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Improving Undergraduate Psychology Students' Academic Advising Experiences

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IMPROVING UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ADVISING EXPERIENCES

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandfather, George Henry Dix. Because of you, my initial love of history and education blossomed.

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ABSTRACT

This action research study evaluated how to prepare undergraduate Psychology students for the transition from a developmental style of advising to the prescriptive advising style of departmental advisors. As an Undergraduate Academic Advisor, I drew upon a theoretical framework of appreciative advising, positive psychology, and the theory of transition to examine how to improve my practice in terms of this transition. Survey data from students who had not yet made this transition and interview data from students who had already made the transition enabled me to evaluate their perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and overall advising model in Psychology, as well as their understanding of their degree plan and the specific course recommendations needed to achieve it. My findings have implications for institutions that employ a shared-split model of advising where students transition from an initial advisor to a departmental advisor with a different advising style.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AP .... Advanced Placement

IB ....International Baccalaureate

FYA ....First-Year Advisor

UAA ....Undergraduate Academic Advisor

UAC..University Advising Center

UofSC...University of South Carolina

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The University of South Carolina (UofSC) places student retention, satisfaction, and success at the forefront of its institutional values and initiatives. The university is constantly looking for ways to improve student satisfaction and meet students' needs. For one such initiative, the Advising Coordinating Taskforce examined undergraduate academic advising to determine what measures might improve alignment with institutional values (UofSC, 2015). Survey data collected from advisors and students between December 2014 and February 2015 showed that advisor-to-student ratio varied largely across colleges and even majors within colleges. Some departments used only staff advisors, while others used a combination of staff and faculty. Some departments used advising technologies, while others used antiquated methods. The survey data also showed low student satisfaction with academic advising appointments. The respondents who seemed most dissatisfied and unfulfilled were first-year students.

In response, the taskforce recommended the creation of the University Advising Center (UAC) to lead professional development and technology training for advisors. Furthermore, they recommended hiring 25 First-Year Advisors (FYAs) to orient first-year students to the university, college, and department; facilitate their transition to postsecondary education; discuss degree and progression requirements; make course schedule recommendations; and help them start to sort through their long-term goals and dreams (UofSC, 2015). The original plan was for first-year students to be advised by an FYA who could help them understand their degree requirements and progression before transitioning to a departmental staff or faculty advisor for the remainder of their undergraduate career. FYAs would also help with advising and registration processes during the first year, so once students transitioned to a faculty or staff advisor, they would be more prepared in the appointment and need less assistance from their faculty or staff advisor. Conversations with their departmental advisor in their later undergraduate years would focus more on their involvement in the department and their next steps beyond UofSC, and less on specific courses and registration processes.

The UAC officially opened in July 2015 with the recommended 25 FYAs. As the UAC evolved, doubling in size, the role and title of the FYA also evolved. Because of first-year students' increased satisfaction with their academic advising appointments, many departments began expanding FYAs' roles to include both first- and second-year students, and the FYAs became Undergraduate Academic Advisors (UAAs). Not all advisors took on second-year students, but all advisors inherited the new title.

As a UAA, I work for the College of Arts and Sciences in the Psychology department. I was hired as an FYA in January 2018 and retitled as a UAA in Fall 2019. The Psychology department had 1,463 active undergraduates as of Fall 2021, but enrollment varies due to newly admitted students, withdrawals, and major changes. Of the 1,463 students, 402 were assigned to me, including all first-year students and some second-year students. The department hired a second UAA effective October 2021 to split the first- and second-year student caseload with me, but at the time of this study, my new colleague had yet to take on any students.

Once a student officially earns 30 credit hours, they transition to sophomore status, becoming a second-year student. Students assigned to me who have earned 40 or more credit hours at the end of their first year move to a departmental advisor for the duration of their undergraduate career. Students who have earned less than 40 hours at the end of their first year stay with me for their second year as well. Technically, earning 30 credit hours classifies a student as a sophomore, but students who meet or exceed the 40-hour mark at the end of their first year typically have Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) credit from high school, positioning them as more advanced, independent students at the end of their first year. Therefore, at the end of every academic year, I go through my caseload of students and reassign any student who has earned 40 or more credit hours to one of our departmental advisors. Although the requirements for the transition from a UAA to a departmental advisor are simple, the transition to a new advising style and advisor brings its own set of problems. With the creation of the UAC, the university envisioned students' having satisfactory and successful advising appointments, but in the Psychology department, this initiative fell short.

Problem of Practice

When students transition to their new departmental advisor, their experience can be overwhelming, and their satisfaction level with their appointment can decline significantly. In the Psychology department, students do not receive clear communication about their transition to a departmental advisor. We discuss in our appointments how they will transition to a new advisor once they earn 40 credit hours, but no official communication goes out once I hit the magic button and reassign them. From the time I reassign them in May until they meet with their new advisor in the fall for course advisement for the upcoming spring semester, they are in what I refer to as "The Black Hole." When students enter the University, they are typically advised by myself at orientation for the Fall semester, but they could also be advised by a departmental advisor if they are assisting me with orientation that day because of high attendance numbers. Students are not assigned an official advisor until August, however. Students then are reassigned to a departmental advisor when they earn 40 credit hours, but again no official communication goes out to them when they are assigned that initial August, or when they earn 40 credit hours. Students are not always aware their advisor has changed, so they often reach out to me with questions or schedule appointments with me for advising. I always direct them to their new advisor, but I understand that I have been the only advisor with whom they have met and had any interaction, so reaching out to a new advisor may be intimidating and uncomfortable until they have built a relationship and established some trust. Students are confused as to why they cannot just reach out to me with their questions as they have always done in the past. Moreover, during this "Black Hole" time frame, departmental advisors are not always available. As a UAA, my primary responsibility, 80% of my job, is advising, so everything else I do in my position revolves around that duty. Departmental advisors have multiple job responsibilities, so they are not always available for advising and student interaction because academic advising is only 30% of their job. Consequently, students begin to notice much longer response times and fewer appointment options.

Although this transition occurs at the end of the academic year, affected students often have the mindset of a brand-new first-year student. They are still attempting to conquer the transition to college from high school, and one stability they have come to know is their advisor. Being at the end of their first year, instead of in the middle or the beginning, gives these students the upper hand in adjusting to the change of a new advisor, but a successful change requires communication, so students know what to expect. Tinto (1993) argued that students transition more effectively when they navigate through three stages of development: separation, transition, and identification. Thus, I wanted to use action research to help students anticipate change, prepare them for the transition to their departmental advisor, and give them the tools to navigate their separation from me.

Once students do meet with their new departmental advisor, they begin to experience a new level of confusion. With me, they experienced appreciative advising, a model based on social constructivism “that provides a framework for optimizing advisor interactions with students in both individual and group settings” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 11). With their departmental advisor, they are more likely to experience standard or traditional advising, also known as prescriptive advising. Students who are not prepared for this new style leave the appointment very confused as to what their next steps should be in terms of degree progression or course requirements. When this happens, students sometimes schedule a second advising appointment with me to seek additional help. I would love to be able to assist all students who need help, but my large caseload prevents me from being able to see students who have already transitioned to a departmental advisor.

Universities have always emphasized retention of students, but especially first-year students. Although the number of enrolled students has increased over the past few decades, the number of students graduating with a degree has stayed stagnant (Owen, 2012). As Tinto (1993) reported 3 decades ago, the majority of new students entering higher education left their initial college choice without completing a degree. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), nearly 2 decades later, only 57% of first-time, full-time postsecondary students earned a baccalaureate degree within 6 years.

The first-year students in Psychology form a close bond with me as their UAA, and they find comfort and consistency in that bond when the rest of their world is a sphere of constant transition and change. Studies have shown that positive non-classroom faculty interaction with undergraduate students can improve retention (Sunleaf, 2013). However, as much as I want students to have a wonderful experience with their UAA, I believe they can also receive the same experience with their departmental advisor, especially if I make more of an effort to help each student understand their degree plan and next steps prior to the transition. As Cueso (2003) emphasized, “Advising and retention are terms found frequently married in higher education discourse; they seem to fit together like hand and glove" (p. 1). Helping students perceive their advising experience in a positive light is key to their retention.

Therefore, my problem of practice was that when undergraduate Psychology students transition to a departmental advisor, they are not prepared for a new advisor or advising method. Using action research, I could investigate how to prepare undergraduate Psychology students for a smoother transition from me as their UAA to their departmental advisor. Action research focuses on improving actual practice, rather than proving generalizable truths (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As an active UAA for the Psychology department, I could take responsibility for my problem of practice by conducting interviews with former advisees and surveying current advisees to gain insight on how I can better prepare students for their transition. Action research positions practitioners as experts in the field, making it an appropriate method for my study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). I could continue to advise students throughout the study, while communicating with participants and identifying necessary interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Because my problem of practice suggested a need to help students understand their academic plan, navigate their transition to a departmental advisor, and promote a positive overall advising experience, the framework for my action research combined appreciative advising, transitions in adulthood, and positive psychology.

Appreciative advising is a social constructivist advising philosophy that provides a framework for optimizing advisor interactions with students in both individual and group settings (Bloom et al., 2008). This framework guides how I conduct advising appointments and thus also played a role in my action research. Using this approach in my study could help me form stronger relationships with students and assist them in understanding their degree plan.

