

**UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR  
ACADEMIC ADVISING**

by

Michael Chirdon-Jones

Bachelor of Arts, Juniata College, 2007

Master of Education, James Madison University, 2010

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This dissertation was presented

by

Michael Chirdon-Jones

It was defended on

April 9, 2018

and approved by

Michael Gunzenhauser, PhD, Associate Dean, Administrative & Policy Studies

Helena Liddle, PhD, Assistant Professor, Community College of Allegheny County

Dissertation Advisor: Gina Garcia, PhD, Assistant Professor, Administrative & Policy Studies

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# **UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING**

Michael Chirdon-Jones, EdD

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Studies show a link between students' expectations for advising and their level of satisfaction with advising depending on whether or not their expectations have been met. Previous studies have found that students whose expectations were in alignment with the advising they received reported high levels of satisfaction with their experiences. Most studies on this topic have surveyed students about their expectations for developmental or prescriptive advising. While this approach has yielded useful information about the link between students' expectations for advising and their level of satisfaction with it, the reliance on the developmental and prescriptive frameworks limits what is known about students' actual expectations for the advising process. In this inquiry, I interviewed 17 community college students to determine what they expect from advising and how their experiences with advising have or have not matched their expectations. The findings suggest that students value advisors who are knowledgeable and provide a personalized advising experience. Students often do not know what to expect when coming to advising for the first time, and some of them are nervous before their first appointment. The findings suggest students are reassured when advisors explain the purpose behind the courses they are taking and help them pick courses that are connected to their long-term goals. Students feel like they are receiving personalized advising when advisors ask them about their goals and

interests, are patient, and avoid an overly formal or business-like approach to advising. In conclusion, I made recommendations for practice that were supported by the findings of this inquiry and identified avenues for future research on this topic.

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## PREFACE

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## **1.0 OVERVIEW OF INQUIRY**

Academic advising has the potential to have a strong influence on students in higher education because it can reach all students who are enrolled at an institution and provide them with individualized attention from a faculty or staff member (Hunter & White, 2004; White, 2015). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that this individualized attention from an advisor has a positive effect on students' persistence and eventual graduation from their institutions. Despite this promise, academic advising is a common source of dissatisfaction for students (White, 2015). On national surveys, students often give their experience with their academic advisors very low ratings (Allen & Smith, 2008). This is problematic because effective advising "can serve as a powerful lever in improving the college student experience and in supporting an institution's goals" (Campbell & Nutt, 2008, p. 5).

Student satisfaction with advising is based on a number of factors. One factor that is important to consider is students' expectations for advising. Nadler and Nadler (1999) identified a strong link between students' expectations for advising and their level of satisfaction with advising. Hale, Graham, and Johnson (2009) and Anderson, Motto, and Bourdeaux (2014) found that students whose expectations were in alignment with the advising they received reported high levels of satisfaction with their experiences. However, overall, Anderson et al. (2014) found that most students in their study reported their expectations were not met and, in turn, were dissatisfied with their experience.

It further complicates matters that advisors and advisees “hold divergent expectations” for the process from the outset (Vowell, 1995). For example, O’Banion (1972) proposed a model of advising that focused on big picture issues first, such as exploring life goals, and selecting courses last. In recent years, the model has been criticized because students typically seek advice in the opposite order of what it proposes (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstick, 2011). Similarly, Allen and Smith (2008) compared what students expect from advising to what faculty value and feel responsible for providing. They found that students expect their advisors to explain how things work at the institution, including policies, requirements, and deadlines for different processes related to registration. This ranked high on the list of what students expect from advising, along with providing accurate information about degree requirements and helping to select a major. Advisors, on the other hand, ranked providing information about how things work very low in terms of importance, and did not feel responsible for providing this information to students (Allen & Smith, 2008). Conversely, advisors ranked providing referrals as a highly important part of their job while students ranked this information as relatively unimportant (Allen & Smith, 2006). These examples demonstrate that there is a disconnection between what advisors and students expect to accomplish through the advising process.

As an academic advisor at a community college, I believe this discrepancy is very prevalent and a major source of dissatisfaction for our students. The reason understanding student expectations can be particularly challenging for advisors at community colleges is that our students have had a wide variety of life and educational experiences and have a variety of different goals and expectations when entering college. Some students go straight from high school wanting to transfer to a four-year college. Others return to school as adults seeking career-oriented programs. These students may also have a wide range of experiences working

with their high school guidance counselors, which are the closest frame of reference students have to working with an academic advisor before college (McDonough, 1997). All of these factors shape their expectations for advising (Burgoon, 1993), meaning that a one-size fits all approach will not be effective in the community college setting (Anderson et al., 2014). Instead, advisors will have to be familiar with students from diverse backgrounds and be flexible in their approach to working with students to effectively meet their expectations (Anderson et al., 2014). This suggests that it is important to come to a better understanding of students' expectations for advising, particularly at a community college, so that advisors can consider how they can meet those expectations appropriately.

## **1.1 PURPOSE AND INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the expectations that students have for the advising process and specifically how those expectations are met or not met in their advising sessions. Expectancy violations theory (EVT) was used to guide this inquiry. EVT can be used to examine how individuals form expectations and how they interpret behaviors that deviate from those expectations (Anderson et al., 2014). This theory has been used in educational settings to examine students' expectations for instructor clarity (Houser, 2006), how students' expectations for nurturing varies by gender of their instructors (Meltzer & McNulty, 2011), and students' expectations for academic advising (Anderson et al., 2014). Based of this theoretical framework, the following questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe expectations for the academic advising process?

2. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe their experience with academic advising?

## **1.2 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE**

In the fall of 2016, I started a new position as a full-time academic advisor at the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC). The other advisors in my department are teaching faculty who advise on a part time basis, rotating through shared office space in the Advising Center. As part of my orientation, I read the CCAC Advisor training manual, which clearly identifies “developmental advising” as our model for advising. This model takes a student-centered approach to advising, which focuses on student development as well as making academic decisions and scheduling classes. In the developmental model, advisors rarely tell students what to do. Instead, they provide guidance to students with the hope that they will make an informed choice about their educational plan (Himes, 2014; Lowenstein, 2009). This model is typically presented as the opposite of “prescriptive advising,” which is a more advisor-center approach, where the advisor explains academic rules and regulations to students, and students follow the advisor’s advice as if it were a directive (Allen & Smith, 2008; Himes, 2014).

After completing the training for new advisors, I began to shadow several of the part-time advisors for my first two weeks in the department. This gave me a chance to observe the different styles and approaches each advisor used when working with students. I quickly noticed that some advisors seemed to approach advising in a procedural manner, which is more similar to prescriptive advising. They asked the student which program they were interested in and helped them pick out classes based on what the student said. Once all of the forms were completed, the

advisor sent the student to the registration desk to complete the enrollment process. Other advisors took a student-centered approach by having a conversation with the student about their goals, strengths, and interests first. They also took more time helping the students schedule classes around work and family commitments and in selecting electives that fit the students' long-term goals and interests. These advisors typically completed paperwork at the end of their advising session. This approach is more in line with our department's emphasis on using a developmental model for advising.

During my two weeks of shadowing, I was not able to collect data systematically about the students' reactions to the different approaches or their satisfaction with their experiences. It did not seem to be a simple matter of students preferring the student-centered approach. Some students who met with more prescriptive advisors seemed to be expecting more from the interaction while others seemed satisfied with getting their class schedule together efficiently. In most cases, it was difficult to judge exactly how the student was feeling as he or she left the advising session. This made me reflect on the idea that effective advising can take more than one form, and that the best form of advising might be more about meeting each student's expectations, rather than dogmatically adhering to one model or another. This might mean taking a more prescriptive approach with less experienced students who do not feel prepared to make choices on their own and expect this assistance from their advisors, and a more developmental approach with more experienced students who are ready to make choices on their own and expect their advisors to support them in making these decisions.

As I read more on the topic, I found scholars who defended the prescriptive approach to advising, noting that for some students, the reassurance it provides helps to alleviate anxiety about making incorrect decisions about their class selection (Anderson et al., 2014). Other

researchers argued that developmental advising and prescriptive advising should not be viewed as mutually exclusive approaches. Rather, effective advising should contain elements of both (Allen & Smith, 2008). Finally, I was persuaded by Fielstein's (1994) suggestion that a better way to understand developmental and prescriptive advising is analogous to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The prescriptive aspects of advising are similar to the students' basic needs. Once those needs are met, students are able to develop confidence in their abilities and will be ready to assume more responsibilities over their educational choices, and will be able to engage in a developmental advising partnership (Fielstein, 1994).

A frequent topic of discussion in my first year at CCAC was how to improve student satisfaction with advising. Various formal and informal assessments revealed that students were not satisfied with the advising they were receiving and did not always trust the guidance they were given. Administrators believe that this dissatisfaction is having a negative influence on our enrollment and retention. To some advisors, this indicates that we need to increase our emphasis on providing developmental advising while others show little interest in adapting their style of advising at all. Instead of adhering exclusively to one advising theory, I believe that adapting the style of advising to the individual student is the best approach.

This is when I first read about meeting a student's expectations being strongly linked to increasing their level of satisfaction and that meeting students' expectations was more important than following any particular model of advising (Anderson et al., 2014; Hale et al., 2009; Nadler & Nadler, 1999). Having the goal of meeting students' expectations requires a flexible approach to advising (Anderson et al., 2014). I believe that I have the ability to be flexible, as do the majority of my colleagues at CCAC and in the broader field of academic advising. However, I realized that I do not know enough about our students' expectations for advising, especially

students from non-traditional backgrounds. For example, in my previous work experience, I have worked most frequently with students who attend college directly after graduating from high school. CCAC has a much higher population of students from different ages and life histories before attending college. I would like to have more familiarity with a broad range of backgrounds and the expectations they bring with them to college. This will be important for advisors at CCAC if we are going to embrace a more flexible approach to advising that is centered on meeting students' expectations.

### **1.3 SETTING**

This study took place at the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC). This is a four-campus community college system located in and around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Each of the four campuses has its own Advising Center, director, and full-time and part-time advising staff. Even though the centers run independently of one another, the college operates under a "One College" model, which means that our goal is to provide a standardized student experience across all four campuses.

Academic advisors at CCAC are faculty members. Most are primarily teaching faculty who advise on a part-time basis, but each of the four campuses has at least one full time academic advisor. My position is at Boyce Campus, which is located in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. I am the only full-time advisor at my campus, and there are approximately 15 other advisors who work in the center part-time, on a rotating basis. During heavy registration periods, which are typically at the beginning of a semester or clustered around placement tests, the center is staffed with four advisors at a time, and each advisor might see between 15 and 20 students in

one day for appointments that last anywhere from 10 to 45 minutes. During the middle of the semester, fewer advisors staff the center, and we see fewer students, but these sessions usually deal with more complex issues, and they tend to last longer than a typical registration appointment.

Advisors are responsible for advising students enrolled in any of CCAC's academic programs, except for students who have been accepted into one of the limited enrollment programs in nursing or the allied health fields. Otherwise, all new students, students enrolled in developmental coursework, and students who are placed on academic probation are required to meet with an academic advisor. All other students are encouraged to meet with an advisor once per semester, but they are not required to do so before registering. Students are not assigned to an advisor unless they are accepted into nursing or an allied health program, so it is possible that a faculty member who is outside of their major field will be their advisor. It is also likely that they will meet with a different person each time they come to the Advising Center. This compounds the problem of differing expectations because the students' subsequent advisors may not meet the expectations that were set by previous advisors.

In the fall of 2017, the total enrolment for CCAC was 16,147 in degree or certificate granting programs. The student body was 55% female and 45% male. The average age of students was 27 years old. The racial and ethnic make-up of our student body is as follows: 60% identified as white, 18% identified as black, 3% identified as Asian, 3% identified as Latino/a, less than 1% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Natives, 2% identified as multi-racial, and 13% identified as other or did not disclose. The majority of CCAC students, 59%, were enrolled in transfer programs, and the remaining 41% were enrolled in career focused degree programs. Most students at CCAC were employed at least part time while enrolled in school, so 66% were

part-time students, which means they were enrolled in fewer than 12 credits per semester. Because many of our students do not come straight from high school, they have diverse life experiences and bring a wide range of expectations with them.

### **1.3.1 Methods**

In order to get an in-depth account of CCAC students' expectations, how they are formed, and whether those expectations are being met, I used interviews as my primary method of collecting data. Interviews were useful in this case because they allowed me to gather information from students that I was unable to observe directly in my initial shadowing of the advising sessions when I started to work at CCAC and conceived of the idea for this study. Patton (2002) states:

We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time.... We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (pp. 340-341)

This description of the purpose of interviewing demonstrates why interviews are the best method to collect data for this study. Student expectations are feelings and thoughts that cannot be directly observed, and they were formed at some point in the past. In addition, though the interaction with their advisor may be directly observable, the meaning students make from that interaction is not. Interviews are the best way to fully explore these issues and to provide information to advisors about how they can better adapt their advising to meet the expectations of their students and ultimately ensure a high level of satisfaction with advising.

I interviewed 17 CCAC students for this study. I used a purposeful sample (Merriam, 2009) to ensure I met with students from a variety of different backgrounds. My sample included a mix of genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and ages. I included both new and continuing students and students from a variety of academic programs in my sample. Burgoon (1993) states that students' previous experiences and their goals shape their expectations, so it was important to include a variety of students in my sample to get a true picture of the various expectations our students may hold for advising. I made efforts to recruit as diverse of a sample as possible to ensure that the participants in this inquiry were reflective of CCAC as a whole and that I did not focus too much on the perspectives of just one group of students. Because I am an advisor, I excluded any students who I advised previously from being part of the sample. I wanted the students who participated to be comfortable sharing their true thoughts and feelings with me, and they may have been hesitant to do so if they had me as one of their advisors.

I used semi-structured interviews to guide this study (Merriam, 2009). I did this to make the students felt as comfortable as possible during the interviews by keeping the tone as conversational as possible. Having a flexible structure for the interviews allowed me to keep the conversations focused while keeping the questions open-ended and exploratory (Merriam, 2009). My questions focused on the broad categories from the EVT framework of student expectations and experiences with advising.

## 1.4 DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Highly effective advising should be part of the teaching and learning mission of an institution (Lowenstein, 2009; White, 2015). Like Lowenstein (2009), I conceive of academic advising as teaching. As such, I believe that it should have its own learning outcomes to serve as a guide for the process and to provide a means for measuring the student learning that happens as a result of participating in academic advising (White, 2015). These concerns are vital to academic advising, but they are beyond the scope of this study. The findings of this study could be used to shape meaningful learning outcomes for advising in the future because we will have a better sense of where are students are starting in terms of their understanding of the advising process.

