt as though their institutions cared more about the residential students than the online students. It is important that online students feel as though they are a part of the institution, too, even if they are not there in person. Keeping students engaged in their program and in the institution will help make them

feel as though they matter and belong.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations and delimitations were identified in this research study. This study identified three potential limitations: sample size, time constraints, and a limited target population. Additionally, four main delimitations to this study were that participants needed to be over 18, were required to be currently enrolled at a four-year online institution, had completed less than 120 credits, and currently worked with an online proactive advisor. A detailed explanation of the limitations and delimitations of this research study is provided in the subsections below.

#### ***Limitations***

Three limitations of this study were the sample size, time constraints, and a limited target population. A small sample size of 10 participants was gathered to collect relevant data for analysis. The participants consisted of seven females and three males. Using a sample size of 10 participants to understand student experiences in an online program and working with an online proactive advisor may present a challenge in generalizing the findings because it is a very small sample as there are thousands of students who fall under this category. Therefore, the study represents only a small population and is subject to the interpretation of the findings. The second limitation of time-constraint was caused since many participants took a long time to book an appointment and some did not show for their first appointment. This meant they had to reschedule their appointment. For the focus groups, some participants confirmed they should show up but when the focus group began, they never logged in. This caused difficulties in gathering the research in a timely manner. Lastly, the third limitation was a limited target population. The researcher only used students in an online undergraduate program. These participants were to have completed less than 120 credits towards their online degree program.

Therefore, the use of homogenous sampling could reduce the sample size. If a participant was in an associate's, master's, or doctorate program, they did not qualify for the study. This sample size may not fully capture online students' experiences working with an online proactive advisor.

### ***Delimitations***

There were four main delimitations to this study. Additionally, four specific requirements bound participants. First, participants had to be at least 18 years of age or older. This study was conducted with students all over 18 and a very wide array of ages. Second, participants were required to be currently enrolled in a four-year online institution. Third, all participants must have completed less than 120 credits, meaning students would be undergraduate students who had not completed a bachelor's degree yet. Lastly, all participants were required to have been currently working with a proactive advisor from their institution.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several research studies have been conducted on proactive advising, online education, and student retention. However, few studies have been conducted on proactive advising in online education and how it impacts retention. The results from this qualitative study suggested the need to explore experiences of students in an online program that work with an online advisor to see if they have positive or negative experiences and if they feel as though their advisor is some of the reason they stay retained in their program. A second recommendation would be to do a more in-depth study as to whether the online academic supports an online institution provides truly help students be successful in their coursework. Residential campuses have several academic supports for their students, but many online institutions lack the same caliber of supports for their online population. A third recommendation would be to survey more students than just those in their bachelor's program. Participants studying in other programs may also

have similar experiences working with online programs and they deserve the same type of support from their online institution. Additionally, further research would help determine if online students working with a proactive advisor and receiving the proper online academic supports would help students in a fully online institution stay retained in their program to graduation. One outlier identified in this study involved a chatbot and the need for extra support beyond the human interaction. Therefore, a final recommendation is to conduct a study to see if more institutions should explore using a chatbot to be able to catch students' concerns even before their advisor may catch them. Sometimes students prefer to express their concerns to something that is not real; however, it helps the advisor and the institution understand how the student is feeling so they can intervene with the correct supports as needed.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand and describe the experiences of students in an online institution who worked with a proactive online advisor, and the effects this had on student retention. A transcendental phenomenological research design was used to capture the lived experiences of online students working with their academic advisor. Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering served as the theoretical frameworks for this study. Data was collected from 10 students pursuing an online education and currently working with a proactive advisor from their institution, through individual interviews, focus groups, and a hypothetical letter prompt. Data collected from the individual interviews, focus groups, and hypothetical letter responses were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) four core approaches to transcendental research: epoche, reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation. Through analyzing the participants' lived experiences, many significant implications for future policies, practice, and empirical works

were discovered. Furthermore, the data validated the theoretical framework. The findings revealed that there is a need for strong proactive advising in online education to help online students with academic success. Additionally, there is a need for online educational leaders and stakeholders to implement a proper proactive advising model that must be followed to help in the success in online education and the need to explore all online academic supports options for online students to access for success.



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**Appendix A: IRB Approval****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 5, 2023

Meghan Cowper  
Rebecca Lunde

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1141 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PROACTIVE ADVISING EFFECTS ON RETENTION

Dear Meghan Cowper, Rebecca Lunde,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional*

## Appendix B: Facebook Recruitment Flyer

# A study of online students' experiences with proactive advising effects on retention



### PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program.

### PROCEDURE

- 1) Participate in a virtual (Microsoft TEAMS), audio and video recorded interview (1 hour max).
- 2) Participate in a virtual (Microsoft TEAMS), audio and video recorded focus group with other participants (1 hour max).
- 3) Write a hypothetical letter to future students about that they helped you & didn't help you when working with an online advisor (1 hour max).