Along with appreciative advising, I also focused on how adults experience transition. According to Goodman et al. (2006), a transition is "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). This definition directly applies to the transition undergraduate students face when they change to their departmental advisor once they earn 40 credit hours. For my research, I used this theory as a baseline for developing strategies I could use in appointments to prepare students for the change in advisor and advising method that they would experience the following year.

Positive psychology also played a role in my research as I envisioned a plan of action to help students cope with the change of advisors and advising methods, as well as helping them develop their degree plans. Positive psychology is the "study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). I relied on this theory to discern key practices that can prepare students to flourish and actively participate in their future advising appointments, regardless of advisor or advising model.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how to adapt my existing approach to help my undergraduate Psychology students transition to their departmental advisors when they earn 40 credit hours. First, I needed to establish clear communication with my first- and second-year students—a trusting and positive advisor–advisee relationship to facilitate discussion of the advising model in place for Psychology students. Second, I needed to ensure students had a degree plan in place, understanding not only their immediate next steps for courses, but also the big picture of degree progression and requirements. Throughout, I had to reflect on how to improve my ability to help students create a degree plan while navigating transition.

Research Questions

To achieve my purpose, I proposed the following questions:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?

Together, these questions allowed me to determine exactly how students perceive their relationship with their advisor, the advising model in Psychology, and their degree plan. Having an understanding of these benchmarks illuminated how to better my practice in helping students prepare for the transition to a departmental advisor.

Overview of Methodology

Helping students transition and prepare for their departmental advising appointments warranted a qualitative approach, wherein "The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). I was much more focused on how to prepare students for the next steps in their advising plan and understanding their rationale, as opposed to a quantitative or mixed-methods study, which might quantify whether a student felt prepared for their departmental advising appointments without capturing their reasoning. If I can improve my ability to prepare students for their next steps, then their satisfaction with advising will likely follow them all 4 years.

As I will explain in Chapter 3, I collected data during the Spring 2022 semester. I sent my usual post-appointment email to my first- and second-year students whom I advised for Fall 2022 courses (Appendix A), but it included a link to a voluntary survey (Appendix B) with 10 open-ended questions relating to their overall advising experience, mastery of their degree plan, and understanding of the advising model in Psychology as they prepare for advising in the department. My caseload for the 2021–2022 academic school year was 402 students, but as usual, this number fluctuated due to major changes and withdrawals. I sought a sample of 16 first- and second-year students, whose responses would help me assess their understanding of the next steps in their advising plan and their long- and short-term degree plan. I derived the target number from the average percentage of students who respond to close-of-appointment UAC surveys: 4%.

I also received departmental permission to interview former advisees—students I advised during their first, and potentially second, year who had since experienced at least one session with a departmental advisor. I interviewed them on their experiences in their first year, as well as how they navigated their transition to a departmental advisor. To recruit these participants, I sent an email (Appendix C) requesting their participation in an interview with me about their advising experiences, aiming for a sample size of 4–7. Their responses to my interview questions (Appendix D) provided valuable data regarding students' successes and struggles, which has implications for my practice.

Positionality

As a UAA for first- and second-year Psychology students, I already use appreciative advising, but this study deepened my understanding of how students experience the model, which will improve my ability to prepare students for their transition to a departmental advisor. My role directly impacted this action research study because I collected data from current and former advisees about their advising experiences. My understanding of their academic plan, ambitions, and dreams was an essential piece of my action research. Instead of being on the outside looking in, I was an insider researcher. According to Efron and Ravid (2013), "Understanding students' social and historical circumstances and knowing their past and present successes and failures, fears, and dreams enable practitioners to gain insight into their students' worlds" (p. 4). This insight allowed me to develop strategies so future students can cope with the transition to their departmental advisor.

My own undergraduate advising experience was very different compared to what my students experience. I attended UofSC and majored in history, but because I graduated in 2012, and the UAC was not established until 2016, I only had a departmental advisor. Therefore, unable to draw from personal experiences with transitioning in advising, I designed my study to rely heavily on interviews with my former students to improve my practice for future students. I intentionally invited former advisees to participate, so as not to put my current advisees in an uncomfortable position due to a perceived power imbalance.

Significance

For this study, I defined success as students' having a clearer and more satisfactory understanding of the undergraduate Psychology advising process. Based on what I learned, in future semesters, I will also help other students understand what the advising model looks like in Psychology, including when the transition happens and how the advising appointment will differ, to prepare for a smoother transition to a departmental advisor. Students will also have a degree plan in place that uses their goal to shape their immediate and long-term future. They will understand their degree progression and requirements, so they are fully prepared with what their next steps should be when they meet with their departmental advisor.

My larger audience for this study includes the UAC and the wider UofSC community. Other colleges within the university may appreciate learning about my findings and may implement my recommendations on a larger scale. Transitions from UAAs to departmental advisors are a campus-wide concern, so even though my study is specific to students in my department, the findings could transfer to all UAAs.

Eventually, the findings might inform changes for other advisors to improve their overall practices, as well as their strategy for helping their students cope with change to a new advisor if they will not retain their students for all 4 years. Students' perception of advising is a critical piece of their views of the university as a whole, as studies have shown a relationship between students' level of satisfaction with the university they are attending and their rate of retention at that institution (Bean, 1983). Colleges and universities can also look at this research to determine how to approach advising to increase the likelihood that students will have a positive outlook on their advising experience, which would likely lead to higher retention rates.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colleges and universities strive to recruit, retain, and graduate students with the highest satisfaction possible. My study focused on one initiative that has evolved to meet the changing needs of students and staff at my institution: academic advising tailored to help students reach graduation on time and improve their overall satisfaction with the university. Initially, most institutions viewed academic advising as “a teaching function based on a negotiated agreement between the student and the teacher in which varying degrees of learning by both parties to the transaction are the product” (Crookston, 1994, p. 9). Today, academic advising “is now crucial if institutions are to achieve goals of persistence and timely graduation, in addition to the humane goals of student self-realization and growth” (Thomas, 2017). As students and staff change over time, so do the approaches to academic advising. Students at some institutions may have multiple advisors at one time or may transition from one advisor to another based on a variety of factors.

As I explained in Chapter 1, all students in the Psychology department where I work, within the College of Arts and Sciences at UofSC, begin their academic advising relationship with a UAA. Most UAAs work with first- and second-year students, but some UAAs maintain all or some of their students for all 4 years of their undergraduate careers. In the Psychology department, the average caseload for a UAA is 300–400 first-and second-year students. Every May, all UAAs in the College of Arts and Sciences evaluate their caseloads to see which students can move up to a departmental advisor.

My problem of practice was that when undergraduate Psychology students transition to a departmental advisor, they are not prepared for a new advisor or advising method. This study thus investigated how I can prepare them for that transition. I noticed a large number of students who had formally transitioned to a departmental advisor continued to request appointments with me because they were not prepared for, nor fully satisfied with, their new advising appointments. Therefore, the purpose of my study was to explore how to adapt my existing approach to help my undergraduate Psychology students effectively transition to their departmental advisors when they earn 40 credit hours. My first goal was to establish clear communication with my first- and second-year students about the advising model in place for Psychology students, so they would know what to expect when they transition, building the kind of trusting relationship students should have with their advisors. My second goal was to ensure all students had a degree plan in place and understood their immediate next steps for courses as well as the big picture of degree progression and requirements.

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?

This chapter examines relevant literature on academic advising, specifically appreciative advising, including historical views of advising, theories that inform appreciative advising, benefits of appreciative advising, studies on advisor effectiveness, and recommendations for implementing a successful transition. This review also includes literature from the student, advisor, and institutional perspective, gauging the level of satisfaction of advising practices from these multiple perspectives.

My desire to include various perspectives guided my selection of resources. I chose multiple studies from 2-year and 4-year institutions to examine advising practices and implementation and student satisfaction on a variety of levels. Even though appreciative advising stems from developmental advising, I also reviewed sources related to prescriptive advising to consider divergent methodologies and practices. I used academic reports from my own and other institutions; peer-reviewed literature and dissertations, obtained from databases such as ProQuest; and websites for professional organizations, such as the Global Community for Academic Advising.

Historical Perspectives

The earliest forms of academic advising exhibited characteristics of prescriptive advising, which is "focused on the expertise of the advisor. The advisor maintains control and responsibility for advising. The primary goal is task completion" (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 6). In short, prescriptive advising has the sole aim of recommending courses for the upcoming semester. The advisor issues recommendations, often without establishing rapport or building a relationship with students (Crookston, 1994).

Existing literature emphasizes how prescriptive advising focuses heavily on the advisor's role and ability. Prescriptive advisors need expertise on the curriculum and knowledge of the major to prescribe or recommend specific courses (Crookston, 1994). Crookston (1994) explained how this transaction parallels a doctor–patient relationship, hence the term *prescriptive*: "The relationship is obviously based on authority; the advisor is the doctor and the student is the patient…. Therefore, if the student follows the advice, the problem will be solved, and all is well" (p. 6). This kind of relationship evokes a particular image of the advisor as a seasoned, all-knowing, potentially tenured, faculty member, suggesting the student has nothing to contribute and is there strictly to learn and to be told how to proceed in their academic career.

Within a prescriptive advising model, the advisor maintains control of and responsibility for appointments, operating on the assumption that college students lack intrinsic motivation and are therefore unable to prepare for or contribute to their advising appointments. Consequently, communication is linear—from the advisor to the advisee (Missouri State, 2021). If advisors assume "students naturally dislike work," prescriptive advising enables them "to control, direct, or issue incentives that will encourage students to produce" (Crookston, 1994, p. 6). Without providing rewards or extrinsic motivation for their students, prescriptive advisors believe students will not succeed in their advising appointments or in their academic careers, so the mindset for the advising appointment is very much a "do it for them" mentality (Crockett, 1985).