I have chosen to focus on students' expectations, with the assumption that this will ultimately improve student satisfaction with advising; however, this study will not directly measure student satisfaction. The results could be used to lay the groundwork for future studies on student satisfaction because they could help generate meaningful survey questions on this topic. The surveys could then test if an increased understanding of the role of academic advisors does have a positive influence on student satisfaction with advising. The goal of this study is to further explore and understand the expectations of students at CCAC because advisors need more information on this topic in order to be effective when we make changes to better address students' expectations for advising.

Additionally, this study will not attempt to determine whether descriptive or prescriptive advising is best for producing student learning or student satisfaction with advising. I believe it is important to move beyond seeing these types of advising approaches as opposing ends of a spectrum and instead accept that both strategies may be effectively used together. Also, I believe an overreliance on these frameworks can limit how advisors approach their work and what we

know about our students. Though these concepts are pervasive in the literature on this topic, I will try to explore students' expectations and experiences beyond the confines of these constructs.

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

The results of this study could influence several different stakeholders. First, the results could help CCAC students have a better experience with academic advising. When advisors are able to meet students' expectations, they are more satisfied with their advising experience (Anderson et al., 2014; Hale et al., 2009). If students are more satisfied with the initial advising experience, they are also more likely to return to advising and potentially develop a relationship with an advisor they trust. This type of individual connection with a faculty member has been shown to increase a student's academic success and persistence towards their degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Effective advising also supports increased levels of student engagement and social and intellectual growth in students (Campbell & Nutt, 2008).

Academic advisors at CCAC can also benefit from this study. Allen and Smith (2008) and Harrison (2009) identify advising as a source of frustration and dissatisfaction for advisors as well as students. Allen and Smith (2008) attribute a portion of this dissatisfaction to the lack of clarity in the role. Because advisors sometimes find themselves on a different page than the students they advise, they may not feel like they are accomplishing anything meaningful in their work. Therefore, helping advisors understand their students better has the potential to increase advisors' levels of job satisfaction (Allen & Smith, 2006).

Campbell and Nutt (2008) point out that effective advising can support an institution's goals as well as supporting students as individuals. This group of stakeholders includes everyone who has an interest in the success of the institution, including administrators, staff, students, alumni, and all faculty at the institution, even those who do not serve as advisors. From this perspective, improving the student experience with academic advising can help CCAC retain a higher percentage of its students, and it can help students find the academic program that best matches their skills, interests, and abilities. In the short term, it can reduce the number of complaints administrators need to address related to problems with advising, allowing them to focus more of their energy on strategic initiatives. In the long term, this has the potential to increase the quality of the academic programs and improve the reputation of the institution when its alumni find successful positions in the community.

## **1.6 DEMONSTRATION OF SCHOLARLY PRACTICE**

First, engaging in this inquiry helped me improve my advising. The knowledge I gained helped me have a better understanding of my students, their backgrounds, and the expectations they have for their educational experience at CCAC. This has helped me to be more flexible in my approach to advising and strive to meet the expectations of the students I advise. Additionally, I have used the results of this project to develop a training session for academic advisors in the fall of 2018. In this session, I will share findings about the expectations our students have for advising and discuss creative ways we can meet these expectations with my colleagues. This presentation will focus on the local context of CCAC, the role that advising plays in the institution, and the specific characteristics of our students. This inquiry project was important

because I collected information about CCAC from the students' perspective and in their own words, with as little bias as possible. Their perspectives will help us to gain a better understanding their expectations and perspectives on advising. I will also submit a copy of this presentation and a summary of the discussion to the directors of advising for inclusion in the virtual advising manual that all academic advisors at CCAC can access. In addition to presenting my findings for my colleagues at CCAC, I presented my research at the National Academic Advising Association Regional Conference on March 22, 2018. This presentation focused on aspects of my findings that are transferrable to advisors who work with students at other community colleges or four-year colleges who serve students from similar backgrounds.

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I laid out the problem of practice, which is that academic advisors at CCAC lack an understanding of students' expectations for advising, which may ultimately contribute to a low level of student satisfaction with advising. Though much of the research in this area involves debating the merits of prescriptive or developmental models of advising, a more promising approach to improve student satisfaction with advising may be to take a flexible approach to advising with a focus on meeting students' expectations for the experience. Though most advisors possess the ability to be flexible in their approach, they lacked information about what students' expectations actually are. Therefore, I used the results of my study to develop a professional development presentation for advisors at CCAC, which helped us explore our students' expectations and think creatively about how we can meet them through the advising process. I used qualitative methods, specifically interviews, to capture data that helped us to

better understand students' expectations of advising at CCAC. The results of this inquiry project will help several stakeholders, including the students, advisors, administrators, and faculty of CCAC.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews the literature related to this problem of practice. First, I provide a brief summary of the history of academic advising to demonstrate how the field's dual focus on academic issues and student development developed over time. Next, I describe the two most influential frameworks for understanding academic advising, the developmental and prescriptive models of advising. Then I present critiques of these models, which suggest that an overreliance on them can detract from a true understanding of students' expectations for the advising process. The next section describes the importance of expectations and how expectations are related to satisfaction. After that, I review literature that establishes a link between student expectations for advising and student satisfaction with advising, as well as research that indicates that there is a disconnection between students' and advisors' expectations for advising. Finally, I propose the EVT framework as a way to explore students' expectations, and I describe how various aspects of the framework relate to advising.

### **2.1 HISTORY OF ACADEMIC ADVISING**

The role of academic advising developed separately and organically at several different institutions in the mid-to-late 1800s. Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) argue that the role arose to solve immediate needs for students, such as selecting appropriate curriculum to follow and

selecting classes. Early advisors could not rely on student development theory because the field had not yet been developed, nor did they take steps to professionalize the field of advising (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Habley (1995) argues that there was little consistency among the early models of academic advising, other than the fact that faculty have played a large role in the delivery of these services. Kenyon College and Johns Hopkins University were two of the first institutions to require each student to have a faculty advisor (Gordon, 1992; Harrison, 2009). Johns Hopkins appointed the first director of advising, at the time called chief faculty advisor, in 1876 (Gordon, 1992). Major growth in the need for academic advising began with Harvard University's adoption of the elective system for selecting classes in the 1870s (Grites, 1979; Rudolph, 1962). This system meant that students needed more assistance from advisors to select the appropriate classes to fulfill their degree requirements. Nearly all colleges and universities adopted some model for advising by the 1930s (Grites, 1979).

As enrollment increased, student bodies began to diversify and academic programs expanded, the role of academic advisors became more prominent (Gordon, 1992; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) argue, "professional academic advising grew out of the practical realities of complex modern colleges and universities and the rise of a developmental understanding of college students" (p. 47). Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) point to the diversifying student bodies, specifically women and World War II veterans, as the impetus for academic advisors to pay more attention to the developmental needs of their students, and in turn to research and scholarship specifically related to how academic advisors could meet those needs. Harrison (2009) identifies the work of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Chickering (1969), as milestones in the professionalization of the field. Because of the growth in student development theory during this time, academic advisors began to be more

focused on the needs of their students beyond simply selecting majors and scheduling classes (Harrison, 2009; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). The establishment of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 1977 was another important milestone in the development of scholarship related to academic advising. It was also during this period that Crookston (1972) put forward his model of developmental academic advising, a concept that continues to dominate scholarly literature in the field.

## **2.2 DEVELOPMENTAL AND PRESCRIPTIVE ADVISING**

Developmental advising and prescriptive advising are two of the most influential concepts in the field of academic advising (Gordon & Habley, 2000). Crookston (1972) was the first to introduce these concepts as a way to understand two basic approaches to the task of advising students. Under the prescriptive model, advisors inform students of academic requirements and track their compliance with those requirements (Allen & Smith, 2008; Himes, 2014;). Lowenstein (2009) argues that the main feature of prescriptive advising is that hierarchical relationship between the student and the advisor. The advisor is the authority figure and the student's role is to passively follow their direction. This approach is described as a bookkeeping approach to advising (Lowenstein, 2009).

In contrast to prescriptive advising, developmental advising is concerned with the whole student (Himes, 2014). In other words, developmental advising seeks to help the student develop cognitively, behaviorally, and psychosocially. Crookston (1972) identified the following goals for developmental advising: "facilitating the students' rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem solving, decision-making, and

evaluation skills” (p. 5). In order for students to develop these skills, developmental advising requires them to play an active role in the advising process (Lowenstein, 2009). For example, instead of simply presenting students with directives, developmental advisors present students with the information they need in order to make informed choices for themselves.

The key concept of developmental advising is that it is a partnership between the student and the advisor (Crookston, 1972; Himes, 2014). These partnerships start with building relationships and strong rapport between advisors and students (Himes, 2014). This means that, in contrast to prescriptive advising, there is a two-way flow of information because the advisor is actively trying to get to know the students in terms of their attitudes, beliefs, and emotional needs (Himes, 2014). This helps advisors provide individualized advising that can help students learn and grow as individuals (Himes, 2014). The advisor and student partnership is central to the advising process in the developmental model.

Allen and Smith (2006) and Fielstein (1994) challenge the idea that there is a dichotomy between developmental and prescriptive advising despite the fact that they are typically presented and measured as dichotomous (Allen & Smith, 2006; Anderson et al, 2014; Himes, 2014). Rather than viewing prescriptive and developmental advising as opposites, Fielstein (1994) suggests that a better way to understand them is analogous to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The prescriptive aspects of advising are similar to the students’ basic needs. Once those needs are met, students are able to develop confidence in their abilities, and they will be ready to assume more responsibilities over their educational choices and will be able to engage in a developmental advising partnership. The potential harm in conceptualizing advising as either prescriptive or developmental is that it limits students’ ability to express what aspects of advising they do find useful. In reality, students might value a mix of approaches that fit into both

categories, yet inquiries into this subject cannot capture a student's desire for both if students are only presented with a choice between one type of advising or the other (Allen & Smith, 2006).

Moreover, Harrison (2009) argues that the developmental model is outdated and may not have continued relevance due to the changes in higher education since the model was first proposed by Crookston. In particular, she believes it does not provide guidance for working with students from diverse backgrounds (Harrison, 2009). She points to Negroni-Rodriuez, Dicks, and Morales' (2006) model for advising Latino/a students and Shultz, Colton, and Colton's (2001) program for advising students of color as promising directions for the field of advising. Overall, Harrison (2009) argues that an ideal advising model may not yet exist, but in order for research to influence practice, it needs to focus on understanding students' perceptions and expectations of academic advising.

### **2.3 CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF ADVISING**

Other models of advising have begun to gain prominence in the field. Examples that are particularly relevant to advising community college students include proactive advising, advising as teaching, and advising as a form of cultural navigation. Proactive advising is based on the idea that students are not always in the best position to know when they need assistance from an academic advisor. In response, this model suggests that advisors reach out to students proactively to make connections with them and to provide support when they need it instead of waiting for the student to seek out assistance from an advisor (Varney, 2007). In the advising as teaching model, the advisor focuses on teaching students the logic of the curriculum to help them reflect on their learning and make appropriate academic decisions independently in the future

(Lowenstein, 2009; White, 2015). Cultural navigation theory focuses on the role of the advisor as helping students understand the culture of higher education to help them find their path through complex institutions (Strayhorn, 2015). This approach focuses on helping students understand the language of higher education as well as behavioral expectations, customs, values, and traditions of the institution (Strayhorn, 2015). Strayhorn (2015) argues, “cultural navigators do more than merely tell someone where to go; they show them via demonstration, illustration, or simulation of possible paths” (p. 59). Despite the growing prominence of these approaches, the developmental and prescriptive models of advising continue to dominate much of the literature in the field.

## **2.4 THE CONNECTION BETWEEN STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION WITH ADVISING**

To understand why understanding student expectations is so critical for improving student satisfaction with advising, it is important to understand the theoretical links between expectations and satisfaction (Anderson et al, 2014; Propp & Rhodes, 2006;). Propp and Rhodes (2006) explain that mental constructs, called schemata, shape how people interpret the world around them and determine how people evaluate the effectiveness of others (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). For example, Nye (as cited in Propp & Rhodes, 2006) gives an example of how individuals judge the effectiveness of leaders by forming their opinion solely on the leaders’ actions and judging the leaders based on how well they measure up to the individual’s mental constructs of what a leader should be. Propp and Rhodes (2006) believe this same principle holds true for academic

advisors, and therefore the most effective way to improve academic advising is to improve advisors understanding on their students' expectations for what advising should be.

Similarly, Anderson et al. (2014) argue that understanding students' expectations for advising is key to improving student satisfaction with academic advising. They argue that meeting students' expectations in advising is more important than providing one type of advising over another (Anderson et al, 2014). Their thinking was informed by expectancy violations theory, which is a framework that is used to understand how people form expectations and how they interpret behaviors that deviate from their expectations (Burgoon, 1993). They argue, "when behaviors displayed by advisors violate what students expect, these violations can damage future interactions" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 28). Therefore, they believe understanding students' expectations for advising is critical to improving students' satisfaction with advising.

## **2.5 STUDENT EXPECTATIONS FOR ADVISING**

In this section, I outline what is currently understood about students' expectations for advising, paying particular attention to instances where their expectations may not be being met. These represent potential problem areas that need to be focused on in future research. Propp and Rhodes (2006) surveyed students about their expectations for their academic advisors. They modified the Advising Roles and Responsibilities Inventory (AARI) developed by Guinn and Mitchell (1986), which catalogues all of the possible roles an advisor may take on (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). Their analysis showed four different dimensions of advisor behavior, which are based on the traditional developmental versus prescriptive advising distinction (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). They added the dimension of level of enactment, which is a measure of whether the

advising being provided is on a generalized level (appropriate for any student) or individualized level (specific to the individual advisee).

The resulting four categories include what would be considered the traditional prescriptive and developmental types of advising, which they named “informing” and “mentoring,” respectively (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). The two new categories they proposed are called “apprising” and “guiding.” The apprising role involves advisors providing advice on strictly academic matters, but in a way that is individualized to each student and requires knowledge of the student’s strengths, weaknesses, and preferences (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). The guiding construct involves providing developmental guidance on topics that “help a student to prepare for future decisions and reflect a consideration of potential outside influences on the student’s life” (Propp & Rhodes, 2006, p. 51). However, this advice is distinct from mentoring in that it does not require an individual level of knowledge about the student, and would be appropriate for any student (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). The final analysis of their results demonstrates that the students who were surveyed expected their advisors to perform the informing, apprising, and guiding roles, and the students preferred these types of advising over the mentoring roles (Propp & Rhodes, 2006).