### ELIGIBILITY

- 1) You are 18 years or older
- 2) You are pursuing a degree online
- 3) You have completed less than 120 credits
- 4) You have worked with an online advisor that proactively reached out to you soon after being admitted to the university.

### INCENTIVE

\$25 Starbucks or Target gift card

### BENEFIT

Help improve online proactive advising and retention.

### HOW TO PARTICIPATE

If you fit the eligibility requirements, please fill out this Qualtrics form and I reach out to you soon with next steps.

[https://saintleo.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9LGwG3oyQLmbDE](https://saintleo.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9LGwG3oyQLmbDE)

\*You may withdraw from the study at any time or decline to participate without any penalty.



**MEGHAN COWPER**  
PhD Student-Liberty University

**Appendix C: Qualtrics Survey**

I am 18 years or older.

- Yes
- No

I am pursuing an online degree at a 4-year institution.

- Yes
- No

I have completed less than 120 credits.

- Yes
- No

I have worked with an online advisor that proactively reached out to me soon after I was admitted into the institution.

- Yes
- No

Please add the best email to contact you at.

**Appendix D: Implied Consent-Individual Interviews****IMPLIED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

- Investigator: Meghan Cowper, [REDACTED]
- Title of Study: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PROACTIVE ADVISING EFFECTS ON RETENTION
- Purpose of Study: You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program.
- Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a virtual (Microsoft TEAMS), audio- and video-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
- Benefits: Improve online proactive advising and retention.
- Risks: None greater than those of daily life.
- Costs/incentives: \$25 Starbucks or Target gift card for completing the research in its entirety.

- Confidentiality:
- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
  - Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
  - Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
  - Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
  - Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Use of information: This data will only be used in my dissertation. Identifying information will not be used in this data.

Voluntary Participation: The participants may withdraw from the study at any time, or decline to participate, without any penalty.

By participating in an interview, you are indicating the following:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- You are pursuing a degree online
- You have completed less than 120 credits
- You have worked with an online advisor that proactively reached out to you

- You have read the above consent statement and have had an opportunity to ask questions to your satisfaction.
- You understand that additional questions should be directed to Dr. Rebecca Lunde at [REDACTED].
- You agree to participate in the study, under the terms outlined in this consent statement

## Appendix E: Implied Consent- Focus Group

### IMPLIED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

- Investigator: Meghan Cowper, [REDACTED]
- Title of Study: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PROACTIVE ADVISING EFFECTS ON RETENTION
- Purpose of Study: You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program.
- Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a virtual (Microsoft TEAMS), audio- and video-recorded focus group with other participants that will take no more than 1 hour.
- Benefits: Improve online proactive advising and retention.
- Risks: None greater than those of daily life.
- Costs/incentives: \$25 Starbucks or Target gift card for completing the research in its entirety.
- Confidentiality:
- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
  - Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Use of information: This data will only be used in my dissertation. Identifying information will not be used in this data.

Voluntary The participants may withdraw from the study at any time, or decline to

Participation: participate, without any penalty.

By participating in an interview, you are indicating the following:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- You are pursuing a degree online
- You have completed less than 120 credits
- You have worked with an online advisor that proactively reached out to you

•You have read the above consent statement and have had an opportunity to ask questions to your satisfaction.

•You understand that additional questions should be directed to Dr. Rebecca Lunde at [REDACTED].

•You agree to participate in the study, under the terms outlined in this consent statement



**Appendix F: Implied Consent-Hypothetical Letter****IMPLIED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH****Investigator:** Meghan Cowper, [REDACTED]**Title of Study:** A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ONLINE STUDENTS  
WITH PROACTIVE ADVISING EFFECTS ON RETENTION**Purpose of Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to describe the proactive advising experiences of students in an online degree program.**Procedures:** You will be asked to write a hypothetical letter, which will be a letter that you write to future students about the things that helped you and didn't help you when working with an online advisor. You will receive a link with the instructions space to write the letter. You will be given a week to complete the letter. The letter should be a minimum of two paragraphs. The letter should take approximately 1 hour.**Benefits:** Improve online proactive advising and retention.**Risks:** None greater than those of daily life.**Costs/incentives:** \$25 Starbucks or Target gift card for completing the research in its entirety.

- Confidentiality:
- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
  - Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
  - Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
  - Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
  - Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Use of information: This data will only be used in my dissertation. Identifying information will not be used in this data.

Voluntary Participation: The participants may withdraw from the study at any time, or decline to participate, without any penalty.

By participating in an interview, you are indicating the following:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- You are pursuing a degree online
- You have completed less than 120 credits
- You have worked with an online advisor that proactively reached out to you

- You have read the above consent statement and have had an opportunity to ask questions to your satisfaction.
- You understand that additional questions should be directed to Dr. Rebecca Lunde at [REDACTED].
- You agree to participate in the study, under the terms outlined in this consent statement