Above all, prescriptive advising focuses on task completion. Advising appointments can cover many topics, such as students' transitions to the university, research and internship opportunities, and career pathways beyond the undergraduate level, but during a prescriptive advising appointment, the advisor's number one goal is to recommend a course schedule for the following semester based on the student's declared major (Yarbrough, 2010). This aspect of prescriptive advising reflects the traditional teacher–student relationship, wherein "the responsibility of the teacher [is] to teach, and the student to learn" (Crookston, 1994, p. 9). Prescriptive advising appointments can meet students' need for a recommended course schedule but fall short of providing any real advice for research or internship opportunities or allowing students to gain any kind of rapport or build a relationship with their advisor.

Recognition of the need for rapport and an advisor–advisee relationship began the shift away from prescriptive advising into developmental advising. In the early 1970s, Crookston suggested a strong, working relationship between an advisor and a student would facilitate tasks and conversations that would increase the likelihood of retention and eventual graduation (Wood, 2002). Bloom et al. (2008) explained how the need for advising appointments to provide more insight on topics and allow students to feel like they were active participants and were building rapport with the person sitting across from them started the conversation for a shift in how advising appointments, and ultimately the role of advisors and students, were carried out. Institutions started to realize that prescriptive advising is not the most efficient way to help a student reflect on how a particular course impacts and aligns with their career and life goals. To truly be invested in a course, students need to understand how it fits into the bigger picture, and they need to trust and value the relationship of the individual providing such information (Bloom et al., 2008). This shift in thinking gave rise to developmental advising, “focused on the relationship between the advisor and the student. The advisor and the student share responsibility for advising. The primary goal is problem-solving” (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 6).

Developmental advising, in definition and implementation, is the opposite of its predecessor, prescriptive advising. First, developmental advising emphasizes the relationship between advisor and student, instead of emphasizing the importance and authority of the advisor, as in prescriptive advising. This shift in priorities guides advisors and students to engage in multiple developmental tasks, which upon successful completion, leads to varying degrees of learning for both parties (Crookston, 1994). Placing value on the advisor–advisee relationship opens the possibility of achieving multiple tasks in an appointment, and that the advisor can walk away from the appointment with just as much new information as the student.

Additionally, developmental advising hinges on the idea that the advisor and the student share responsibility for advising. In contrast to the principles of prescriptive advising, developmental advising suggests the student can bring just as much to the table as the advisor can (Yarbrough, 2010). The advisor and student may discuss multiple ideas for how to meet a goal or solve a problem, fostering a “partnership for learning in which the learning helps define the problem and the teacher guides the learner in problem-solving. The learner and the teacher share responsibility for the learning process” (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 9). Developmental advising does not mean the advisor suddenly becomes hands-off in the advising meeting; rather, developmental advising is a back-and-forth conversation with the student, who is an equal contributor and decision maker.

Finally, developmental advising differs from prescriptive advising in that the primary goal of the appointment is problem-solving. Developmental advisors do provide course schedule recommendations, as in prescriptive advising, but broader conversations occur alongside that task (Crookston, 1994). Advisors who practice developmental advising believe students have a variety of motivations, resisting a one-size-fits-all solution for problems that arise in their appointments. Advisors using this style also subscribe to “the idea of integrated development, that academic concerns and growth cannot be separated from the personal concerns and growth of the student” (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 11). Thus, problem-solving in developmental advising is a shared responsibility between advisor and student, encompassing the student’s beliefs, goals, and drives, rather than simply what five classes for the upcoming semester will check off a box toward degree completion (Coleman, 2013).

This shift into developmental advising led to related constructs like student-led or student-focused advising, including appreciative advising, an implementation of the concept of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry promotes “the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them” (Stavros et al., 2015, p. 7). As an approach to organizational change, appreciative inquiry “is a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process to ‘see’ the wholeness of the human system and to ‘inquire’ into that system’s strengths, possibilities, and successes” (Stavros et al., 2015, p. 7). On an individual level, appreciative inquiry, like positive psychology, is all about looking holistically at a person and using their strengths and abilities as beneficial tools when formulating plans and solving problems. As a constructivist approach, appreciative inquiry holds that dialogue is important, inquiry can create change, and positive questions lead to positive changes (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). This concept promotes full-scale change from the ground up for advising by incorporating questions, building a relationship with the student, and finding out how to help them succeed with the skillsets they already have. This inquiry-based approach to advising ultimately manifested in appreciative advising.

These student-centered approaches sought to aid students in developing skills and behaviors to succeed in college as a whole, not just in degree completion (Bloom et al., 2008). Appreciative advising thus "helps students capitalize and make meaningful their collegiate academic and extracurricular opportunities and experiences" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 13). With the tools to find out what is going on with a student, advisors can give the best advice possible, allowing students to really feel like they are being seen and their voices are being heard (Coleman, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

As I explained in Chapter 1, my theoretical framework combined the principles behind appreciative advising, positive psychology, and theories of adulthood transition. This section elaborates on each lens. The following sections below elaborate on each lens to give readers a sense of the key principles that informed my approach as a researcher.

Appreciative Advising

Appreciative advising is “the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). The goal of appreciative advising is to form rapport with the student that puts their meeting with the advisor in a positive light, so they are more willing to discuss long-term goals, dreams, and ambitions, as well as any current hardships they are facing. Appreciative advising formed out of developmental advising, which, “is concerned not only with specific personal or vocational decisions but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavior awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills” (Crookston, 1994, p. 78). Appreciative advisors guide students through six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020).

Disarm

The Disarm phase includes “the intentional use of positive, active and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 11). This phase centers on the first encounter between an advisor and a student. The initial meeting should occur in a warm, welcoming space (Lawson, 2009). An advisor can make a meeting feel inviting by smiling and maintaining eye contact. The advisor can also share some details about themselves or ask questions about upcoming events on campus, so the student feels more of a connection to them. Striving to be approachable disarms students, making them more open to sharing information.

Discover

The Discover phase refers to “Ask[ing] positive open-ended questions that help advisors learn about students’ strengths, skills, and abilities” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). This part of the appreciative advising model is all about trying to figure the student out. Because every student who comes through an advisor’s office door is different, what may benefit one student may be irrelevant to another. Discovery allows an advisor to learn about the student and begin to develop a plan to help them.

Dream

The Dream phase, which focuses on “Inquiring about students’ hopes and dreams for their future” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020), is two-fold. First, the advisor lets the student identify and discuss their dreams for their future in an open and non-judgmental environment. A level of trust must exist between the advisor and the student for the student to feel comfortable enough to share their dreams, which often requires vulnerability. Second, the advisor engages in conversation with the student about their dreams by asking follow-up questions to elicit additional details about their hopeful future endeavors. This exchange reassures the student that the advisor was actively listening and cares about what they disclosed. During this phase, the advisor frames the student’s dream in a positive light and addresses the student’s attributes and strengths that can help them obtain their goals.

Design

The Design phase, which allows the advisor and student to “co-create a plan for making their dreams a reality” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 65), is when the academic audit, progression requirements, and overall degree understanding come into play. Based on the student's career goal (e.g., attending medical school to become a psychiatrist), the advisor ensures the student knows what is involved in reaching that goal by discussing specific course options or potential minors that may make the student a better candidate for their next academic steps. Discussions about internships and research requirements are also common. During this phase, the student must be aware of their current and next steps to ensure adequate progress toward their dreams.

Deliver

The Deliver phase is when the student follows through on the plan they developed with their advisor. This phase may include struggles or amendments to the initial plan due to a change in the student's long-term goal or academic setbacks if the student is not meeting progression requirements. This stage allows the student and advisor to "revise, modify, and prioritize the plan" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 96). The expectation, however, is that the student is actively completing the plan and communicating with the advisor about the need to make any changes.

Don't Settle

For both the student and the advisor, the Don't Settle phase involves setting and meeting high expectations (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). The student must articulate their expectations for their advisor and advising appointments so the advisor can meet those expectations. During this phase, the advisor also challenges the student, continuing to push them forward when they have a setback and raising the bar as they continue to grow and progress during their undergraduate career.

Appreciative advising centers on building a trusting, understanding relationship between advisor and student. In the Disarm and Discover phases, I am building a relationship with students that will allow them to start to build trust with me. As this relationship grows over 2 years, it relies on an open line of communication on both sides. To keep students' trust in me and in the value of the appreciative advising model, and to start off the relationship with their departmental advisor in a positive light, I need to improve our communication around the time of transition. If students have a clearer idea of the advising plan that is in place during their 4 years as a Psychology student, they may not feel as bewildered when they transition to their departmental advisor once they earn 40 credit hours.

Appreciative advising has the big-picture goal of helping the student create a plan for their hopes and dreams, while holding them accountable in reaching that goal. Advisors must use the middle phases to discuss how course recommendations, major progression requirements, and degree completion tasks fit into students' short- and long-term plan. When students transition to departmental advisors, they are already expected to have an idea of their preferred courses for the upcoming semester, understanding how those options fit into the bigger picture. If I succeed in the Dream and Design phase, students can succeed in the final phases with a departmental advisor. Through action research, I worked more intentionally with students during the early phases to illuminate how their goals fit into their degree plans, which could lead to more effective communication when they transition to their departmental advisor. Their ability to effectively communicate with their departmental advisor will make them active participants in their future appointments.