This study was significant in the fact that it presents two new constructs about advising that have not been explored by previous research (Propp & Rhodes, 2006). It also demonstrates that students’ expectations for academic advising are more complicated than the simple split between developmental and prescriptive advising. However, the four dimensions are also constrained by the original theory. While Propp and Rhodes (2006) expand the range of types of advising to consider, they are based on the distinction between developmental and prescriptive advising, and they do not provide students with the ability to specify expectations outside of that

framework. Additionally, their survey method limits students' ability to express expectations that are not included as items on the AARI.

Allen and Smith (2006) conducted a study to determine what students expect from the advising process and how satisfied they are with various aspects of advising. In order to move beyond the developmental versus prescriptive advising dichotomy, they first analyzed all the activities that are actually undertaken during advising sessions and developed categories for similar functions (Allen & Smith, 2006). The five categories they developed are: integration, referral, information, individuation, and shared responsibility (Allen & Smith, 2006).

Allen and Smith (2006) used these categories to develop a survey that asked students to rate how important they believed each function was to their experience and how satisfied they were with each function. Students were asked to rate their opinions of the function's importance and their satisfaction with the advising they had received in that area on a six point Likert-scale. The results showed that students rated each item as important, with each item receiving a mean score over four on the scale. Interestingly, the results demonstrate that the students who participated in this survey preferred a mix of developmental and prescriptive advising strategies (Allen & Smith, 2006).

In terms of their levels of satisfaction with each area, students indicated a modest level of satisfaction with the advising they received with scores between three and four on the six-point scale (Allen & Smith, 2006). The function they found most important, providing accurate information, was also the function they were most satisfied with. Other than that, however, there was little consistency between the two rankings. The third most important function, "how things work," was ranked near the bottom at ninth in terms of satisfaction. This indicates that there

may be a disconnection between what students expect from advising and the advising they receive.

Allen and Smith (2008) conducted a follow up study on student expectations, which compares the results of what students expect from advising with what types of advising faculty advisors believe is important and feel responsible for providing. The results indicated that students and advisors agree that all advising functions are relatively important with faculty also rating all areas above four on the six-point scale (Allen & Smith, 2008). Advisors and students also agreed that providing accurate information is most important, and students and advisors had similar ratings for the integration functions of advising (Allen & Smith, 2008). There were, however, some noticeable differences. Advisors reported that providing referrals was among their most important responsibilities, but this was one of the least important functions from the student perspective (Allen & Smith, 2008). On the other hand, students placed a high value on the “how things work” function, and this was one of the functions advisors felt least responsible for (Allen & Smith, 2008). Finally, students felt it was moderately important for their advisors to know them as individuals, but this function was ranked near the bottom by advisors (Allen & Smith, 2008).

Though students and advisors who responded to this survey agreed on the importance of the informational aspects of advising, the results also reveal that there are fundamental differences between what students expect from advising and what types of advising advisors feel responsible for providing (Allen & Smith, 2008). Additionally, these results demonstrate that when there is a discrepancy between what students and advisors believe is important, the level of student satisfaction suffers. This can be seen in the low level of satisfaction students have with the “how things work” function, which students rate as highly important and advisors rate as one

of the least important functions. These results are similar to what Anderson et al. (2014) would predict; when the students' expectations are not being met, the result will be a low level of satisfaction with advising (Anderson et al., 2014).

Hale et al. (2009) and Anderson et al. (2014) conducted a three-part survey to find the connections between students' expectations for advising, their perceptions of the advising that they are receiving, and their satisfaction with advising. The results of both studies suggest that student satisfaction does increase when there is alignment between students' expectations and the type of advising they receive. This was true for both students who expected developmental advising and for students who expected a more prescriptive advisor. One type of advising did not produce higher levels of satisfaction than the other. The key was that the type of advising delivered needed to match the student's expectations in order to produce a high level of satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2014; Hale et al., 2009). Another important result that Anderson et al. (2014) found was that the majority of students in their study reported that their advisors were not meeting their expectations, and therefore they were largely dissatisfied with their advising experience.

Hale et al. (2009) and Anderson et al. (2014) both made significant contributions because they demonstrated that there is a strong link between students' expectations and their level of satisfaction with advising. The results suggest that understanding students' expectations and seeking to meet those expectations is an important goal for improving satisfaction with academic advising. However, both studies failed to fully explore students' expectations for advising beyond the neat categories that fall within the traditional developmental and prescriptive frameworks. To truly understand students' expectations, it is important to move beyond this dichotomy and find ways to allow students to express their points of view in an open-ended

format. Anderson et al. (2014) chose a framework, EVT, for their study that provides a basis for this exploration, but they left most aspects of the framework out of their analysis.

## **2.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS THEORY**

Expectancy violations theory (EVT) guided this inquiry in order to better understand how students' expectations for advising are shaped and how advisors can meet those expectations in order to improve satisfaction with advising. This theory has been used to explain how people react to having their expectations met or violated in a variety of interpersonal contexts (Burgoon, 1993). It was used by Houser (2006) in a higher education context to understand non-traditional students' expectations for instructors' communication styles in the classroom. Anderson et al. (2014) used this theory to analyze how students react when their advisors either do or do not meet their expectations for academic advising. They demonstrated that students whose expectations were met are much more likely to be satisfied with their advising experience.

Burgoon (1993) describes expectancies as “an enduring pattern of anticipated behavior” (p. 31). Expectancies are strongly rooted in social norms and an individual's previous life experiences (Burgoon, 1993). They are also based on communicator, relationship, and context factors (Burgoon, 1993). Communicator factors include characteristics about the individuals who are communicating with each other which “lead one communicator to anticipate how another will communicate” (p. 32). These factors include demographic characteristics, physical appearance, and communication style. Relationship factors relate to the degree to which communicators know each other, how similar they are to each other, how much they may like or dislike one another, and whether their statuses are equal or if there is a power differential

between them (Burgoon, 1993). Context factors include environmental constraints, like the level of privacy in the interaction, as well as factors like the level of formality or whether or not the interaction is task-driven in nature (Burgoon, 1993).

Expectancies serve two functions in interactions. First, they shape how an individual approaches an interaction in terms of how they plan to behave and adapt in the encounter. Second, they filter how individuals perceive information and shape their understanding of social interactions (Burgoon, 1993). Violations of expectations are not always negative, but they do cause individuals to notice something in the interaction has deviated from what they expected. They first notice this violation, then they attempt to make sense of it, and finally, they assign either a positive or a negative evaluation to the violation (Burgoon, 1993). For example, someone who has had negative experiences with customer service from a particular company in the past might expect a subsequent interaction to go poorly. If they are met with an exceptionally helpful employee in the subsequent interaction, they will notice the behaviors that do not conform to their expectations and assign a positive value to those violations of their expectations. Burgoon (1993) argues that this divergence from the expected poor experience can cause individuals to evaluate the encounter more positively than they would have if the expectations for the encounter had been positive or neutral, assuming everything else about the interaction remained the same.

Applying EVT to advising provided a framework that can allow advisors to have a deeper understanding of their students' expectations and how they can be met, or in some cases, violated to improve a student's experience with advising. Even though each student is an individual, there will be similarities and shared experiences among students that can allow advisors to understand students' previous educational experiences, and how those experiences

shape their expectations for advising. Additionally, we know there are certain factors in the model that are defined by the context in which we are meeting the students, but we can still make adjustments to our behaviors to have a positive influence on the students' experience. For example, advising is task-driven in nature, so students may have certain expectations for that encounter to be transactional. It is possible that advisors can positively violate that expectation by providing a warm and welcoming advising experience for the students. Another factor is that there is a power differential present in the interaction because advisors have more authority in the interaction than students. Exploring students' expectations through EVT can help advisors understand students' previous experiences with authority figures, and this can help them avoid confirming a negative expectation for the encounter or meet a positive one. For example, I have advised students who were nervous about meeting with an advisor because it reminded them of being called into a principal's office in high school. Some have expressed to me that by being relaxed and using humor during the session, I helped them feel at ease and have a positive advising experience.

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

In the first section, I explained how academic advising developed from an early method for helping students select their courses into a field that also focuses on student development. This dual focus led to a split between the developmental model and the prescriptive model for advising. This framework has been very influential in the development of how advising is practiced and how it is studied. However, an overreliance on these frameworks limits our understanding of students' expectations for advising and on how to provide effective academic

advising. In the next section I established how expectations are related to satisfaction and reviewed two studies that provide evidence to support the hypothesis that students whose advising experience aligns with their expectations will show higher levels of satisfaction with advising. I also summarized studies that establish that there is a disconnect between students' and advisors' expectations for advising. Finally, I introduced the EVT framework as a way to explore students' expectations and explained how a better understanding of the aspects of the framework will help advisors better meet their students' expectations. The EVT framework guided this inquiry and is explained further in the next chapter.

### **3.0 INQUIRY PLAN**

In this chapter, I outline my inquiry questions for this study. I also provide an in-depth description of the setting of the inquiry, including information about the physical space of the advising office, details about the advising staff, and a description of the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) student body. I identify my epistemological assumptions for research and a reflexivity statement that identifies my position within this inquiry and potential sources of bias that I bring to the process. Next, I explain how I used a basic qualitative approach, utilizing interviews to investigate my problem of practice. I also give an overview of the sample and sampling method as well as an approach to analyzing the data.

### **3.1 INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

According to the EVT framework, when students' expectations are met or violated in a positive way during the advising process, their level of satisfaction with their experience will increase. Hale et al. (2009) and Anderson et al. (2014) demonstrate that students' expectations have a greater influence on student satisfaction than following either a developmental or prescriptive approach for advising. This information is useful for advisors at CCAC, but we currently do not have enough practical knowledge about our students' expectations for advising to make use of this framework. The inquiry questions for this study focused on gaining a better understanding

of students' expectations for advising and their actual experiences meeting with academic advisors. The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe expectations for the academic advising process?
2. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe their experience with academic advising?

### **3.1.1 Setting**

The setting for this inquiry was the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), Boyce Campus where I am a full time academic advisor. The college's mission is to provide quality career and transfer education programs that are accessible and affordable for residents of Allegheny County. There are four campuses of CCAC: Allegheny, Boyce, South, and North. The vision for the college is that each campus will provide students with the same level of service and a similar student experience. This was not always the case, however, and in the past the four campuses operated independently of each other. Despite efforts to standardize the four campuses, there is still some variation in how the four campuses operate. One major difference between the four campuses is that they do not all offer the same academic programs, so while CCAC offers more than 150 different programs, they cannot all be completed on every campus.

Though it is not an official designation, Boyce campus is often thought of as the allied health campus because it has nine different Allied Health programs, which is the most of any of our campuses. Boyce campus also has a collaborative program in business with Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where students can complete their course work for their

Associate's degrees and Bachelor's degrees at Boyce campus. This means that we have a high concentration of students enrolled in one of those programs or students who are working on their pre-requisites to apply to one of these programs.

The total enrolment for CCAC in the fall of 2017 was 16,147 students in its degree or certificate granting programs. The student body was 55% female and 45% male. The average age of students was 27 years old. The racial and ethnic make-up of our student body is as follows: 60% identified as white, 18% identified as black, 3% identified as Asian, 3% identified as Latino/a, less than 1% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Natives, 2% identified as multi-racial, and 13% identified as other or did not disclose. The number of students in the final category is large because questions about demographics are optional on our application, and students often leave them blank. The majority of students (66%) attended part time. Thirty-seven percent of our students were declared as either general studies or liberal arts and sciences. Some of these students intended to transfer, and others were taking pre-requisite courses for a limited enrollment program in nursing or allied health. Twenty percent of our students were enrolled in a business program, 32% were enrolled in nursing or allied health, and 11% were in career and technical education.

In terms of academic advising, each campus has its own director and its own staff of approximately 20 part-time advisors. Boyce campus has one full time advisor, which is my position. Because I was one of the newest members of the advising team and had no supervisory role, I had little direct influence on the department as a whole. However, I am a member of the committee of full time advisors, so we often develop training and spearhead new advising initiatives. For example, our committee had recently developed a new set of early alert

procedures for working with students who are on academic warning and probation, and we gave a presentation on this topic at our annual enrollment and retention conference.

Most of the part-time advisors at Boyce campus were full-time teaching faculty in the Allied Health department. There were also advisors who taught in the physics, social science, and computer information technology departments. We also had two adjunct faculty who serve as advisors. Teaching faculty who advise do so either as a release from teaching a course or as an overage, which is an additional stipend to their base salary. Part-time advisors apply to advise every year. At Boyce campus, this is largely an informal process, and all advisors are rehired every year if they wish to continue advising.

The physical space for advising at Boyce is fairly small. There are four advising offices. Three of them are shared by the part-time advisors, and the fourth office belongs to me. At any given time, there are between two and four advisors available to meet with students. Although we encourage students to make appointments, most of them come in as walk-ins. During peak enrollment periods, this can mean that students have to wait in long lines to meet with an advisor.

The mission of advising at CCAC is “to empower and guide students to develop and implement sound educational plans that are consistent with their personal values, goals, and career plans” (Community College of Allegheny County, 2017, p. 1). All new students, any student enrolled in developmental (pre-college level) coursework, and any student who is not in good academic standing is required to meet with an academic advisor in order to register for classes. All students are encouraged to meet with an advisor once per term, but unless they are in one of the three previously mentioned categories, it is not required. Students are able to self-register online or in person at the registration office, which is located next to the advising offices.

Because many of our students do not come straight from high school, they have diverse life experiences and bring a wide range of expectations with them. Because advising is one of the first formal interactions students have with the college, it is important for advisors to understand their expectations and take positive steps to meet those expectations. This diversity also makes it challenging for advisors to understand the expectations of their students because they will hold many different expectations based on their backgrounds.

### **3.2 EPISTEMOLOGY**

I view social science research through a constructivist lens. This is to say that I do not believe that reality is “a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured” (Merriam, 2009, p.242). Instead, I believe that our social world is made up of social constructs, or different ways of viewing and understanding the world around us (Merriam, 2009). This is similar to the idea from linguistics that language is both arbitrary and conventional (Millward, 1996). For example, the fruit that English speakers call an apple is not inherently an apple. There is nothing about the object itself that makes it an apple; the fact that we have assigned it that name is arbitrary. However, it is also conventional in the sense that (most) English speakers agree that this particular fruit is an apple, so we can all call it an apple and successfully communicate messages regarding apples.