Positive Psychology

Appreciative advising, which formed out of developmental advising, also operationalized the theory of positive psychology. Positive psychology aims to establish contentment and well-being for the past, hope and optimism for the future, and flow and happiness in the present (Linley et al., 2006). This theory focuses on the individual as a whole to facilitate problem-solving and assistance.

Although positive psychology was developed for implementation in a client–therapist setting, the underlying values and techniques easily transfer to the advisor–student setting and thus informed appreciative advising. Positive psychologists theorized that “therapists might provide more help to clients if they intentionally focused on and incorporated client strengths into treatment” (Howell, 2010, p. 16). Likewise, when advisors are helping students through their transition to college or assisting them with potential solutions to specific problems, they can draw on individual students’ strengths, goals, and drives when discussing a plan of action. This application of positive psychology influences the problem-solving side of appreciative advising.

Positive psychology has also informed how to build and maintain the advisor–student relationship in appreciative advising. Building a relationship between client and therapist from a positive psychology approach focuses on how information flows from therapist to client. The therapist does not dictate to clients, instead using a facilitative approach to help people achieve their objectives (Joseph, 2012). Within appreciative advising, this developmental approach to facilitate the flow of information between an advisor and student is also key. Allowing students to contribute ideas and openly share their concerns builds trust and rapport, which are critical to the success of the appreciative advising model (Joseph, 2012).

Transition Theory

Given my problem of practice, students' lack of satisfaction with upper-level advising, I recognized the need to prepare students for the transition to their departmental advisor. A transition is "Any event, or non-event, which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). Undergraduate Psychology students check every box of this definition. They lose the relationship they have with me, their UAA, and have to establish rapport with a new advisor. The change in advisor also brings a change in routine from the possibility of walk-in appointments to having to make an appointment in advance, sometimes several weeks out. The shift in advising style from developmental advising to prescriptive advising also requires students to fulfill a new role and may make them aware of the need to change their assumptions about the advising process.

To help undergraduate Psychology students navigate the transition to a new advisor and advising style, I can help them build certain coping skills. According to Schlossberg's 4S model, successful transition depends on four major factors: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). *Situation* refers to the amount of control the student has over the situation. At present, my students do not have any control over when they transition to a new advisor because the reassignment happens automatically when they earn 40 credit hours. However, I can rely on the other three factors to help my students fully understand what is going to happen, which may give them some sense of control.

Self pertains to how a student's personal and demographic characteristics affect how they view life and process change. As I will elaborate in this chapter, first-generation students and students from under-resourced and underrepresented K–12 schools may have a harder time with this transition. The key for success is full disclosure: all students must realize that all undergraduate Psychology students transition to a departmental advisor. This full disclosure promotes clarity and minimizes confusion for all students, but especially students already facing additional barriers.

Support focuses on those around the individual who give them comfort and guidance during the transition. This piece of the theory informed my tactics for preparing the students for transition: I focused my efforts on the final semester they are with me so they know what to expect once they move up to a departmental advisor.

Strategies refers to the way individuals cope with transition, suggesting how this theory can intertwine with appreciative advising, especially the design phase. I could use my role as a UAA to help students not only design their academic plan, but also design coping strategies for their transition to a departmental advisor. Using the two theories together helped me understand how to help students anticipate and cope with the transition of changing advisors, while also guiding my action research methodology. As students enter an advising relationship with a UAA, they could already begin to learn what the advising process will be like for Psychology students so they can begin to implement coping skills and prepare. This approach would follow Schlossberg's recommendation for aiding adults in transition by connecting them to the help they need to cope (DeVilbiss, 2014).

Schlossberg and Chickering (1995) elaborated on this concept when describing college students' transitions as occurring in three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. *Moving in* coincides with initial changes a student faces as they begin their collegiate career, *moving through* focuses on the changes they experience during the heart of their college experience, and *moving out* emphasizes the changes students face as they approach the end of the collegiate journey. Thus, academic advising coincides with "moving through" as something students experience during their time at the university. According to Schlossberg and Chickering (1995), adults who are "moving through" begin to balance their activities with other parts of their lives; they begin to feel supported and take on new challenges in their collegiate journey. Because students spend their first 40 credit hours with a UAA, they can receive support and achieve academic success before taking on new challenges with their departmental advisor, with whom they will continue to work toward degree completion.

Benefits of Appreciative Advising

This section specifies how appreciative advising can benefit students, advisors, and institutions. Through this type of developmental advising, institutions can see an increase in student satisfaction, advisor satisfaction, and overall retention and degree completion. Institutions seeing an increase in these four areas can also put more weight and value on the advising practice.

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction includes measurable variables like student fulfillment, retention, and degree completion. The first of these variables, how fulfilled a student is after they have attended their advising appointment, indicates their perceptions of the rapport they have built with their advisor. Holton (2017) showed that students value their ability to connect and communicate with their advisor; when they can accomplish both tasks, their satisfaction with their overall appointment and advisor significantly increases. Holton also discussed how students value a lot of the same aspects central to appreciative advising, such as creating a warm environment, implementing a more human approach, and discussing their successes and goals instead of focusing on their failures. These aspects align with the Disarm, Discovery, and Dream phases of appreciative advising (Bloom et al., 2008).

Students also build stronger relationships with advisors who practice developmental advising through appreciative advising, which leads to higher satisfaction, as evident in the time advisors spend with their advisees and the availability they offer to their students (Yarbrough, 2010). Developmental advising promotes a more two-way conversation due the inquiry-based style of the appointment, which makes students feel more like active participants whose voices are being heard. Such an added level of understanding in the appointment can lead to higher student satisfaction (Yarbrough, 2010). The more time that advisors invest in those unique and lasting relationships, the more students notice, and the higher their satisfaction increases (Holton, 2017). When students report feeling noticed, understood, and/or appreciated by their advisor, their satisfaction with their overall perception of advising increases (Allen & Smith, 2008).

In contrast, studies of prescriptive advisors have documented low student satisfaction. One study of a college where a majority of advisors were faculty advisors with no real background in academic advising found advisors were just making course recommendations, rather than discussing opportunities outside of the classroom or highlighting connections between students goals' and recommended courses (Filson & Whittington, 2013). In another study on academic advising with undergraduates, Coleman (2013) found students who do not engage in conversation with advisors about issues of concern or how to be more involved in their institution are more likely to report dissatisfaction with academic advising overall. Although Coleman could not prove definitively that developmental advising techniques guarantee satisfaction, the study's results suggest appreciative advising yields higher satisfaction rates.

Researchers have also measured student satisfaction with advising through retention and degree completion. Although universities want students to leave advising appointments feeling fulfilled, understood, and appreciated, students need to take that satisfaction one step further by carrying out the plans they make with their advisors, namely by succeeding in their courses and completing their degree requirements. Young-Jones et al. (2013) found that students who interact directly with educational professionals, such as academic advisors, exhibit higher levels of retention and academic success. The researchers proved this positive correlation by showing that students who met at least once a semester with an academic advisor demonstrated higher responsibility and better study skills and reported a higher level of support from their university and their advising process as a whole. Improved study skills, in turn, provide students with a higher chance of matriculating to degree completion. For example, one study at a 2-year institution in the Midwest found that students who received appreciative advising appointments compared to prescriptive advising appointments were 3.893 times more likely to complete their degree on time and 3.461 times more likely to complete it in an additional year (DeGeare, 2019). Although external factors may also contribute to students' completing their degree on time, this study indicated a clear positive correlation for students who received appreciative advising appointments.

Advisor Satisfaction

Advisor satisfaction is also key when evaluating appreciative advising. Faculty members who use the traditional prescriptive advising model often find the practice tedious and beneath them, believing their professional roles primarily include research and teaching (Filson & Whittington, 2013). Faculty members who see advising as simply fulfilling a university obligation concentrate on recommending courses rather than building a relationship with students. This prescriptive approach causes faculty members to be just as dissatisfied as students (Filson & Whittington, 2013).

Colleges and universities that have switched to an appreciative advising method have seen satisfaction within the advising community rise. One study conducted at multiple 4-year institutions examined the satisfaction of nine academic advisors who practiced appreciative advising, using strengths/talents, effectiveness, and relationships to judge overall advisor satisfaction (Howell, 2010). Although some advisors spoke to some of the struggles of appreciative advising, such as feeling too much empathy for students, most reported feeling empowered by appreciative advising, which led them to be better advisors. One participant shared that "The appreciative advising framework gave him the strength to have the conversation (with his student)" (Howell, 2010, p. 90).

When advisors are more satisfied with their practices and overall job, they can perform their job better, which can lead to higher student satisfaction (Holton, 2017). However, feeling satisfied with appreciative advising and one's ability to implement it requires advisors to participate in extensive training. Holton (2017) demonstrated that advisors who were able to immerse themselves in appreciative advising training were more caring, empathetic, and compassionate, which enabled them to build stronger relationships and have a more personal touch with students.

Advisors must have a working knowledge of, and feel empowered by, appreciative advising to obtain the highest level of satisfaction. Fortunately, advisors can access training on an institutional and national level. Kaplan (2020) studied the well-being and overall satisfaction of advisors who attended the Appreciative Advising Institute, a national training event, and found that 1 month after the institute, the advisors felt confident in their ability to implement appreciative advising and had already begun to see improvements in their relationships with students, which led to higher rates of advisor well-being and satisfaction.

Implementing a Successful Transition

My problem of practice encompassed students' transition from a UAA to a departmental advisor as well as the actual practice in their appointments. Beyond understanding how to implement appreciative advising to help students academically and holistically, UAAs must also understand the unique challenges and tribulations first-year students experience (UofSC, 2021). This understanding enables UAAs to help students develop coping mechanisms for their transition to a departmental advisor.

First-Year Students

First-year students are those entering the higher education realm for the first time. They may have completed some collegiate coursework through AP or IB programs or dual-enrollment coursework, but they are first-time, full-time, students (UofSC, 2021). This specific population of undergraduates requires extensive support and resources going into—and throughout—their first undergraduate year, provided through initiatives such as new student orientation and transition and acclimation courses (U.S. News & World Report, 2021).

If advisors wish to retain first-year students and be a useful resource for them, they must implement effective tactics. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2020), of the 2.6 million individuals who enrolled in college as a first-year undergraduate student in Fall 2018, 76% remained actively enrolled at an institution, and 67% remained enrolled at their initial academic institution in 2020. Because students feel more connected to advisors who listen to them and help them through their problems and struggles, advisors can increase their effectiveness with first-year students by engaging in targeted intervention and outreach (DeGeare, 2019). The 2017 National Survey on First-Year Experiences found that academic advisors at 88.3% of colleges and universities implement some kind of early intervention strategies (Estrada

& Latino, 2019). Such efforts might include degree-applicable course outreach, part-time hours outreach, and marking students "at-risk" (UofSC, 2021). This critical outreach can incorporate easily accessible data from advising technology platforms. Such intervention can establish trust between students and advisors early in a student's academic career (Dial & McKeown, 2019), which as existing research on appreciative advising has demonstrated, can increase retention and graduation rates.

First-Generation Students

From a social justice standpoint, all students deserve an institution's very best efforts and the best possible chance to succeed, which depend on the advisor–student relationship. Without coping skills to navigate their transition between advisors, students may struggle in a black hole of uncertainty, not knowing whom to contact for assistance and resources. Without appreciative advising or transition assistance, the first-generation population may be especially vulnerable. First-generation students are those whose parents or extended family members have not completed a college degree (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Although this group of students is fully capable of successfully completing academic and degree requirements, they often need extra reassurance and advocacy because they do not always know what questions to ask—or to whom (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). Building rapport with first-generation students through appreciative advising is key to retaining them and helping them complete their degrees.

First-generation students also experience a disadvantage of not having parents who can help them navigate the expectations of advising or a university's perception of advising. Studies have shown that first-generation students do not always understand a department or program's advising model or plan, so they are unsure of how or even whom to contact to seek assistance (Swecker et al., 2013). Using a direct, proactive, and caring approach is a proven method for working with first-generation students, but this interaction can never occur—and a relationship between advisor and student can never begin—if they do not understand the advising model at hand (Varney, 2007).

Summary

This chapter examined literature on how to measure student satisfaction with advising, with implications for my goal to help students prepare for their transition to a departmental advisor. Although appreciative advising is a relatively new concept in higher education, existing studies have demonstrated the benefits of developmental advising over prescriptive advising and studies of appreciative advising to date are promising. From this review, I concluded that should colleges and universities continue to implement appreciative advising, advisor and student satisfaction will continue to rise, which will lead to higher retention and degree completion rates.

My review also highlighted how effective transitioning and coping mechanisms tend to emerge from a counseling lens, which can easily apply to a higher education setting, especially theories tailored toward adults. Existing literature thus illustrates how advisors like me can use coping mechanisms to help first-year students transition to college, and through the relationship we build with them, prepare them to transition to a departmental advisor. The next chapter illustrates how reviewing the literature informed the qualitative research plan I designed to obtain critical information to impact my practice. Literature has shown that although an appreciative advising approach may be the most effective method for meeting with students, it is irrelevant if students cannot understand the department's advising model and their degree plan.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As I explained in Chapter 1, my problem of practice was that undergraduate Psychology students were not prepared to transition to a departmental advisor and a new advising method. Using action research, I hoped to resolve this problem by exploring how to adapt my existing appreciative advising approach to improve students' ability to navigate this transition, chiefly through communicating about the advising model and ensuring students understood their degree plan. With a fuller understanding of the process, including short-term and long-term next steps, students are likely to have a smoother transition to their departmental advisor, which will also benefit staff like me. This ease in transition will lead to more successful advising appointments, likely increasing student satisfaction with the advising process.

As a reminder, my research questions were:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?

My first research question specifically investigated how students perceived the advising model in Psychology and the relationship they developed with me. My second research question looked more closely at students' understanding of their specific degree plans.

Research Design

My study took a grounded theory approach, which typically produces a substantive theory, as opposed to proving or disproving a hypothesis, and "is particularly useful for addressing questions about process; that is, how something changes over time" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 32). I focused on the process of preparing students for their transition to their departmental advisor. Although grounded theory has faced some resistance from quantitative researchers, it can yield concrete analysis and decisive results. From an action research perspective, I intended to improve my practice, and through grounded theory, I could justify my results in the form of "a systematic theory, that […] is a reasonably accurate statement of the matters studied […and] is couched in a form that is possible for others to use in studying a similar area" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 224–225). Applying this concept directly to my study, I could be satisfied with my qualitative research when I received enough completed surveys and conducted enough interviews to construct a decisive strategy or theory for helping students transition from their UAA to a departmental advisor. With a short data collection window, I was unable to implement changes based on survey and interview responses within the scope of my study, but because action research is cyclical (Efron & Ravid, 2013), I intend to implement and assess key changes based on my participants' responses, further expanding a grounded theory.

Sampling Plans

My ideal sample consisted of two separate groups. The first group was first- and second-year undergraduate Psychology students who met with me for advising in Spring

2022 for the Fall/Summer 2022 term. Initially, I planned to filter this group by only including students whom I anticipated to earn 40 credit hours by May 2022, meaning they would move to a departmental advisor for the upcoming school year. However, department caseloads were expected to change for Fall 2022 to accommodate the new UAA I mentioned in Chapter 1. At the time of this study, a new credit-hour cutoff for reassigning students to a departmental advisor had yet to be determined. In other words, the department could have asked UAAs to hold students through the traditional second year (i.e., 60 credit hours). Alternately, they could have requested that we go back to being true first-year advisors, serving students below a 30-hour mark. Seeing no reason to filter my current students, I decided to send the survey link to all students who met with me for advising in Spring 2022. The second group was students on track to graduate in May 2022 who met with me for advising during at least their first year and had transitioned to a departmental advisor and attended at least one academic advising appointment with them. Both groups of students needed to be in "good standing" with the university (i.e., with an institutional GPA of 2.0 or higher).

First- and second-year undergraduate Psychology students who met my criteria received a link in their typical follow-up email from me after their advising appointment requesting their completion of my survey (Appendix A). As a reminder, my assigned caseload for the 2021–2022 academic year was roughly 400 students. Based on previous advising years, around 300 of those 400 students were anticipated to earn the 40 credit hours needed to move to a departmental advisor by the end of the year. With this information in mind about that population, and the typical survey completion rate I described in Chapter 1, my ideal sample size was 16 students, or 4%.

Fourth-year undergraduate Psychology students on track to graduate in May 2022 who had at least one advising appointment with a departmental advisor also received an email from me, asking them to participate in an interview about their advising experiences and perceptions (Appendix C). I obtained a contact list of 485 students by running a report for students who had earned at least 90 credit hours, which is the university's benchmark for Senior status. Because I ran the report based on earned hours, the list also included true third-year students who had entered with a large number of credits from high school. I decided to include them in the interview request as long as they were on track to graduate in May 2022 because they met the criterion of having completed at least one advising appointment with a departmental advisor by Spring 2022. I removed the name of any student who did not have an active graduation application on file for May 2022 because of ethical concerns, given they would return for Fall 2022. From this second population, my ideal sample size was between four and seven students. I was open to interviewing as many as 12 students, but any more would have led to overwhelming amounts of data with which to "identify themes, categories, patterns, or answers to [my] research questions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 216). Aiming for quality over quantity, I wanted to ensure I could fully transcribe, notate, and analyze all interviews within the short research time frame. If more than 12 students responded, I intended to choose a sample with students on multiple tracks. For example, pre-med, pre-law, or counseling students have expanded conversations with advisors because their degree plans are so specific, yet they also need to know and understand their degree plan, so I was curious to see if any particular group(s) felt less prepared for the transition or less sure of their degree plan. Of the five students who scheduled an interview with me, four completed the interview, thus within my target range. I will share more about them in Chapter 4.

In both cases, I used convenience sampling: inviting participants through a survey link or interview request link conveyed my intent to recruit based on pure availability and student interest. Convenience sampling alone may not be very credible, leading to information-poor cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First- and second-year students could not receive a link to participate in the survey unless they had been advised because I included the link in the follow-up email, and third- and fourth-year students could not receive an invitation to participate in an interview unless they had completed at least one advising appointment with a departmental advisor and were on track to graduate in May 2022. Given these limitations, convenience sampling made the most sense. Assuming most students who responded had built a strong, positive relationship with me through their advising appointments, resulting in their willingness to participate, I also aimed to obtain data from those who had less pleasant experiences with advising. As an advisor, I note any students whom I have potentially misadvised or misinformed or who seem disengaged. Such students may have provided different data than students who have a positive relationship with me going into an interview. I understood, however, that sitting for an interview may have been a daunting task for this particular group of students, so I was open to receiving electronic responses to my interview questions (Appendix D), although no students took that option.