This is how I believe that all symbolic meaning operates. Symbols do not have meaning on their own; they carry the meaning that society attaches to them. Words are an example of a high level of agreement on the correspondence between symbol and meaning, but in other areas, there is more room for differing interpretations of the same symbol. An example related to

higher education is academic titles. One possible interpretation of titles such as advisor, professor, or doctor is that the person holding this title has the necessary education, experience, and expertise to provide trustworthy advice. Certainly, many students who come to CCAC hold this view, but it is possible that others may have more skeptical views of higher education. To some students, the fact that professors have spent most of their careers in academia means that they do not know anything about working in the “real world,” and therefore their advice about majors or careers is not particularly valuable. They may meet with advisors because they must, not because they expect to gain anything of value from the interaction.

This is not to say that I do not believe there is anything fixed and knowable about reality or that all interpretations are equally valid. I like the ballpark metaphor when conceptualizing these various interpretations and constructs. There is wide room for multiple interpretations that fit within the ballpark. Some are closer to the center of the park and some are “out in left field,” and while it is debatable which section of the park any given interpretation falls into, these interpretations are all worthy of consideration. There are also theories that are firmly outside of the ballpark. Conspiracy theories or beliefs based on false premises are examples of interpretations that should be outside of the ballpark, and they do not need to be given equal weight or consideration by researchers, practitioners, or other decision makers.

In terms of inquiry as practice, this frame of mind means that I am less interested in research that seeks to prove something and more interested in inquiry that leads to deeper understanding. As a practitioner, I also find this type of inquiry most useful because I am not looking for the single best approach to academic advising, nor do I believe that there is just one. Instead, I am seeking to understand my students better, so I can be flexible in my approach and adjust my style appropriately for each individual that I work with. In terms of improving

advising at CCAC as a whole, I also believe that sharing information about our students and bringing advisors into the conversation about how we can utilize this information is the most effective way to make change in our current advising model. First, I believe our experienced advisors can bring good insight into the change making process. Also, from my observations, advisors respond better when information is given in the spirit of adding a “tool to the toolkit,” rather than as a new mandate being forced upon them.

### **3.3 REFLEXIVITY**

Like Finlay (2002), I think of reflexivity as an ongoing process in which I “examine[d] the impact of [my] position, perspective, and presence” (p. 532) in the research process. I attempted to identify my position prior to engaging in inquiry as practice, but I also knew more issues would arise as this process progressed. First, I approached this project from an emic, or an insider, perspective because I am a former CCAC student and I am currently employed by the College as an academic advisor. This means I had some preconceived notions about the topics that arose during my interviews. Being aware of these biases help me reduce their influence when I reacted to the responses of the participants in my interviews, asked follow up questions, and analyzed the interview transcripts. My role as an advisor heavily influences my perception of the process, so in this inquiry, I was also seeking the emic perspective of the students.

I acknowledge that I have a bias in favor of a certain type of academic advising that comes from my personal experience as a student and my professional experience working as an advisor. As an undergraduate, I had a warm relationship with my academic advisor at Juniata College. We were on a first name basis, and she took time to get to know me on a personal level

and she consistently encouraged me to challenge myself academically. As an advisor, I believe a similar approachable, warm stance is most appropriate when working with students, but I also have colleagues who approach advising with a more formal, authoritative stance. In the end, however, I am most interested in the expectations of our students and what is in their best interests. Therefore, I have attempted to allow my curiosity to be my main motivation throughout this process, rather than an attempt to prove that my approach to advising is better than another approach. Another step I took to ensure the trustworthiness of my analysis is that I formed a small working group of full time advisors from the CCAC. I periodically shared my findings with this group to seek their perspectives and to limit my own personal bias in the process. Additionally, I sought the advice of my advisor and dissertation committee members about how to limit my personal bias in the process.

### **3.4 INQUIRY APPROACH**

I used a basic qualitative research design for this study (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) argues that this approach is appropriate for applied fields of practice like education because it allows for an in depth understanding of how individuals experience a phenomenon and make meaning from that experience. The three main goals of this research design are: “[understanding] how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). In basic qualitative research, researchers achieve understanding by “identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Recurring patterns and themes from the data form the findings for basic qualitative studies, and they are based on interpretation of the researcher (Merriam,

2009). This is why it is important for researchers to be conscientious of their biases and position within the study and engage in reflexivity to ensure their findings are trustworthy. Merriam points out that understanding people's experiences is an important goal for all qualitative research, but other types of qualitative research have additional goals that they need to accomplish. Using a basic qualitative approach allowed me to focus on understanding students' expectations and experiences with academic advising without having to collect enough data to make a larger comment about CCAC as an organization.

### **3.4.1 Data Collection**

First, I collected demographic information about the students who participated because the EVT framework suggests that students' background characteristics are important in shaping their expectations (Burgoon, 1993) (see Appendix F). For the student interviews, I used semi-structured interviews. Using a semi-structured interview guide gave me questions that I asked every student, but I was also able to ask follow up or clarification questions as needed (Merriam, 2009). I referred to the EVT framework to develop open-ended questions that addressed each aspect of the theory. For example, I asked students to tell me about their goals because the EVT framework suggests that this will play a role in shaping their expectations. I also asked students to describe the expectations for the advising process as well as any expectations they had for the personal characteristics of their advisors. When asking students about their actual experiences with advising, I asked about context factors that the EVT theory suggests are important like the level of formality they perceived in the interaction. A full list of questions is in Appendix C.

I conducted initial data analysis alongside data collection, so the process was ongoing and iterative (Merriam, 2009). I was able to adjust my interview guide when consistent themes began

to emerge or new questions arose from the analysis of the first several interviews. For example, several students spoke about being concerned with “random classes,” so I developed follow up questions to ask when students brought up this idea. These questions helped me learn more about how students defined “random classes” and what “random classes” represented to them.

During the interviews, I attempted to maintain a conversational tone to make the students feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me. As suggested by Patton (2002), I attempted to keep a neutral stance to the content of the interview while at the same time developing a rapport with each student based upon my respect for them as individuals and my appreciation for their willingness to share their experiences with me. I sequenced the questions to start with basic, descriptive questions to get students talking before moving into more in depth questions (Merriam, 2009).

### **3.4.2 Sample**

Seventeen CCAC students participated in interviews for this study. The sample for this study drew from CCAC students using purposeful sampling, which means that I selected students who met the criteria outlined below, rather than seeking a random sample (Merriam, 2009). I reached out to students directly through email using an IRB approved introductory script (Appendix B) and asked CCAC instructors to make announcements about my project to their classes. I used snowball sampling, using current participants to recruit future participants, to ensure that I had enough participants (Merriam, 2009). For example, I was not initially satisfied with the number of nursing students in my sample, so I asked one of the nursing students who participated to help me connect with some of her classmates. As a result, two additional nursing students participated in interviews. The only students who I specifically excluded from the sample were students I

have personally advised. These students may not have felt comfortably speaking honestly about their experience with me, and it would have been difficult for me to remain objective when analyzing data about my own advising.

The sample included 10 male students and seven female students. Eleven students self-identified as white, one as Black, one as African American, two as Hispanic, one as Asian, and one as American. The student who identified as American also disclosed that he is a first-generation US citizen whose family emigrated from India. Two students identify as immigrants to the US and speak English as a second language. All of the US citizens in my sample reported speaking English as their first language. Five students identified as first-generation college students. Three students were general studies majors who planned to transfer to a four-year college or university. Seven students were majoring in business. All of them had plans to complete a bachelor's degree or higher at some point. Five of these students had definitive transfer plans while the other two are still considering their options. Five students were pursuing nursing or allied health majors. Two students were in our criminal justice program. Thirteen of the 17 students had taken at least one developmental course, and two of the students were still enrolled in developmental coursework at the time of our interviews. Fourteen of the students were enrolled at CCAC full-time during the fall 2017 semester and three were part-time students. Fifteen students reported being employed at least part-time and two students were not employed at the time of the interview. One student reported that he is a veteran of the US Army. Full biographical details of each participant are available in Appendix G.

### 3.4.3 Analysis

The goal of my analysis was to find practical themes that could help advisors at CCAC better understand the expectations our students have for the advising process. I used a three-step process consisting of transcribing the interviews followed by first cycle coding, where I used In Vivo codes, and second cycle coding, where I developed conceptual categories from the first cycle codes (Saldaña, 2016). First, I transcribed each interview, which helped me become immersed in the data. Next, I began first cycle coding one interview transcript using In Vivo coding, meaning that I used words or short phrases used by the participants themselves to serve as codes (Saldaña, 2016). I selected this strategy because it “prioritizes and honors the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106). Saldaña (2016) recommends focusing on action verbs and evocative vocabulary during coding. For example, one of the codes I used was “just doing their job.” Three students used this exact phrase to describe an advisor who did not show a personal interest in the student. Several more described a similar experience, so I used this code to describe an impersonal approach to advising. Then, I looked for specific actions or behaviors that made students feel this way, which I also coded with short phrases the students used like “on to the next one” to describe a sense of rushing to get the appointment over with or “take this, this, this” to describe an advisor who focused only on what classes to take and nothing else. Saldaña (2016) states that when using In Vivo coding, it is not always possible to derive a code from a direct quote from a participant. He explained, “Sometimes the participant says it best; sometimes the researcher does” (p. 109). In cases where I could not apply an In Vivo code, I focused on trying to find a code that was as descriptive as possible. In most cases, it involved identifying the topic of discussion between the advisor and student. For example, *discussed non-academic* topics or *discussed goals* were codes I commonly used.

There is no fixed ratio of codes to data, but Saldaña (2016) discourages code proliferation, or having too many codes for the same phenomenon. This was particularly challenging coding sections when students described their advising experience. Students had many different ways to express that they had met with someone who was friendly or kind. I used the code “actually cared” to note the experiences of students who felt that their advisor genuinely cared about them. When I applied this code to new strings of data, I could hear the intonation of the student who said this phrase in my mind.

To guard against code proliferation, I kept a running list of codes to use repeatedly and considered whether what was being described was different enough from the previous code to create a new code (Saldaña, 2016). I did this using the constant comparative method, which “involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). The initial codes were tentative and I made some changes as analysis continued, but this strategy helped keep the process organized and prevented it from becoming overwhelming (Saldaña, 2016).

After first cycle coding, I moved on to conceptual coding in the second cycle, which involved forming conceptual categories from the initial codes. To assist in my analysis for the second round of coding, I used code mapping to organize the data (Saldaña, 2016). This process consisted of laying out all of the codes into groups of similar codes with the goal of bringing “meaning, structure, and order to the data” (Anfara, 2008 as cited in Saldaña, 2016, p. 219). An example code map is available in Appendix H.

During the mapping process, I looked for conceptual categories that met the criteria outlined by Merriam (2009). I found the following guidelines most useful. First, the categories should be sensitive to the data and as descriptive as possible. Merriam (2009) states, “an outsider

should be able to read the categories and gain some sense of their nature” (p. 186). For example, *time* is not as sensitive as *time management* (Merriam, 2009). Next, categories should be conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). This means that categories and the subcategories that fit within them should be at the same level of abstraction. I found Merriam’s (2009) example of sorting items in a grocery store to be useful in this process. She explained that produce, canned goods, and fruit are not congruent categories because fruit is a type of produce. To make these categories congruent, produce and canned goods should be primary categories, and fruit would be a subcategory of produce (Merriam, 2009). An example of when I used this metaphor to improve my analysis is with the category of friendliness. For a long time, I was mapping the friendliness of the advisor as a separate category from a personalized advising experience. In part, this was due to the large quantity of codes I had that dealt with the friendliness (or lack thereof) of advisors. However, upon further reflection, I realized a friendly demeanor was not a primary category of its own. Instead, it is one aspect of the larger category of a personalized experience, which also included discussing students’ goals, interests, and strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to these criteria, I also used the EVT framework to assist in analyzing the data (Burgoon, 1993). The EVT framework points to expectation violations as being particularly important events to pay attention to. I focused on any example where a student’s expectations were not met to determine how those violations influenced that student’s experience. For example, a student expected a friendly advisor, but met with someone who came across as “distant and cold.” This student reported having a negative perception of advising after that, and he reported rarely seeking assistance from an advisor after that interaction. In analyzing the interaction, I had a code for the students’ expectation (exp-friendly), their assessment of the

interaction (“cold and distant”; exp-not met), and the outcome of the interaction (NOT SAT for satisfied, NR for never returned).

I coded the data for this project on my own, but to ensure trustworthiness, I discussed my analysis with advising colleagues and consulted with my dissertation committee as I progressed. Saldaña (2016) states that this process “provides the opportunity not only to articulate your internal thinking process, but also to clarify emergent ideas and possibly make new insights about the data” (p. 38). The group of advisors was particularly helpful in identifying aspects of the findings that could be used to inform advising practice. Additionally, I used member checking, or consulting the students who I interviewed, to ensure I was accurately reflecting their views in my analysis (Saldaña, 2016). All students indicated that they were willing to participate in this process. In the end, I sent out six requests to participants to ask for their feedback. Of that group, four students responded, and each noted that they agreed with my characterization of their experience.

#### **3.4.4 Limitations**

I have chosen a basic qualitative research approach that relies heavily on interviews because I believe this is the best way to begin exploring students’ expectations for advising. However, there are limitations to using this approach. Because of the small sample size, the results of this study will not be generalizable. While this is not a limitation because basic qualitative research is not expected to be generalizable, it is possible that a small sample size will exclude some important perspectives from this study. This is why I took steps to make sure my sample was as diverse as possible. Additionally, because this study is non-experimental, it did not provide evidence that proves EVT applies to academic advising or that using the EVT framework to

inform advising practice improves students' satisfaction with the process. The data I collected to identify and understand students' expectations could be used to devise an experimental or quasi-experimental approach that would test this theory, and this may provide a good direction for further exploration of this topic.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have outlined my inquiry questions regarding students' expectations and experiences with academic advising at CCAC, and I have provided an in-depth description of the setting. In order to frame my decisions regarding the approach and method I have chosen and to avoid possible sources of bias in the process, I explained my constructivist epistemological assumptions and my reflexivity, or position within this study. I identified basic qualitative research as the approach guiding this inquiry. Additionally, I explained the semi-structured interviews guide I used to collect data. I described the purposeful sampling technique I used to get participation from current CCAC students from diverse backgrounds. The initial sample did not include enough perspectives from students in health related majors, so I used snowball sampling to find more students pursuing degrees in nursing. Next, I outlined the three-step process I used to analyze my data. First, I transcribed the interviews followed by first, and then I described the first and second round coding techniques I used to develop conceptual categories from the data. Finally, I have identified the possible limitations of using these methods.

## **4.0 FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the findings of my interviews with 17 Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students. In these interviews, I sought to understand how students described their expectations for and their experiences with the advising process at CCAC. In the first section, I outline the expectations students held for advising. Though many students reported having no expectations for what the advising process would be like, they did expect an advisor who would be knowledgeable and provide personalized advising. Some students also expected to receive little personal attention, and they were concerned about being placed into “random classes” unrelated to their goals. In the second section, I describe students’ experiences with advising at CCAC. Specifically, I describe how students talked about their experiences, and I provide practical details for how advisors can ensure that their students have a positive advising experience.