Data Collection

I used two modes of data collection. First, as I explained, I sent a survey (Appendix B) to undergraduate Psychology students who were on track to earn 40 credit hours by May 2022 who met with me for advising during the 2021–2022 academic year. The survey allowed them to share their perceptions of the advising model in Psychology and their advisor–advisee relationship, along with their understanding and comprehension of their degree plan.

The second mode of data collection was interviewing, the backbone for qualitative research. Third- and fourth-year undergraduate Psychology students who met with me during their first, and potentially second, year received my email request to participate in an interview regarding their advising experiences and perceptions (Appendix C). I interviewed four respondents who met my sampling criteria, using a semi-structured protocol (Appendix D). A semi-structured interview approach, with flexible questions, was more conversational, and thus yielded more open-ended answers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An interview was another appropriate tool for data collection for my study because I was focused on the process of preparing students to transition to departmental advisors and examining their understanding of the department's advising plan and their overall academic plan, so these students were able to reflect on their transition experiences. Interviews took place in person and on campus during the Spring 2022 semester, and I endeavored to create an open and nonintimidating environment in my office so the students would be open and honest in their responses. With participants' permission, I recorded audio so I could listen to the interviews multiple times if necessary.

Before explaining the logistics of my methodology for data analysis, I wish to emphasize the important ethical considerations for my action research study. When looking at qualitative studies, "ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261). First, all participation in my study was completely voluntary. Students completed their advising appointments and registered for courses without any penalty, regardless of whether they participated in my study. Second, none of the students who participated were assigned to me after the Spring 2022 research term. All interviewees had already moved on to a departmental advisor and were on track to graduate in May 2022. All students who received the survey link were on track to earn 40 credit hours by the end of Spring 2022, and thus transitioning to a departmental advisor after the data collection window.

Data Analysis

Because the questions for my survey and interview were open-ended, I used similar analysis techniques for both data sources. Students submitted survey responses via an online form, so no transcribing was necessary. For the interview responses, I played each recording multiple times, stopping and starting after small chunks to ensure accurate transcriptions. Once I cleaned the transcripts to ensure they were accurate representations of my interviews, I began notating them. Notation allowed me to start the process of identifying meaningful themes and connections by marking "bits of data that [were] interesting, potentially relevant, or important to [my] study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204).

I then started category construction by coding each document for any information that was relevant to my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the survey responses, I broke each research question into two predetermined categories each that guided my search for themes, connections, and meaning (Table 3.1). I then color coded this information by highlighting the documents and noting alignment with my research questions in the margin. The same process also helped me make sense of the interview transcripts, although I collapsed the categories for the second question because participants' responses consistently combined discussion of their next-step course recommendations with their larger degree audit understanding.

Table 3.1 *Predetermined Categories for Analysis*

Research question	Predetermined categories
What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?	Perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship
	Understanding and perception of the overall advising model in Psychology
To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?	Understanding of their overall degree plan
	Understanding of specific requirements to achieve their degree plan

After coding the transcripts based on these categories, I was then able to identify different themes and patterns that arose (e.g., different categories of satisfaction, academic plans, degree progressions, and understandings of the Psychology advising model). I then broke these categories down even further into subcategories of positive or negative. For example, within the category of student satisfaction, I anticipated a subset of positive experiences or high satisfaction with advising and a second subset of negative experiences or low satisfaction with advising.

Using grounded theory as my overall approach, I was then able to identify categories, properties, a core category, and hypotheses to form an overall theory of practice. Furthermore, I was able to compare “within and between levels of conceptualization” to formulate a “theory that applies to a specific aspect of practice” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 228). Given my aim to improve my practice of preparing undergraduate Psychology students for their transition to a departmental advisor, grounded theory was a beneficial approach.

Summary

This chapter demonstrated my efforts to be systematic and ethical in my design of this study to improve my own practice as an advisor, which is the ultimate goal of action research. Using both surveys and interviews as data retrieval tools allowed me to gain insight from both sides of the advisor transition. As the next chapter reveals, my research plan succeeded in yielding the kind of information that will inform my pursuit of future interventions to help students navigate this transition.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This qualitative action research study aimed to explore undergraduate perceptions of the advising model used in the Psychology department, their advisor–advisee relationship, and their understanding and comprehension of their degree plan through a grounded theory approach. Given my problem of practice, that when undergraduate Psychology students transition to a departmental advisor, they are not prepared for a new advisor or advising method, I undertook this study to improve my own advising craft and better prepare students for this transition.

The following research questions guided my data collection, which took place during the Spring 2022 term:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?

The sampling plan I described in Chapter 3 yielded two separate groups of participants. The first group, first- and second-year undergraduate Psychology students on track to transition to a departmental advisor in the fall, received a survey link in their follow-up email after their advising appointment in Spring 2022 for the Fall/Summer 2022 term. The second group consisted of third- or fourth-year Psychology students who met with me during their first—and potentially second—year and had since transitioned to a departmental advisor.

This chapter elaborates on both groups of participants by presenting their survey and interview responses and my analysis using predetermined categories (Table 3.1). The categories allowed me to efficiently and effectively read through the data to find common themes that related to my research questions, guided by my theoretical framework.

Survey Analysis

During my official advisement window for the Spring 2022 semester, 2/2/2022 through 4/14/2022, students scheduled appointments with me in anticipation of the upcoming summer and fall terms. Given UofSC's registration period, April 4–15, students who get advised in February do not register before, for example, students in March. Students have a predetermined time ticket during the 2-week time frame for registration, so the timing of their advising appointment likely had no impact on their survey responses. When I invited students to schedule their appointments for Fall 2022 advising, my assigned students had dropped from 403 to 371. As explained in Chapter 1, this change in number from August to January is anticipated because of the constant flow of students changing majors and withdrawing from the university. Of the 371 students assigned to me at the time, 293 (79%) scheduled and attended their advising appointment. As to why the remaining 78 students did not, students who changed their major would have met with an Exploratory Advisor, which is an advisor undergraduate students can meet with to explore new major options and evaluate course credit for major change (UofSC, 2022). Students could also have transferred or taken a semester off, or they could have scheduled with a different advisor. As discussed in Chapter 1, although the Psychology department encourages students to schedule with their assigned academic advisor, we do allow students to schedule with any other Psychology advisor because of preference or availability.

Survey Participants

All 293 students I advised in Spring 2022 received a follow-up email from me immediately following their appointment with a link to my survey requesting their voluntary participation (Appendix A). Of the 293, 17 (6%) completed the survey. Although this number is on par with survey responses on an institutional level from close of appointment surveys in Spring 2022, I think the percentage is low. The response rate could even be indicative of my problem of practice: if Psychology students are not satisfied with their advising appointments, they may want as little to do with any follow-up as possible, including participating in a survey.

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, my role for the Psychology department is primarily to serve true first- and second-year students. In practice, some students on my caseload may be classified as juniors because of their high credit hours from incoming AP, IB, or dual enrollment coursework. Of the 17 completed surveys, 9 students identified as freshmen, 5 students identified as sophomores, and 3 students identified as juniors, based on their responses to Question 10, which asked about their standing in terms of credit hours instead of true enrollment year. The number of credit hours a student has earned at the time of their appointment shapes the advising conversation more than their true year of enrollment for reasons such as early graduation or double majoring, which have enormous consequences for their degree plan.

Respondents provided their university ID numbers rather than their names, which gave me the option to discard survey responses if any participants withdrew while minimizing bias because I would not be able to identify a student just from the ID number. This section also refers to survey respondents by numbers, based on the chronological order of their survey submission. In other words, the participant number has no association with the university ID number.

Predetermined Categories

My survey questions were designed for free-response answers, so I used predetermined categories to sort through and make meaning of the data (Table 3.1). Following Efron and Ravid's (2020) guidance, I drew my categories from my research questions, breaking my data into four groups, two for each question, which enabled me to look for themes and commonalities.

Perceptions of the Advisor–Advisee Relationship

For this category, I primarily used survey responses from Question 3, which asked, "How would you describe your advising appointments with me?" (Appendix B). I first determined whether each student described a positive or negative advising experience, noticing that students responded in one of two ways. They either responded briefly and in general terms, such as "good," or they wrote out in detail a specific example that stuck out to them from our appointment. Both types enabled me to decisively determine whether each student's experience was positive or negative. In other words, I did not observe any neutral responses. Figure 4.1 shows the overall breakdown of positive and negative responses.

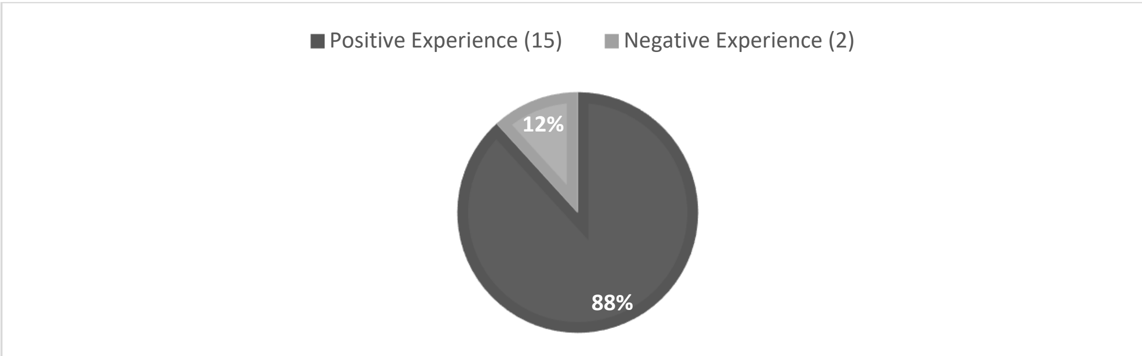

Figure 4.1 *Positive or Negative Advising Experiences*

Positive Experience. When looking at specific responses to determine whether students' experiences were positive or negative, I noticed the 15 students I perceived as having positive experiences expressed at least one or more of the following themes: that I was helpful, knowledgeable in terms of content, or understanding, and that the appointment was completed in a timely fashion (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 *Themes Reflecting Positive Experiences*

Theme	Student responses	
	n	%
Helpful	10	67
Knowledgeable	5	33
Timely	5	33
Understanding	3	20

Helpful. Of the 15 students who had a positive advising experience, 67% (n = 10) listed my helpfulness as one of the reasons for their experience, making it the most prominent theme for the category. Some of the 10 students described my helpfulness directly, such as Student 2, who wrote that the appointments "were very helpful. You always gave me the best advice for what would best benefit me for the coming semesters." Other students alluded to the theme of helpfulness, such as Student 1, who wrote, "She makes sure I am on the right track for my graduation and let me know if I could be able to handle those courses." This response aligns with another predetermined category by indicating the student's understanding of their degree plan, yet it also conveys that they found the information helpful because of the additional conversations of whether certain courses could or should be taken together, which leads to trust in an advisor, and ultimately a positive advising experience.

Knowledgeable. Of the 15 students I perceived to have a positive advising experience, five (33%) explicitly stated that I was knowledgeable in my role as their advisor. For example, Student 9 wrote, "Advising appointments with you are great. You listen [to me], and they are typically pretty quick responses because of how knowledgeable you are." This student directly attributed their satisfaction and overall experience of the appointment to my knowledge as their advisor. Other responses in this category were less direct. For example, Student 2 wrote, "You always gave me the best advice for what would best benefit me for the coming semesters," suggesting my knowledge of the curriculum contributed to their positive experience.

Timely. Five (33%) of the 15 students indicated a positive advising experience by expressing that their appointments were timely. Students want opportunities to talk through their questions and concerns, but they also want advisors to be intentional with appointments, thus valuing the students' time. Student 4 evoked the demands of a busy schedule on college students by stating that our appointments were "informative but not a waste of time. I go in and get what I need done and leave. It's perfect with my busy schedule." Student 6 echoed this point by describing the appointments as "great!" and adding, "I like how they are short and sweet. They get to the point." Individual advising appointments can vary in length, yet these responses show how critical valuing students' time can be, even as advisors prioritize providing all of the information students need. Valuing students' time makes students themselves feel valued, which can lead to a positive advisor–advisee relationship and a positive advising experience.

Understanding. 20% (n = 3) of the 15 students who had a positive advising experience described me as understanding. Such students primarily illustrated how I possessed the quality rather than using the exact word. Student 8 wrote, "I love[d] my advising appointment with you. I always feel better after we have talked." This reaction related to my being understanding of a situation the student had discussed during our appointment. Others indicated understanding in terms of the overall conversation, and not just with course-specific questions, such as Student 15, who wrote,

> The environment is very comfortable and makes me feel easy to ask any questions, even not dealing directly with advisement. I also feel your confident

> energy makes me confident that my courses are perfectly on track, and since you are approachable I'd be comfortable coming to you with any concerns.

Because I was understanding of any situation they brought up in the advising appointment, Student 15 felt comfortable in the environment and in their course recommendations, which ensured a positive advising experience.

Negative Experience. Two students (12%) reported having a negative advising experience, which implies a negative advisor–advisee relationship. The theme across both responses was feeling like their questions were not always heard or properly answered, which led to their feeling dismissed, rushed, or ignored. Student 7 wrote, "I feel like it's rushed and most if not all of the questions I asked are not answered." Student 17 voiced similar concepts by writing, "I'm honestly a little frustrated. I feel like what I communicate isn't always heard." When students feel like I view them as just another appointment on my calendar and do not see them for the individuals that they are—or when they ask questions and feel like they are being ignored or I am being passive, they may feel discouraged and shut down. Such experiences can harm students' perceptions of the advising experience and sour their view of advising in the Psychology department as a whole. More specifically, such experiences can negatively impact their view of their relationship with me and have implications for their conversations with their future departmental advisor. The departmental advisor is likely to have an uphill battle in terms of changing the student's perception of advising.

Analysis. The first half of RQ 1 concerns students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship, which requires understanding how they arrive at their perceptions.

A student's advising experience directly affects their advisor–advisee relationship, so identifying ties between the constructs is imperative. Survey respondents cited positive experiences, exhibiting themes of my being knowledgeable, helpful, and understanding, and suggesting their appointments were timely. These themes align with two concepts I mentioned in Chapter 2: appreciative advising and positive psychology. Appreciative advising "establishes and celebrates a deeper personal relationship between advisors and students through an emphasis on the intrinsic, ontological value of each student" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 7). The intentional two-way relationship creates a space where both advisor and advisee feel appreciated and valued. My ability to disarm evidently created such an environment. Several respondents felt comfortable and heard in that space, and one-third (*n* = 5) of those who had positive experiences suggested our conversations were very intentional, which shows how I value students' time.

My theoretical grounding in positive psychology, which concerns "the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions" (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 103), can also illuminate students' positive experiences. The themes that emerged from students' responses demonstrate what makes an advising experience positive, which leads to the optimal functioning of the advisor and advisee in the appointment, as illustrated by positive psychology.

Two-thirds (*n* = 10) of students with positive experiences cited my being helpful, which underscores what students want to experience in their appointments. That helpfulness was the largest indicator of a positive advising experience has implications for my practice, as I will elaborate in Chapter 5. Students who have such experiences can carry that positivity into their transition with their new departmental advisor. UAAs like me must lay the groundwork that advising appointments are intended to be positive—a safe and comfortable space not just for conversations about specific course recommendations, but as appreciative advising and positive psychology promote, holistic conversations about their overall experiences at the university. These strategies ensure students feel valued, appreciated, and heard, which then promotes a positive outlook on the advisor–advisee relationship. As a UAA in Psychology, I must be very intentional in my appointments to create such a positive environment and relationship. If I can establish this positive perception for the student during their time with me, they may start their new relationship off with their departmental advisor on the right foot.

Although only two students reported negative advising experiences, I identified some commonality across their responses. Both students wrote direct responses about feeling rushed or their questions' not being heard, but neither elaborated on specific examples. I might infer that neither student viewed me as knowledgeable, helpful, or useful, or felt their appointment was timely, but without specifics, I cannot say for sure. Nevertheless, given the need to ensure all students have a positive advising experience, I will elaborate on the implications for improving my advising practice in Chapter 5.

Understanding and Perception of the Overall Advising Model in Psychology

The second predetermined category corresponded with the second part of RQ 1, surfacing students' understanding and perception of the departmental advising model. To assess whether they knew the model is designed for them to change advisors after earning 40 credit hours, I drew primarily from Question 5, which asked, "How will you be able to tell who your new departmental advisor is moving forward? How do you schedule with them?" (Appendix B). Furthermore, I sought an understanding of whether they were prepared for the change from the developmental advising style in their appointments with me so as to be active participants in their prescriptive-style advising appointments with their departmental advisor. I gleaned such data from Question 8, "How else could your advising appointment have prepared you to be an active participant in future appointments?" (Appendix B).

Understanding of Next Advisor and How to Schedule Future Appointments. For the first half of this predetermined category, I determined whether each respondent indicated a clear understanding of who their advisor would be moving forward and how to schedule appointments with them. Figure 4.2 presents these findings.

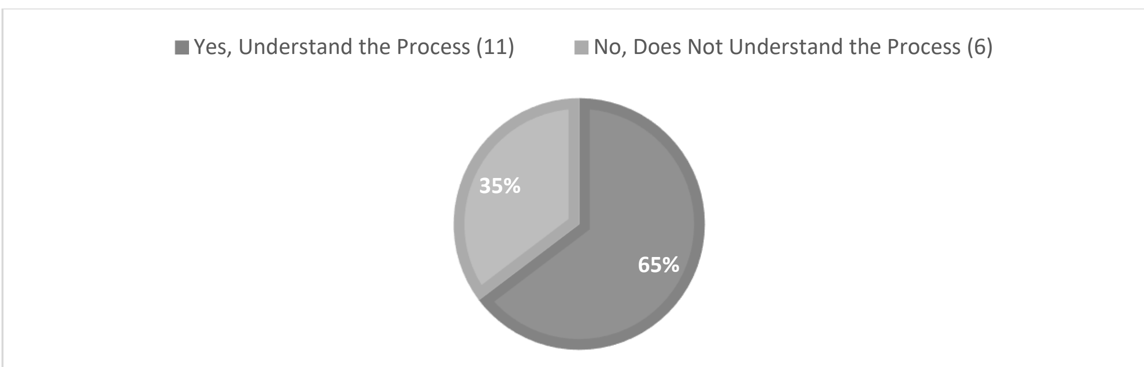

Figure 4.2 *Understanding of New Advisor and Scheduling Processes*

Understands the Process. Nearly two-thirds, or 65% (n = 11), of participants understood they would be reassigned to a departmental advisor after the current semester and were familiar with how to schedule an appointment. For clarity, I did not expect students to be able to name a specific departmental advisor but rather sought evidence that they were aware of the upcoming shift. Advisor assignments for the 2022–2023 school year did not occur until August.