### **4.1 STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS FOR ADVISING**

Many students said that they had no real expectations for what advising would be like prior to coming in for their first appointment. After they applied to the college and were accepted, they got a list of steps to complete. Meeting with an advisor was one of the steps, and that was the extent of their knowledge of the process. When asked about her expectations for the process,

Ashley said, “I had no idea. I had no idea at all.” In response to the same question, Rob said, “I had never thought about it beforehand.” Ruth attributed her lack of knowledge about the process to the amount of time she had been out of school. She said, “I was clueless at the time because I was out of school for so long, and I had no clue about what advising did or didn’t do.” Alex also said that he had “no idea” what to expect, and he added, “I was nervous about what my classes would be.”

Though most students said that they were aware they would be picking classes during their advising session, several students reported being surprised that they were finalizing their schedule at that meeting. Rob and Ashley believed the process would be more like the process for getting class schedules in high school, where they would indicate which classes they wanted to take for the next year, but often had to wait until fairly late into the summer to get a final schedule. Ashley said, “I thought it would be a longer process. I thought it would take like a couple weeks to get classes after your appointment.” Lisa had attended a previous college, and she also was not prepared to have to pick her classes at her first advising session. “At [previous college], they didn’t do it like you do it here. You tell them your major and they give you classes for that major. You don’t get to pick...anything...like you do here,” she said. Some students were pleased with the efficiency of CCAC’s scheduling process because they expected it would take longer while others did not feel prepared to make so many decisions in their first advising appointment. For example, Marge said, “We’re not used to all of this. Here, all of the classes have numbers, like math 80, 90. I was in math 108. I didn’t even know what that meant. It’s a lot to take in all at once.”

For seven out of the 17 students I interviewed, the advisor they met with at CCAC was the first adult they spoke to individually about their academic and career goals. Most students

reported receiving career and college related advice in high school or from their parents and friends, although some students said that the guidance they received in high school was not particularly helpful. Jeff described group guidance counseling sessions in high school. He said, “It was helpful, but it would have been more helpful if someone had talked to us individually.” Alex gave a more representative response when I asked him about who he received advice about college and career choices in high school. He said, “I guess my teachers...maybe.” This lack of engagement with anyone who serves a similar function to an academic advisor is likely a large part of the reason that students did not have many fully formed expectations about what the advising process would be like.

#### **4.1.1 Students Expect a Knowledgeable Advisor**

Although many students reported not having set expectations for what the advising process would be like, they did have expectations for the qualities their advisors would have. Every student indicated that they expected to have a knowledgeable advisor. Topics that students expected advisors to know about include: which courses to take for certain majors, the appropriate order to take classes in, requirements for admission to nursing or health programs, which professors were the best teachers for each class, and information about transferring credits to four year schools.

Students who planned to transfer, which included 12 of the students I interviewed, were predominantly concerned about the transfer process. The five students planning to pursue health majors were most concerned about their advisor being familiar with the application process for their program. Students said that if they took classes that were not helping them accomplish their goals, this would be a waste of their time and financial resources. The primary concern the

students expressed was making sure they were taking the right classes to accomplish their goals, and they expected their advisor to help them with this process.

Students also expected their advisors to be knowledgeable about all of the services CCAC offers, so their advisors could help them find the resources they need. Gwen wanted her advisor to help her find her place within the school. She described feeling lost and overwhelmed when she first came to CCAC:

I had no idea where my starting point was. Was I supposed to start in admissions or with a placement test or with advising or in the career office? I think that's what people need to know. They need to know where their first stomping ground is. You start with the placement test and you know where to start. I think it's important to know your steps.

As Gwen was describing this initial experience, she was making motions like she was trying to find her way around the building, sometimes pointing in the actual direction of the office she was mentioning.

**“Random Classes.”** Students also expressed that they were initially nervous about advisors signing them up for “random classes” or “throwing [them] in whatever classes were open.” This is connected to knowledge, in that they expected advisors to be knowledgeable enough not to sign them up for something random. Students were concerned about advisors signing them up for classes that would not relate to their major, would not transfer, would not fill a degree requirement, or would not teach them relevant skills. This is how Miggy and Jeff expressed their concerns about taking “random classes”:

Miggy: It would take time away from my major. Taking time away from classes that I really need to graduate. It would be a waste of my time. Some of the classes could help with other things, but not with my real goal.

Jeff: I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to waste my time or anyone else's time by taking the wrong thing.

To students, random classes represented classes that would be chosen quickly and arbitrarily, which would ultimately not be beneficial to their long-term goals.

**Assurance.** One reason students may have placed so much emphasis on a knowledgeable advisor is that they were seeking a sense of assurance that they were making the right choices when selecting majors and setting up their class schedules. Attending college is a significant commitment of time and financial resources for students, so they wanted to make sure they were making good investments of those resources. New students, like Marge, described feeling overwhelmed by all of the choices they had to make because CCAC is a more complex institution than their high schools. Because of this increased complexity, they were relying on their advisors to provide them with a sense of assurance that they were making the sound decisions. For many students, especially first-generation college students, academic advisors are well positioned to help them gain this sense of assurance by helping them interpret academic requirements and transfer policies and helping them get connected to campus resources that can aid in their success.

#### **4.1.2 Students Prefer a Caring Advisor**

Students expressed a strong preference for an advisor who took a personal approach to advising and showed a personal interest in them. This was not always what they expected, however. John and Jeff described feeling nervous before their first session. John was anticipating that his advisor would be “mean, tough, [and] really strict.” Jeff felt unprepared for his first advising session and was nervous his advisor would be impatient with him. He said, “I was nervous

because I didn't know what classes to take for my major. I was nervous because I didn't look anything up and I wasn't really prepared." Bart, referring to the way the advising offices are lined up along the same wall, said that he expected the process to be like "an assembly line" where students would sit down, get their list of classes, and move on to the next station.

Though some students expected "assembly line" style advising, it was not what they considered ideal. When they described their ideal academic advisor, they described someone who would take their time to get to know them and make specific recommendations for them.

Jeff: Someone who isn't in a hurry to get me out and see the next person. Someone who is going to take the time to get to know me and recommend specific classes for me. Someone who has a more personal approach. It would make me feel better and have more of an understanding of the classes I'm going to take.

Alex: I wanted to meet with someone who was nice and cared about what I was doing. Not someone who would just throw me classes and get me out of there. [I'd want] someone who would be nice and get to know me a little bit. Someone who will be flexible with scheduling and helping me pick the best classes for my major, with good professors.

John: I wanted to know what would be a good field for me personally and the way I learn because I learn a little bit differently.

Kaylee: I want someone who is going to be patient with me, someone who is going to help me go through all of my options. I'm hoping for someone that can be friendly and knowledgeable.

These students were hoping for an advisor who would take the time to get to know them and make recommendations that were specific to them. When describing an ideal advisor, Alex said,

I understand that you need to see a lot of people in one day, and you don't have time to spend a ton of time with every student, but I want the person to know what my goals are so I can stay on track and not get held back.

For these students, an important aspect of ideal advising was receiving personal attention even if they were expecting to be rushed through the process so the next student could be sent through the "assembly line."

Other students did expect that their advisor would take time to get to know them to make personal recommendations for them. For these students, a friendly advisor who would take time to get to know them was more than just an ideal scenario; it was what they expected.

Momo: Someone who is kind, very caring, and takes time to get to know the student and their previous experience with school... For example, some students might [want to become] a doctor, but they don't have the mind for it, so the advisor needs to be able to guide them in the right way. According to their skills.

Ruth: [I expected] that they could help you and guide you about your academics and what you need to do to achieve your goals.

Gwen: I expected someone who was friendly.... Someone... to help me know what that next step is. An advisor who could tell me about the classes and what to expect in the classroom, and how to plan for the future, like even what to do after I graduate.

In order to meet this expectation, advisors would need to spend time asking students questions about their goals, backgrounds, and interests.

Students also expected an advisor who would be patient with them when they picked their classes. Fifteen, all but two, of the students I interviewed also worked at least part time, so it was important to them that their advisor understood that they had commitments outside of

school. Students described how stressful it could be to prioritize work and school, especially when the classes they needed to take were only being offered at times that were not convenient for their work schedule. Ashley described her ideal advisor as “someone that is understanding and tells you not to overload yourself. Someone that understands that you don’t just have school, and maybe you can’t just be at school all day.”

All but one student reported that they expected or preferred that their advisor be friendly and take a personal approach to advising. Josh said that he had no expectations or preferences for how his advisors would behave on a personal level.

It didn’t matter to me as long as they had the right information to give to me. It would be helpful if they weren’t mean or demeaning or other negative characteristics. But as long as they had the right information that’s all that matters to me.

Unlike many of the other students, Josh had a very clear goal in mind when coming to CCAC, and he had strong support from his parents, particularly his father, in his decision making process. Because he has this type of support from his parents, he may not feel like he needs as much assurance from advising as other students do.

#### **4.1.3 Differences in Expectations by Demographics**

The expectations students held for advising did not vary along demographic lines as much as the expectancy violations theory (EVT) would suggest. The expectation for advisors to be knowledgeable was consistent for all demographic groups. Life experience prior to attending CCAC did seem to have an influence on these students’ expectations. Students who were recent high school graduates described feeling nervous about the advising process, and they were more likely to express concerns about being placed into random classes. Most of the students who

came to CCAC after working for a number of years reported that they specifically expected a friendly advisor. The recent high school graduates who participated may not have expected a friendly advisor, but they did report having a preference for one. This can be seen in their descriptions of an ideal advisor, which nearly always included the words friendly and helpful. The main difference was that the more experienced participants held the expectation that their actual advisor would match up with their ideal advisor while younger students were more likely to expect a negative experience. This may be related to the fact that many students were connecting academic advising with what they felt was generally ineffective guidance counseling in high school.

The students with disabilities and students who are English language learners who participated in this inquiry described having concerns that were more specific than what other students described. Gwen, who self-disclosed to me and to her advisors that she is a student with a disability, said,

With students like me who work with supportive services, we need that structure, we need everything laid out and to be pointed in the right direction. And that's what some advisors up here don't know. That's the important thing, the structure.

John, who also self-identified as a student with a disability, said that he needed assistance knowing how to adjust his study strategies for each class because of differences in his learning style. Momo, for whom English is a third language, expected guidance from his advisor in managing language related challenges he was having in his classes. Because these concerns are prominent in the minds of these students and advisors are usually a first point of contact for students, they expect advisors to help them navigate these issues immediately.

## 4.2 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH ADVISING

### 4.2.1 Advisors are Knowledgeable...Sometimes

The most consistent expectation that students held for their advisors was that they would be knowledgeable. Many students reported that their advisor met this expectation.

Mike: Tell me about your experience with your first advisor.

Ruth: Well, she was very good.

Mike: Can you tell me more about that?

Ruth: Yes, because she was familiar with what you needed to do and achieve your goals in [nursing].

.....

Wesley: He broke it down for me and explained what was needed, especially as a new student here. He showed me the program with all of the classes I need to take before getting into the program and what classes I'll take when I am in the program. He explained everything very clearly and told me what I need to do.

Jeff: The first advisor was reassuring because she knew what I would need to do.

Alex: It was good. I knew that I was taking the right classes with the right professors. It helped me have confidence.

Students who felt like their advisor was knowledgeable advisor felt a sense of assurance that they were making the right choices and scheduling the right classes. These students described feeling a sense of confidence after their advising appointment, which suggests that their expectation for assurance was met by their advisor. Advisors were able to provide assurance by explaining requirements, answering questions, and guiding students towards resources.

The most common way advisors violated this expectation was by not knowing the answer to a question that seemed like something that an advisor should know. Students knew that some of their questions were complicated and did not necessarily expect their advisor to know the answer right away. If their advisor could provide a referral or if the advisor made an effort to help the student find the information, students were satisfied with their experience. Josh, whose main concern was having a knowledgeable advisor, was referred to a transfer counselor. Here is how he described the first advisor he met with:

The first advisor that I talked to was very helpful. He told me some general things about getting started here and helped me set up my schedule. He gave me some tips about transferring, like I should take five classes instead of four to get out of here in time. Then he told me to go to talk to a transfer counselor, which I didn't even know they existed and it's a good thing I did because now I have a good plan and know exactly what I need to take to transfer to Pitt [University of Pittsburgh].

Instead of being upset that his first advisor could not tell him exactly what classes he needed to take to transfer to Pitt, Josh viewed being referred to a transfer counselor as a way of pointing him in the right direction. His overall assessment of the first advisor was that he was helpful and gave him good advice.

Nathan met with an advisor who he did not believe to be knowledgeable. He was frustrated because his advisor could not answer questions about transferring credits to a specific university. He described the interaction as follows:

I was trying to go to Point Park, and they were not sure about what to share with me. Literally, they advised me to go to the website. I can go to the website by myself

without coming to advising. I thought it would make a difference because advisors meet with so many students, but it didn't make a difference.

What frustrated Nathan the most was being sent to a website, something he could have done on his own without meeting with an advisor. Although he described other positive qualities about his advisor, like being kind and friendly, he did not seek out assistance from an advisor again. He said, “When I stepped out of the room, I didn’t have a good idea of what to take or what classes would fill which requirements. I would figure it out myself...I expected them to be more knowledgeable.”

As Nathan’s story demonstrates, students do not always want to be referred elsewhere for information. They expect advisors to have some degree of familiarity with degree requirements, pre-requisites for classes and programs, admissions requirements for limited enrollment programs, and basic knowledge of transfer requirements. Kaylee summarized this expectation when she said, “I would expect that if you’re an advisor at a college, you should be familiar with the programs at least at a basic level.” She met with two different advisors who she said were not familiar with her program. She was frustrated because she had specific questions she could not figure out for herself, but the answers her advisors were giving to her did not make sense to her. This is how Kaylee described her experience:

Also, I knew, like, that with [accounting], there would be pre-requisites to take, and I kept asking, does it matter the order I take these classes in and they said, “No it doesn’t matter, just take them whenever.” And come to find out, it does matter! And they also didn’t tell me I should be taking five classes per term in order to graduate with my associate’s in two years, so for a while I was thinking they’re just trying to get the most

money out of me that they can, because they were putting me behind where I should have been.

To Kaylee, it was the advisor's job to know the answer to these questions. When she found out she had been given incorrect or incomplete information, she began to lose trust in the advising process. In the end, Kaylee said she found an advisor who she trusted and would only meet with that person from then on.

**Explaining the purpose demonstrates knowledge.** Advisors demonstrated that they were knowledgeable by explaining the purpose behind classes and requirements. When students met with an advisor who took time to explain the purpose behind the classes they were taking, the students no longer felt like the classes were random. Miggy's advisor, for example, spent a good deal of time with him to make sure he was not signing up for course requirements that he had already met through transfer credits. He was also registering for classes right before the semester started, meaning that his options would have been limited due to sections being full.

He spent a lot of time with me. He went through the whole book to help me find classes. I had already taken a lot of classes, so he was saying, well, I could give you this class, but that wouldn't really help you because you don't need that. That told me that he was doing the right thing.

Miggy had grown somewhat skeptical of advisors after his previous experience because he discovered that he had been signed up for classes that did not count for his intended major. He felt like the advisors at his previous school did not care about students and were "only in it for themselves." In contrast, his advisor at CCAC took time to explain whether the class would be beneficial for him before signing him up for it. This helped him develop trust in his advisor.

Students who are undecided about their majors are often susceptible to feeling like they are taking random classes because it's harder to connect classes to a long-term goal if students are not sure what their long-term goals are yet. Ashley was initially unsure of what she should major in, so her first advisor explained how she could meet general education requirements and explore her interests by taking classes from several departments in her first semester. She said, "I didn't know what I wanted to do so she told me to explore different things to see what I would like. She was reassuring, you know, that it takes time, that I didn't have to rush."

Jeff and Krista had experiences where they felt confident in their schedules and experiences where they were unsure about the guidance they were receiving. Jeff explained the difference between two advisors he had met with. He considered the first experience positive and the second one less so. He said:

The first advisor was reassuring because she knew what I would need to do. The second advisor was more open, just said, "What do you want to take?" It was a little frustrating because I don't really know what to take. I needed someone to help guide me and help me decide.

Later, he added:

I was surprised that the advisor asked what I wanted to take and kept asking the same question over and over, even though I said that I wasn't really sure. That was frustrating. Krista also met with an advisor who took a similar approach. She described feeling unsure about her schedule when she left that appointment. She thought to herself, "Well, I don't know. I hope I'm on the right track. I hope I'm taking the right thing. I hope these classes will transfer."

Later, Krista described having an advisor who was more helpful than anyone she had met with before. When I asked her what the biggest difference between this advisor and her previous

advisors, she said that the advisor helped her pick classes that were relevant to her long term career goals and helped her get on the right track. In comparison, this is how she described her first two advisors:

Krista: Yeah, they just put me in classes for general studies. There was no explanation.

Mike: And how did that make you feel?

Krista: Well, at first, I was thinking, “what am I taking these classes for?” I didn’t know why I was taking them. I was just...in them.

When advisors help students understand the purpose for the classes they are taking, they help students feel a stronger sense of connection to their goals and confidence that they are working towards those goals. When they do not, they leave students feeling like Krista who wondered why she was taking certain classes and feeling like she was “just...in them.”

Alex said that he always had good advisors, but his brother’s experience had been much different than his. This is how Alex described his brother’s experience with his advisor when he first started at CCAC:

One advisor was a little weird. He was my brother’s advisor when he first came here.

I’ve never seen that guy before. He put him in random classes that didn’t make any sense. He put him in some US history class, and it was part two, and he hadn’t even taken the first part yet. Yeah, he was the worst advisor I’ve ever seen here, and I don’t think I’ve even seen him around here since then.

His brother eventually withdrew from this class. It required a lot of reading, and because he did not see the value in taking it, it did not seem like it was worth the effort. It is likely that the advisor had a rationale for selecting this class because history classes satisfy the social science general education requirement, and history classes do not need to be taken in a specific

order. The student did not know this, however, so the class seemed random and not worth the effort. When advisors make recommendations for which classes students should take, it is likely that there is a basis for the recommendations. This example demonstrates that advisors do not always share their rationale with students.

Students did not need their advisors to tell them exactly what classes to take, but they wanted guidance in making their choices. Wesley described the assistance he received from his advisors as an “educated push.” When advisors simply ask, “What classes do you want to take,” students feel frustrated because they do not have enough information to make a good decision. When advisors provide them enough guidance in the course selection process, they described feeling confident in their choices and as if they were “on the right track” when they left their advising appointments.

#### **4.2.2 Personalized Advising Matters**

Many students, even those who were initially nervous before their first advising session, reported that they met with an advisor who “actually cared” about them. They described advisors who were friendly and who took time to get to know them.

Josh: He took a personal interest to get to know me, but he gave me a lot of good information about what I needed to do.

John: Advisors at CCAC are really friendly and nice. They give good advice to help students succeed and do well in their education. They really care about students.

Jeff: The advisor was really welcoming and talked to me about my previous experience and where I went to high school and about my future plans.

Meeting with a friendly advisor was especially beneficial for students like John who felt nervous prior to coming to advising. Reflecting on his experience, he said, “I was nervous the first time, but I got brave after the first time but still a little nervous.”

Discussing non-academic topics and aspects of their personal lives helped students feel a personal connection to their advisors. Krista met with several advisors who helped her schedule her classes, but she never felt a personal connection to them. Eventually, though, she met with two different advisors who she connected with on a personal level. When describing the difference between the advisors she connected with and others who she met with, she said:

Krista: They seemed like they cared, and they wanted to help me. They were personable and so, um, tried to connect with me. It wasn't just all about the classes. They tried to connect with you. There was conversation in it as well.

Mike: So you talked about things not necessarily related to your classes?

Krista: Yes.... for instance, it was like me being a customer, they were connecting with a customer.

Alex and Lisa also described appreciating the personal connection they developed with their advisor through discussing aspects of their personal lives as well as academic topics. Lisa developed such a strong relationship with her advisor that she made sure that she met with her every semester, and she learned details about her advisor's personal life as well. For example, she knew her advisor was going to have surgery, and she stopped by to check on her when she returned to work even though she did not need any advising at the time.

Not all students needed to discuss their personal lives with the advisor in order to feel like they were receiving personalized advising. Alex said that his advisor focused on his goals and previous academic experience and the types of teachers he responded well to. This allowed his

advisor to make personal recommendations, which in turn helped Alex feel a sense of confidence. Alex said, “We didn’t talk about my personal life. We focused on making sure it was a good schedule, with good classes and teachers that he would recommend. It gave me confidence that my schedule was good.” Alex still felt like he received personal attention because his advisor learned enough about his academic preferences and learning style to make personal recommendations for him.

In contrast to students who felt like their advisor cared about them, several students described having a sense that their advisor was “just doing their job.” After leaving an advising session in which he felt he did not receive any individual attention, Momo said, “I said to myself, they are just doing their job, they don’t need to go beyond that. That’s how I felt.” Although he said the advisor did not need to go beyond “just doing his job,” it was clear from his tone of voice that he was disappointed in his experience. The phrase “just doing their job” was associated with an advisor who did not seem to be taking a personal interest in a student.

Josh: Second person was more distant. It didn’t bother me, but they basically just helped me set up the times. They were just doing their job.

Bart: She was definitely knowledgeable, but she wasn’t... she wasn’t unfriendly, but she wasn’t super happy. She seemed a little cold. I guess I would have preferred if she were a little more friendly, but she was doing her job, I guess.

In addition to rushing students through an appointment, other actions that signaled to students that their advisor was “just doing their job” were not asking about students’ goals and interests, focusing only on scheduling classes, and not taking the time to make sure the student understood everything before trying to end the appointment.

**Formality.** The level of formality in the interaction was another important aspect of a personalized advising experience. Students preferred a relaxed formality in their advising sessions. Josh described said his interactions as “mostly formal—not business formal, but more of a relaxed formal.” Some level of formality helped students feel a sense of structure. Gwen, who had one positive experience with an advisor and one negative experience, described her positive advising experience as formal because her advisor helped her understand what she needed to do and helped her develop a plan. At the same time, though, she described the interaction as comfortable, which helped her feel a sense of ease that she did not feel with her first advisor. Jeff had a similar experience with his advisor. He felt like the session shifted from informal to formal as the session progressed. He said, “It was a formal experience, well, it started out informal when she was trying to get to know me, but then it became more formal.” Similar to Gwen, Jeff described a sense of confidence in knowing exactly what he needed to do after his advising session, but both of them still felt like their advisor cared about them.

Students who described their experiences as overly formal, like a business transaction, were more likely to feel like their advisor did not really care about them as individuals. Momo did not feel like his advisor got to know him at all. He described the session as very quick and efficient. He said, “I took placement test, and they said this is the classes you need to take, and that was really it.” He did not see any value in this for him; he felt like he could have selected class times from a list on his own without the assistance of an advisor. This is how Momo reflected on his experience:

Momo: It was a formal interaction.

Mike: And how did that influence your experience?

Momo: I was expecting a more welcoming person, a person I would be excited to come back and see again. Not someone who would just put me in such and such classes and then done. On to the next one.

Kaylee described a similar experience with an advisor. She said,

She was ok. She was fine but not overly friendly. It was like a business meeting, she was being professional, but it seemed like she just wanted to get the appointment over with so she could get on to the next person.

Kaylee did not object to the idea of having some degree of formality in the session. She said, “It’s okay to be formal, but not at the expense of having a friendly, human interaction.” Students do expect some degree of formality in their advising session, but they also want to feel comfortable and not feel like they are being rushed through the session so their advisor can move on to the next student. Setting an overly formal, business-like tone and making students feel like they were being rushed indicated to students that their advisor did not care about them and contributed to their sense that they were just a number in the eyes of the college.

**Patience.** Patience was another quality that helped students feel like their advisor cared about them. Jeff described having to make several changes to his schedule, but his advisor did not show any signs of being frustrated. He said:

I was pretty happy with my experience. It was easy to get what I needed, especially with my work schedule. The advisors didn’t get mad or frustrated when I had to keep making changes to the schedule, but in the end everything fit perfectly with school and work, like a puzzle.

Kaylee also had a difficult time fitting her classes in with her work schedule, but her advisor reacted much differently. This is how Kaylee described the experience:

She let me look at my options, but she wasn't really willing to compromise with me because I have to keep my work schedule in mind and I have a long commute, so she seemed like she was getting annoyed when something wouldn't work out for me.

In the end, both Kaylee and Jeff were able to find class schedules that did not interfere with their work schedules, but Jeff left feeling like everything fit together perfectly, like a puzzle, and Kaylee left feeling like she had been an inconvenience to her advisors for taking up too much of her time.

**Impersonal advising is detrimental.** Most students described having an advisor who “actually cares” about them, which they were happy about, or an advisor who was “just doing their job,” which students typically found disappointing. Gwen had an experience that fell outside of either of these categories. She described having a strong expectation that her advisor would be friendly and personable. The first advisor she met with did not meet this expectation, and in fact, it was such a negative experience for her that she thought about not attending college. This is how she described her experience with her first advisor:

The first person wasn't very friendly or very welcoming. It was like talking to this desk. I didn't feel like I was wanted here. So I didn't know what classes to take or what I was doing... With the first advisor, I felt a little bit intimidated because I didn't know what to ask. I was a brand new student. I had no idea. And I don't think she had that personality to understand or relate that information. She just said, so tell me what you want to take and we'll sign you up!

Gwen's second advisor made her feel much more comfortable. She did not feel intimidated and she felt comfortable asking questions. When she left her second advising appointment, she felt

like she had a solid plan in place for her first semester. This is how she described the difference between her feelings after her first advising session and her second:

The first time, I double guessed myself, I felt like I didn't belong here and maybe I shouldn't come. So then I thought it must be the person, so I came back. That second person helped me feel good, and like I was making the right choice. I couldn't wait to start. I was excited to start. That first person, it wasn't good, uh, I couldn't... like I said, I was second guessing myself, and thought maybe I shouldn't come.

Gwen's expectations for advising were in stark contrast with her first experience, which likely played a role in how jarring she found the experience. The experience Gwen described was not typical for the participants in this inquiry. It is important to consider her experience because although it reflects a rare occurrence among the participants in this study, it is unlikely that it is unique among the larger population. Also, it is important to note the severity of the consequences for students who may abandon their plans to attend college because they feel unwelcome. Gwen's story emphasizes the important role advisors should play in making students feel welcome at CCAC and helping them find the road to their success.

#### **4.2.3 Expectations vs. Experiences**

As the EVT theory suggests, students' expectations for advising seemed to play a role in how they evaluated their experiences. Several students who reported having negative expectations of the advising process reported that their experience was better than what he had expected. Reflecting on his experience, Jeff said,

I never thought the advisors would be that friendly and helpful. I thought that they would just throw you in whatever classes were open to get to the next student. But after that I came to expect that everyone would be equally helpful and friendly.

Alex had not expected individualized attention, so he left his first advising meeting feeling satisfied with his experience. Similarly, Jeff and John reported that they received more personal attention from their advisors than they were expecting. This reaction is consistent with EVT. They evaluated their experiences as highly positive because they were not expecting so much individual attention from their advisors. Their advisors exceeded their expectations, so it made a strong, positive impression on them.

Gwen and Momo's experiences are dramatic examples of a negative expectations violation. Both students expected a friendly advisor who would take a personal interest in them, but both were disappointed in their initial experience. These examples also demonstrate the importance of advisors meeting students' expectations of being friendly and approachable. For students who expect to have a personalized advising experience and do not receive one, they will leave their advising experience dissatisfied. Some of these students, like Momo, will not return to seek assistance from an advisor. In the worst-case scenario, a student like Gwen may not return to the college. For students who are initially nervous about coming to college, like John, a friendly and approachable advisor will help them begin to feel comfortable. For students like Josh, who do not feel it is necessary to have a friendly advisor, it was not detrimental to his experience to have someone who took a personal interest in him. Most students will benefit from having an advisor who is welcoming and can begin to build a personal connection with them, so they start their college experience on a positive note rather than second guessing their choice to attend CCAC.

Meeting students' expectations did not mean that advisors needed to solve every problem a student had. Students often knew that their situations would be challenging. For example, Miggy was late in registering for the term. He needed to be a full-time student to play baseball, and he could not schedule classes during his baseball practice. He did not expect his advisor to be able to solve all of these problems for him. What he expected was someone to be honest with him and make an effort to assist him. In the end, he said his advisor was extremely helpful even though it was a challenging set of circumstances to work through. Additionally, though students expected their advisors to be able to answer their questions, they were understanding when an advisor did not know something as long as they were provided with an appropriate referral or resource to help them find the information they needed. For example, students who were referred to a transfer counselor did not report dissatisfaction with their advisor for not being able to assist them. Nathan, who was told to visit a website, was quite dissatisfied with his experience. Meeting students' expectations does not mean that advisors need to be able to solve every problem for every student. Instead, students expect advisors to show genuine interest in their success, to provide them with accurate information about degree and transfer pathways, and to guide them towards the resources they need to be successful.

When students' positive expectations for advising were not met, there were three potential outcomes. Students like Nathan and Momo stopped going to advising. They felt like they did not benefit from the experience, and so they decided to use self-registration and CCAC's website to plan their schedules. Krista and Kaylee continued to see advisors, but they sought out and avoided specific advisors. Both described times when they came to the advising center and left if there was not someone available who they knew could help them. Finally,

students who did not believe advisors could help them sought out academic advice from other sources like student success coaches, career counselors, or their professors.

For students whose expectations were met or exceeded, there was a mix of outcomes. Most students who reported having a positive initial experience with advising continued to meet with advisors even after they were no longer required to do so (students who are finished with developmental coursework and in good standing). They typically were willing to meet with any advisor and had a positive association with advising. Some students reported seeking out support from advisors when they ran into challenges throughout the term, even when their issues were not related to their major, academic requirements, or class selection. John, for example, said that they met with advisors for advice about how to study for a particular class. Wesley had issues with financial aid that he did not understand, and he thought of advising as a good place to seek assistance even though he was fairly sure it was not exactly the right department. Some students, like Lisa, Wesley, and Kaylee reported having a strong relationship with a particular advisor who they continued to meet with each semester. By meeting or exceeding the expectations of these students, advisors laid the foundation for the type of relationship advisors want to have with students. One which will help students develop independent planning and decision making skills so that they eventually become less reliant on academic advisors.

### **4.3 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I presented my findings about students' expectations for and experiences with advising at CCAC. In the first section, I explained that students expect their advisors to be knowledgeable about CCAC academic programs, campus resources, requirements for each

major, pre-requisites and admissions requirements for limited enrollment programs, and the transfer processes. Some students expect to have an individualized advising experience where they felt like their advisor took a personal interest in them. Other students expected an impersonal, “assembly line” style of advising, and they expressed concerns about being signed up for “random classes” that were not connected to their goals. However, most students hoped their advisor would take time to get to know them on a personal level, ask them about their career goals and interests, and take time to assist them without making them feel rushed. Finally, I summarized the extent to which students’ backgrounds seemed to influence their expectations for advising.

Students described a wide variety of experiences with academic advising at CCAC. In the second section, I provided details about these experiences and focused on practical steps advisors can take to ensure students have a positive advising experience. I focused on the differences between the experiences of students who found their advisors to be very knowledgeable and those who did not. Then, I described the differences between students who understood the purpose behind the classes that they were signing up for and students who did not. Next, I focused on the experiences of students who felt their advisor took a personal interest in them and students who felt like their advisors were “just doing their jobs.” I also highlighted the experience of a student who had such a negative experience with advising that she considered not attending CCAC. Though this example was not common among participants, I believe the findings are serious enough to warrant strong consideration. Finally, I analyzed these experiences through the EVT lens by comparing their expectations with their actual experience with advising.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss three key findings from this inquiry, implications for practice, and implications for research. First, the findings reveal student expectations for advising do not align with the view that developmental or prescriptive advising are opposite ends of a continuum. Instead, students described wanting elements of both the prescriptive (information-centered) and developmental (relationship-centered) approaches to advising. Second, the findings support the important role expectations play in shaping students assessment of their advising experience. Third, the findings reveal the importance students place on understanding the purpose behind the classes they take.

In the next section, I describe several implications for practice. These include improvements the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) can make to preparing students for their initial experience with academic advising and addressing students concerns about transfer credits. Next, I describe strategies advisors can use to help students understand the purpose behind the courses they take and make meaningful choices when choosing electives. Then, I describe various ways advisors can use these findings to support the college's initiative to make the academic advising process more "relational and less transactional." Finally, I describe implications to future research. These include using the expectancy violations theory (EVT) to fully explore student expectations for advising and exploring the connections between understanding the purpose behind course requirements and motivation, successful course

completion, successful attainment of learning outcomes, and persistence towards degree completion.

### **5.1.1 Key Finding One**

The first key finding of this inquiry is that most students do not have a preference for advising that can be accurately characterized as either prescriptive or developmental. This finding supports Allen and Smith's (2008) and Fielstein's (1994) argument that developmental and prescriptive approaches to advising should not be considered opposite ends of a continuum of advising styles, but more akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs where informational advising forms the base of the pyramid and relationship building is closer to the top. Only one student's description of ideal advising closely aligned with a prescriptive framework, but he was unique in that he had strong support from a family member in making academic decisions, and he entered CCAC with very clear goals. When most students described their ideal academic advisor, they described aspects that would come from both the prescriptive model and the developmental model of advising. The students wanted advisors to be able to provide a wide range of information about degree requirements, transferability of credits, and academic policies and procedures, which are all aspects that could be addressed by a prescriptive advisor. Students also wanted an advisor who cared about them and took the time to get to know about their personal interests and life goals that extended beyond degree completion, which are aspects that fit within the developmental framework for advising. Reflecting on the findings, it is easy to imagine how an overreliance on one approach would have alleviated some of the students' concerns while possibly creating others. Instead of trying to determine if one approach is superior, advisors should be familiar with a variety of approaches, like proactive advising, advising as teaching, or

advising as cultural navigation. They should use the approach or combination of approaches that best meets the needs of each individual they advise. Similarly, practitioner inquiry in the field of advising should move away from a reliance on the developmental and prescriptive frameworks because they fail to capture the nuances of advising that are important to students.

### **5.1.2 Key Finding Two**

A second key finding of this study is that it is important to understand the expectations that students have for academic advising. Consistent with Burgoon's (1993) expectancy violations theory, the students who reported that their experiences with advising deviated most from what they were expecting were least satisfied with their experience. More importantly, these students reported that they did not meet with advisors or meeting with advisors only rarely after their initial experience with advising. One student actually second guessed her decision to attend college after an experience that was particularly at odds with her expectations. These examples reinforce the powerful influence expectations have on students' assessments of their experiences. The findings of this inquiry reveal a fairly consistent set of expectations across various demographic groups. For example, a personalized advising experience was important to most students, and the elements of what created this experience, discussing goals and interests, a friendly demeanor, and a relax interaction style, were also consistent across students from all backgrounds. Of equal importance, the findings reveal that there are various ways for advisors to meet those expectations. For example, students reported many actions that advisors took to make the experience feel personalized. Some students reported discussing aspects of their personal lives while others reported focusing more on their individual academic backgrounds. This finding suggests that there is room for advisors to develop an approach to advising that feels

comfortable to them, as long as it provides an individualized experience, demonstrates care for the individual student, and provides the knowledge students need to make informed decisions.

### **5.1.3 Key Finding Three**

A third key finding of this study is that students want to know that there is meaning and purpose behind the classes that they are taking. Explaining the purpose behind courses and requirements is an important way that advisors can demonstrate to students that they are knowledgeable about the curriculum. This helps students form a sense of trust in their advisor and confidence they are taking the right classes. Though it may seem like a simple step, explaining the purpose behind courses and requirements addresses one of the most common concerns students expressed, signing up to take “random classes.” Simply put, explaining the purpose of the courses makes them seem less random, and hopefully more connected to the long-term goals that students have. Additionally, students expressed frustration when their advisor signed them up for a class without explaining its importance or when the advisor made their choice of classes seem arbitrary by asking “what else” the student wanted to take. These concerns point to the relevance of the advising as teaching model championed by Lowenstein (2009), White and Schulenberg (2012), and White (2015). White and Schulenberg (2012) argued,

It is the role of the academic advisor to teach students how to put together a course of study that is individually meaningful... As part of this process, the advisor must help students discover the structure and rationale for the curriculum they have chosen. (p. 13)

In addition to making classes seem more meaningful to students, they argue that this approach will better equip students to make independent academic decisions in the future, moving them from reliance on an advisor to independence (White & Schulenberg, 2012). Rather than having

this discussion when time permits, advisors should consider discussing the rationale for course selection and curriculum design as a core function of the advising process.

## **5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The findings of this inquiry have several important implications for practice. Here I offer concrete recommendations for CCAC to consider.

### **5.2.1 Recommendation #1: Prepare Students for Advising**

First, the findings reveal that students had very little knowledge about what the academic advising process would be like before their first advising appointment. This uncertainty could contribute to the nervousness that many students reported feeling about the advising process. It also means that some students were unprepared to make all of the decisions that they would need to make during their first advising session. For example, students need to commit to specific class times when they register. For some students, this requires coordinating their schedules in advance with employers and family members regarding work schedules, transportation, and childcare. Other students reported believing that they needed to know exactly what their major would be and what classes they needed to take prior to coming to their first advising sessions. These are all topics that advisors can assist students with, however, so it is not necessary for students to delay coming to advising until they have made all of these choices on their own. Advisors should work with admissions personnel to communicate to students what to expect from the advising process, so they will be more prepared and possibly less nervous about

meeting with an advisor. A first step would be to add a clear explanation in their acceptance letter about what the advising process entails. Advisors could also redesign the advising webpage to include a section specifically for new students. Items could include a pre-advising checklist, videos that explain transfer pathways and career pathways, and information for students who do not know exactly what they want to study.

CCAC's current advising syllabus could be revised to include a section that specifically addresses expectations for advisors and for advisees. Adding this section to the syllabus would create a good opportunity for advisors to learn more about their students' expectations for the advising process. Findings from this inquiry and similar inquiries in the future can help set baseline standards for academic advisors, but in order to understand and address the expectations of each student, this needs to be an open dialogue between each advisor and each student. The advising syllabus can also help create a structured conversation around this topic. It can also help students form reasonable expectations for advisors by letting them know what advisors can assist them with and when they may need to seek assistance from a different department. The lines between financial aid specialist, counselors, and academic advisors can be particularly blurry for some students, so defining the expectations for the advising directly in the syllabus would be a helpful addition to the document.

### **5.2.2 Recommendation #2: Provide Additional Support for Students who Plan to Transfer**

One of the most common concerns reported by the students who participated in this inquiry was about the transferability of their CCAC credits. At CCAC, transfer counselors, not academic advisors, are responsible for advising students about which classes will transfer to other

institutions. Transfer counselors work in a separate department, and students must make an appointment to meet with them. Additionally, there are only three counselors at each campus, so it is not realistic for every student who wants to transfer to meet with a transfer counselor before registering. In vast majority of cases, it is not necessary for a new student to meet with a transfer counselor to select classes for their first semester because the foundation level courses for most transfer institutions are the same, and there are a number of transfer courses that will transfer to any institution. The findings indicate that many advisors are able to manage this concern well by helping students select classes for their first semester and providing a follow up referral to transfer counselors before enrolling in future terms. However, not every student left feeling confident that their classes would be transferrable and not all students were consistently referred to transfer counselors.

Advisors and transfer counselors should collaborate and agree upon a more formal model for advising first time students who plan to transfer. One step that could be taken immediately is developing a list of readily transferrable classes appropriate for first semester students. This will help students and advisors both feel confident when selecting courses for the student's first semester. Another immediate step should be to include more training for advisors about CCAC's articulation agreements, like the Transfer Articulation and Oversight Agreement (TAOC), which guarantees certain courses will transfer to any university in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. It also guarantees program-to-program transfer for a number of majors. Selecting courses from a specific articulation agreement will help ensure the transferability of credits and explaining the agreement to students will help give them a sense of confidence that they are taking classes that will transfer.

In the future, CCAC should reconsider how the responsibilities of transfer counselors and full-time academic advisors are distributed. For example, full-time advisors could be cross-trained as transfer counselors. All of the topics a student would address with a transfer counselor fall well within the responsibilities of an academic advisor, but advisors would require additional training in transfer policies and the curricular requirements of surrounding colleges and universities. Because of the consistent presence of the full-time advisors in the advising center, they would be able to serve as a resource to the faculty who advise part-time. This change could also provide more time for counselors to focus on providing the type of personal counseling that only they are qualified to provide. This change will require an initial investment of time and energy from full-time advisors and counselors, but in the end, it will provide necessary support for both students and faculty advisors.

### **5.2.3 Recommendation #3: Make All Aspects of Course Selection Intentional**

In addition to being concerned about transfer credits, students expressed that they wanted to know the purpose behind the classes they were taking. This can be an easy step to by-pass in an advising session, especially during high volume periods for registration, but given its importance to students, advisors should take care to provide an explanation to students about the purpose of the classes they are signing up for. A common challenge for advisors is that it can be difficult to explain the inherent value in certain curricular requirements, especially those that are perceived to have little practical purpose, like the humanities requirement, for example. One tool advisors can use to help students understand the importance of the humanities is the World Economic Forum's *The Future of Jobs* report, which surveyed employers about the most important skills they look for when hiring new employees (2016). Critical thinking and creativity rank second

and third on that list (World Economic Forum, 2016), and both of these skills can be linked to studying the humanities. Similar connections could be made between other items on this list and CCAC's general education requirements.

In many degree programs, both at four-year colleges and at CCAC, there are a certain number of general electives. This means that students can take almost any classes they want to fill these requirements. It is possible that this is the type of requirement that prompts some advisors to ask a question like, "So, what else do you want to take?" This approach leaves students feeling like the classes they are selecting are random, pointless, and potentially a waste of their time. This is a concern CCAC advisors need to be more conscientious about, and we should develop a framework for helping students select general electives so that it does not feel like a random choice. There are many ways advisors can help students select general electives that will make them more meaningful to students. For example, advisors could suggest selecting classes that would help them develop a skill by taking a class like Web Development or explore a personal interest outside of their major. Also, advisors should remember that not all students are aware that they need a certain number of credits to earn a particular degree. Even students who are skeptical of the idea of taking a class to explore a personal interest are likely to be receptive to the idea that they are accumulating credits towards their ultimate goal of earning a degree.

#### **5.2.4 Recommendation #4: Develop Relationships with Students**

One of CCAC's strategic initiatives is to make processes like academic advising "more relational and less transactional." My findings suggest that our students will benefit from this shift towards a focus on building relationships. Many students reported that they valued the relationship that

they built with an advisor. Some students were able to develop a long-standing relationship with the same advisor over the course of their career at CCAC while others appreciated the fact that their advisor seemed to care about them even if their interaction with each other was brief.

The findings reveal practical steps advisors can take to foster relationships with students. First, advisors should avoid making students feel rushed through their appointments. The feeling of being rushed is subjective, so it is establishing exact timeframes for every aspect of an advising session is unlikely to be helpful, but checking in with students before moving from one topic to another could help ease the sense that the advisor is rushing through an appointment. There are times of the year when advisors do need to move through appointments more quickly because of the high demand for advising. During these periods, advisors could invite students for follow up appointments during the less active times of the semester. This strategy would allow advisors to address time sensitive issues first and provide a time for students to follow up about other important topics, like long range planning. A two or three weeks into a semester is also a good time for students to check in with someone about their progress and to see if there are any problems they can address early in the term.

Another step advisors can take to begin developing relationships with students is to ask questions about their goals and interests beyond simply establishing which academic program students are pursuing. Several students noted that this made them feel like their advisor “actually cared” about them, and it allowed advisors to make personal recommendations for students. Propp & Rhodes (2006) apprising construct, which involves providing advice that is related to academics but tailoring that advice to the individual student’s strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, is a good baseline to establish so that all students feel like they are receiving personalized advising.

### **5.2.5 Recommendation #5: Check Students' Confidence Levels**

CCAC is a large and complex institution. For new students, there is a great deal of information that they need to take in, and many of the students who participated in this inquiry described feeling overwhelmed by the number of decisions they needed to make in their initial advising appointment. One of the ways advisors can assist these students is by helping them feel a sense of assurance that they are making good decisions. When advisors gave thorough explanations, answered students' questions, and provided appropriate referrals to campus resources, students described a sense of confidence in the choices they made. Other students described feeling confused or unsure when they left advising. One way advisors can avoid this outcome is by asking students if they are feeling confident at the end of their advising sessions. If students say no, advisors can see if there is information students would like to review or they can make sure students know where to go for further assistance. In some cases, advisors may not know the answer to a student's question. In these cases, advisors can offer to personally follow up with students after finding the information that they need. These steps can help students gain a sense of assurance that they are making wise investments of their time, energy, and financial resources.

## **5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Although this inquiry is based in practice and intended to improve practice, the findings do have implications for future inquiries and/or research. First, this inquiry supports the use of EVT to inform academic advising and in many ways align with this theory. Studies that have systematically examined the relationship between students' expectations for advising and student

satisfaction have relied on the prescriptive and developmental models of advising to develop their surveys. Instead of this approach, future studies should focus on specific expectations, like the ones identified in this study, to explore the influence that meeting or not meeting those expectations has on students' satisfaction with their advising experience. This information would be particularly useful to any institution that needed to improve its level of student satisfaction with advising.

The findings of this inquiry also indicate that students want to understand the purpose of the courses they are taking. This could have implications beyond their assessment of their academic advising experience. Further research could explore the influence that understanding the purpose of the courses they are taking has on students' motivation, successful course completion, successful attainment of learning outcomes, and persistence towards degree completion. Findings from these studies could be used to further develop models of advising and reinforce the importance of academic advising in higher education. If findings could demonstrate a positive correlation between a core function of advising and other positive educational outcomes, academic advisors could use these findings to argue for increased institutional support for their academic advising programs.

Findings from this inquiry, as well as Anderson et al (2009) and Hale et al (2009), suggest that student expectations for advising play an important role in the process. The important role that student expectations play in the process suggests that a new model of advising may be emerging. This model would focus on responding to student expectations. Further research into this topic would need to be done to fully develop this new model, which could be named responsive advising.

Finally, one of the delimitations of this study was that it would not address learning outcome for the advising process. The findings, however, provide information about the baseline knowledge students have about the career and decision making process. For example, many students seem to be unaware of the basic structure of Associate's and Bachelor's degrees, which are split into major requirements, general education requirements, and general electives. Many first-year students are under the impression that they should only be taking course that are directly tied to their major. This information could be used to develop surveys to gather more data about students' knowledge about these topics. This larger data set could then be used to develop meaningful learning outcomes for the advising process.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I laid out three key findings from this inquiry. The first key finding supports the argument that developmental and prescriptive advising should not continue to be viewed as opposing theories, but instead they should be understood as part a range of models that advisors can draw from to meet their students' expectations and needs. The second key finding emphasizes the important link between understanding student expectations for advising and providing students with a satisfactory advising experience. The third key finding is that students need to understand the purpose behind the courses they take and the requirements of their program. This finding supports the argument that academic advising is an important educational, rather than administrative, function in higher education. In practice, there are improvements to consider so that CCAC can prepare students for academic advising, addressing students concerns about transfer credits, explaining the purpose behind the courses students take, move to a more

relational and less transactional model of advising, and help students develop a sense of assurance about the academic decisions they are making. I also suggest that future inquiries consider the use of EVT to explore student expectations for advising and for exploring the connections between students understanding the purpose behind course requirements and motivation, successful course completion, successful attainment of learning outcomes, and persistence towards degree completion. Finally, I discuss ways the initial findings of this inquiry could be used to gather more data about important topics related to academic advising, which could then be used to develop a new model of responsive advising as well as meaningful learning outcomes for the academic advising process.

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT

#### Understanding Student Expectations for Academic Advising at CCAC

##### INTRODUCTION

I'm inviting you to participate in an interview about CCAC students' expectations for and experiences with academic advising. You may decide whether or not you want to participate, and your responses to the questions will be kept private. When I write about the results, I will not identify you specifically. You will choose a nickname, and that is how I will refer to you in the report I write about the results of the interviews.

##### WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to participate you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last about 60 minutes. You can stop participating at any time.

##### RISKS

Participating in this study has a very low risk.

##### CONFIDENTIALITY

I will take the following steps to keep information about you confidential: any specific information you mention (names of people, specifics about classes, interactions with advisors, professors, etc.) will be written about in generic terms, your name will not be used in the write up, and all recordings will be deleted after the research process is complete.

##### YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not harm your relationship with the researcher (me), CCAC, or the University of Pittsburgh.

##### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

Contact Mike Chirdon-Jones at [mchirdon-jones@ccac.edu](mailto:mchirdon-jones@ccac.edu) or his advisor Dr. Gina Garcia at [ggarcia@pitt.edu](mailto:ggarcia@pitt.edu) if you have questions about the study, any problems, or concerns.

##### Consent of Subject

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(Printed Name)

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(Signature)

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(Date)

## APPENDIX B

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear [student],

I am an academic advisor at CCAC Boyce Campus and a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. I am doing a research study with the goal of improving the student experience with advising at CCAC. In particular, I am interested in your expectations for academic advising, and how they were either met or not met in your experience with advising. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

If you would like to participate in this project, please respond to this email, and I will send you information about setting up a time to meet for an interview.

You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty, and it will not harm your relationship with the researcher, CCAC, or the University of Pittsburgh. The decision to join, or not to join, is up to you. Your responses to these questions will be kept confidential, and any identifying details will be removed before the results are presented or published.

If you decide to participate you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last about 60 minutes. There are no substantial risks associated with your participation in this interview.

Contact Mike Chirdon-Jones at [mchirdon-jones@ccac.edu](mailto:mchirdon-jones@ccac.edu) or his advisor Dr. Gina Garcia at [ggarcia@pitt.edu](mailto:ggarcia@pitt.edu) if you have questions about the study, any problems, or concerns.

Thank you,  
Mike Chirdon-Jones

## APPENDIX C

### INQUIRY QUESTIONS

Research Question	Interview Question	Probing Question
<p>1. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe expectations for the academic advising process?</p>	<p>To start, tell me your pseudonym (or alternative name). Tell me about what you were doing before coming to CCAC and why you decided to attend.</p> <p>Tell me about your major, and your career expectations (i.e., what do you want to be when you grow up?)</p> <p>Tell me about your previous experiences with advising, either in high school (guidance counseling) or another institution.</p> <p>Before you came to your advising appointment at CCAC, what did you think the process would be like?</p>	

	<p>Tell me about your expectations of an advisor here at CCAC.</p> <p>When you come to advising at CCAC, what do you hope will happen?</p> <p>Describe your ideal academic advisor.</p> <p>How do you feel about working with an advisor who has similar background characteristics as you? Or different background characteristics?</p>	<p>What would they be like? How would they make you feel?</p> <p>Does it matter? How?</p>
<p>2. How do Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) students describe their experiences with advising?</p>	<p>Tell me about your experience or experiences with academic advising at CCAC.</p> <p>How would you describe your academic advisor?</p> <p>Tell me about your relationship with the advisor you met with.</p> <p>Tell me about the level of formality in the interaction.</p> <p>What were your goals for your advising session?</p>	<p>How would you describe his or her style of communication?</p> <p>How did this influence your experience?</p> <p>Would you say that you achieved them? Why or why not?</p>

	<p>When you left your advising appointment, how did you feel about CCAC? Yourself? Your academic plans?</p> <p>Was there anything about your experience that surprised you?</p> <p>Did anything go differently than what you were expecting?</p>	<p>How did you feel about this?</p>
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## APPENDIX D

### IRB STATUS

**From:** IRB  
**Sent:** Wednesday, November 1, 2017 1:27 PM  
**To:** Chirdon-Jones, Michael A  
**Subject:** PI Notification: IRB determination

**University of Pittsburgh**  
***Institutional Review Board***

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1480  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

#### **Memorandum**

**To:** Michael Chirdon-Jones  
**From:** IRB Office  
**Date:** 11/1/2017  
**IRB#:** [PRO17100567](#)  
**Subject:** Understanding Community College Students' Expectations for Academic Advising

The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section

45 CFR 46.101(b)(1)

Please note the following information:

Investigators should consult with the IRB whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to an exempt study might alter the exempt status. Use the "**Send Comments to IRB Staff**" link displayed on study workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.

It is important to close your study when finished by using the "**Study Completed**" link displayed on the study workspace.

Exempt studies will be archived after 3 years unless you choose to extend the study. If your study is archived, you can continue conducting research activities as the IRB has made the determination that your project met one of the required exempt categories. The only caveat is that no changes can be made to the application. If a change is needed, you will need to submit a NEW Exempt application.

## APPENDIX E

### NACADA CONFERENCE ACCEPTANCE

**From:** Gavin Farber [mailto:gavin.j.farber@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 23, 2018 9:43 PM  
**To:** Chirdon-Jones, Michael <mchirdon-jones@ccac.edu>  
**Subject:** 2018 NACADA Region 2 Conference Proposal Acceptance

Dear Michael,

Congratulations! You are invited to present the following proposal at the 2018 NACADA Region 2 Conference:

Presentation Title: Understanding Students' Expectations for Academic Advising  
Proposal Code #: 826  
Assigned Format: Roundtable Session

**If you do not accept this offer, please do not reply to this email.** If you do accept this offer, please fill out the form HERE by MONDAY, 2/5 at the latest, **in lieu of replying via email**. If you need an extension, it please email Andrew at anmillin@gmail.com as soon as possible to discuss.

Thanks for reading!  
Gavin Farber & Andrew Millin  
Proposals Chair & Selection Chair  
2018 NACADA Region 2 Conference

## APPENDIX F

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

#### Student Participant Information

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Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. All responses will be kept confidential and your identity will remain private. Your responses to these questions are *optional*, but will be helpful in reporting findings.

1. Preferred alternative name (pick a name different from your own): \_\_\_\_\_
2. Preferred method of communication (check/complete all that apply):  
 Cell (text/call): \_\_\_\_\_  E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Instagram: \_\_\_\_\_  Facebook: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Twitter: \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your sex or gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How do you identify racially/ethnically? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Language(s) spoken: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you the first in your family to go to college?  Yes  No  Decline to State
7. Are you an international student?  Yes  No  Decline to State
8. Are you an immigrant student?  Yes  No  Decline to State
9. Are you eligible for Pell grants?  Yes  No  Decline to State
10. Are you enrolled?  Full-time  Part-time      Class level: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you work?  Full-time  Part-time
12. Degree objective (i.e., AS, BS, MA): \_\_\_\_\_
13. Current major: \_\_\_\_\_
14. In order to verify validity, would you be willing to review preliminary results from this study?  
 Yes  No

## APPENDIX G

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Program	First-Generation College Student	School: Full-time or Part time	Employment: Full-time or Part time	Experience Prior to Attending CCAC
Alex	Male	White	General Studies – Transfer Program	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Ashley	Female	White	Criminal Justice – Transfer Program	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Bart	Male	White	Nursing	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Gwen	Female	White	Paralegal	Yes	Full-time	Part-time (Work-study)	20 years of work experience
Jeff	Male	White	Accounting – Transfer	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
John	Male	American	Business – Transfer Program	No	Full-time	Not Employed	Recent High School Graduate
Josh	Male	White	Business – Transfer Program	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Kaylee	Female	White	Business – CCAC/IUP Collaborative	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate

Krista	Female	African American	Business – Transfer	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Lisa	Female	Hispanic	Nursing	No	Full-time	Part-time	Attended University in North East PA
Marge	Female	White	Nursing	Yes	Part-time	Full-time	Recent High School Graduate
Miggy	Male	Hispanic	Business – Transfer Program	Yes	Full-time	Not Employed	Attended 2 community colleges in Florida; came to CCAC to play baseball in fall 2017
Momo	Male	Black	Accounting	Yes	Part-time	Full-time	Graduated from College in home country of Togo, immigrated to US and worked for approximately 10 years.
Nathan	Male	Asian	General Studies – Transfer Program	No	Full-time	Part-time	Immigrated to the US 5 years ago and worked full-time prior to attending CCAC.
Rob	Male	White	General Studies – Undecided	No	Full-time	Part-time	Recent High School Graduate
Ruth	Female	White	Nursing	No	Part-time	Full-time	Graduated from high school 30 years ago and has worked in health care full-time prior to attending CCAC.

Wesley	Male	White	Nursing	Yes	Part-time	Full-time	Attended a different community college in PA and served in the US army as a medic prior to attending CCAC.
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## APPENDIX H

### CODE MAP

Personalized Advising Matters		
“Actually cared”	“Just doing their job”	“I didn’t feel like I was wanted here”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisor asked about student’s goals and interests</li> <li>• Advisor asked about previous experience</li> <li>• Student described advisor as “warm,” “friendly,” and/or “welcoming”</li> <li>• Advisor did not make student feel rushed</li> <li>• Advisor and student discussed non-academic topics</li> <li>• Advisor made personal recommendations based on students preferences, learning style, goals, or interests</li> <li>• Student described interaction as somewhat formal, but still “relaxed” and “comfortable”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little or no discussion about students goals and interests</li> <li>• “Take this this this” – advisor focused only on scheduling classes</li> <li>• “On to the next one” – student felt rushed and like the advisor was just trying to move along to the next student</li> <li>• Student described advisor as “not overly friendly,” “cold,” and/or “distant”</li> <li>• Student described interaction as “business-like” or overly formal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student described feeling intimidated by advisor</li> <li>• Student described advisor as impatient</li> <li>• “Talking to this desk” -- student described advisor as being very difficult to communicate with</li> </ul>

Note: Each bullet point above had a shorter code for the purposes of coding the interviews and the mapping process. I have re-created an example map with more detailed explanations for clarity.

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