Of the students who were knowledgeable of the transition, some stated that fact directly and others shared how to find the advisor assignment change. Student 16 wrote, “Yes, you get emails” in regard to who your assigned advisor is at the beginning of the school year. This direct statement conveyed the student’s anticipation of the change and intention to look for the email with the new advisor assignment in August.

Most students referenced different locations in the UofSC system, such as their Student Profile and Degree Works, where they could view their new advisor assignment. Student 11 wrote, “I believe you can find your advisor on your student profile on my.sc.edu,” much like Student 1’s comment, “I can tell who my new departmental advisor is by looking at the Degree Works on my self-service page. The degree works tells me the name of my advisor at the top of the page.” Students like these are clearly aware that they will change advisors and know where to look for the new advisor assignment once the change takes place in August.

As for student knowledge of how to schedule an appointment with a departmental advisor, I looked for specific statements related to any of the multiple methods. For example, Student 15 wrote about scheduling an appointment through a UofSC system by explaining, “I can set up an appointment through the navigate website.” Student 5, however, wrote, “My advisor sends me an email and I click on the link they send to schedule an appointment,” referring to campaign scheduling emails that advisors send out at the beginning of the advising window. Both answers, although different, show an understanding of the advising appointment scheduling process.

Does Not Understand the Process. Six students (35%) reported that they did not know that their advisor would change to a departmental advisor once they earned 40 credit hours, and therefore do not understand the advising model in Psychology. These students also fell in one of two categories. They either expressed that they did not know this change occurred or they were aware that the change occurred but unsure of how to view or be notified of their new advisor assignment.

Some of these six students directly stated their uncertainty or lack of awareness. Student 4 wrote, “I didn’t know I changed advisors.” Student 14 echoed this remark by writing, “I am not sure who my new departmental advisor is.” These direct statements explicitly suggest such students are unprepared for the change.

Other students in the subset of six seemed aware that they would receive a new advisor but unsure of how to view the new assignment or whether and how they would be notified of the change of assignment. Student 7 illustrated this confusion by writing, “I hope they will email me to let me know that they are my new advisor.” This statement suggests the student inferred from the survey question that they should expect to receive a new advisor but remained unsure of how to navigate the transition.

I placed Student 13 in this category due to an incorrect answer: “I am pretty sure Kelsey is still my advisor.” Because students typically move to a departmental advisor after 40 credit hours, this student may have less than 40 credit hours, and thus would remain with me for the upcoming year. However, in my appointments, I never tell students that they will remain with me for their next school year, so this response led me to believe that Student 13 does not understand the advising model for Psychology.

Of students who did not understand the process of scheduling an appointment with their future departmental advisor, their answers were pretty direct when stating their lack of understanding. Student 17 stated “No idea whatsoever” regarding how to schedule an advising appointment. In similar fashion, Student 14 wrote, “I am not sure how to schedule an appointment with them.” This lack of understanding could stem from their not being completely sure how to schedule with me while I was their advisor or could suggest their assumption that if their advisor will change, the way they will schedule an appointment may also change.

Preparedness for Active Participation in Appointments. When further examining the students’ perceptions of the advising model, I sought evidence of their readiness to be active participants in departmental advising appointments. The transition from a developmental style to a prescriptive style is successful when students feel empowered to take on this change and believe they have the skills and tools for active participation. Figure 4.3 depicts student readiness in the survey sample.

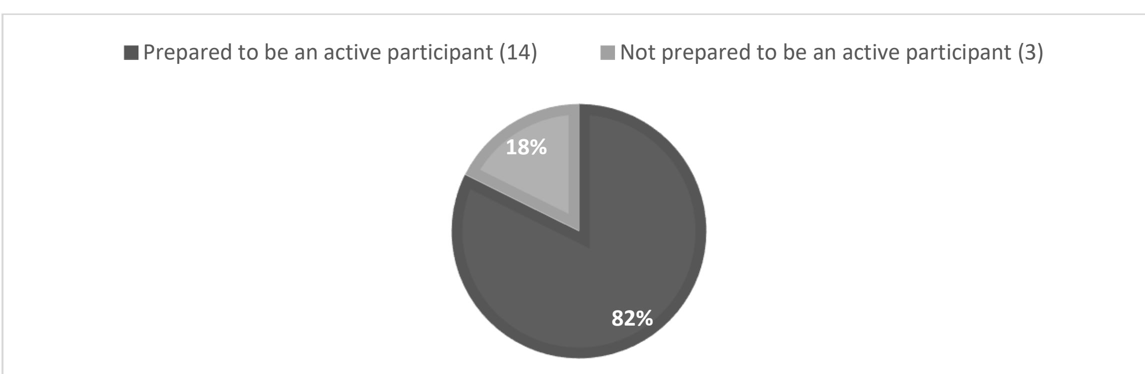

Figure 4.3 *Preparedness for Active Participation*

Prepared to be an Active Participant. I identified 14 students (82%) whose responses indicated readiness to be active participants in their future advising appointments. The main theme that emerged from these statements was coming to the meeting with courses for the upcoming semester in mind. Some students further elaborated that they would rely on Degree Works for that purpose. Degree Works is a real-time audit of the student's progress, including enrolled courses. It is accessible at all times to both advisors and students, so it is a tool that enables students to see which requirements they have already met, the requirements their current courses are meeting, and the requirements they still need to complete. Student 14 wrote,

> Techniques that I discussed at my advising appointment that will help me in my future appointments is to do my research prior to my appointments, so that I am familiar with the courses that I want to take and if I have any questions about anything, I can come prepared.

This idea of coming prepared also appeared in Student 8's response: "We discussed Degree Works and the other classes that I need to take. I can start to go through the higher-level courses that I need to take and do the pre-requisite for those courses."

Not Prepared to be an Active Participant. Three (18%) of the 17 students who responded to the survey reported that they lacked the skills to be an active participant at future advising appointments. Two of the three directly noted a lack of discussion about preparation techniques during their advising appointment, which cast doubt on their abilities. Student 7 wrote, "I did not discuss techniques at my advising appointment. I asked questions and was directed to read about the courses on Degree

Works." Student 17 wrote of the need "to discuss it at an appointment." Although this response is vague, because Question 8 asked what else could have been done at their advising appointment to prepare them to be active participants in future appointments, I believe Student 17 was suggesting their appointment with me did not prepare them to be an active participant, necessitating an additional appointment to acquire such skills.

The third student in this category responded with a more concrete suggestion. Student 10 wrote, "It could help if my appointments planned a little further into the future than one semester." This is extremely valuable insight because if the students were aware of potential courses for future semesters beyond the most immediate, they may process more easily why they are enrolled in certain courses when they are, such as if Course A is the prerequisite of Course B. If they are tracked to take Course B in Fall 2022, then they need to make sure they are enrolled in Course A in Spring 2022. Having a broader view of their courses during their time at the university may improve students' understanding of which courses they choose for the upcoming semester, which would make them more likely to be active participants.

Analysis. When analyzing my data in response to the second half of RQ 1, I recognized that student understanding of the advising model in Psychology must reflect awareness their advisor assignment will change when they earn 40 credit hours and a concrete grasp of how to schedule advising appointments with their departmental advisor. All advisors in our department use the same scheduling techniques, such as EAB/Navigate and campaign emails, which are emails sent directly from an advisor to all of their assigned students letting them know that advising has started for the upcoming term and includes a direct scheduling link for appointments. The students who were prepared referenced these tools in their responses, but respondents who were unable to recall any of the scheduling options do not seem to understand the departmental advising model and process. To better my practice as a UAA, I must find a way to communicate the advising model in Psychology clearly and concisely, directly disseminating the information. The theory of transition I cited in Chapter 2 emphasizes the openness and transparency of successful adult transitions, so individuals are not surprised by change and have time to develop coping skills and strategies. Schlossberg's theory of transition illustrates this principle—that how adults adapt to a transition is determined by "the individual's perception of transition, . . . characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments, . . . and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (DeVilbiss, 2014, p. 27). Having a direct conversation with my students would allow me to help them create coping strategies, such as ensuring they know where to locate their new advisor assignment and how to schedule an appointment with them.

In addition to understanding their advisor will change and how to schedule with their new advisor, students must also be prepared for future advising appointments. Students who felt confident in this area understood the importance of coming to appointments with some idea of their courses for the upcoming semester and any questions they already had about their degree plan or any other relevant topic, such as getting involved in research. Students who did not feel confident in this area also exhibited evidence of the next category by demonstrating a lack of understanding of how their current courses fit into the larger picture of their degree plan, such as if they were registered for a course in their current semester to meet the prerequisite requirement for the upcoming semester. This lack of big-picture understanding can harm their ability to be active participants in future advising appointments. If students were able to access and understand their audit on Degree Works, they could understand where their courses fit, whereas students who were unable to successfully analyze their Degree Works or major maps were at a disadvantage coming into their advising appointment, which led them to believe they are not prepared to be active participants in future advising appointments.

Understanding of Their Overall Degree Plan

This predetermined category came from the first half of RQ 2 about the extent to which undergraduate Psychology students understand their degree plan. I was curious about their big-picture understanding, beyond the courses they needed for the upcoming semester, and how the upcoming semester fit into the larger plan, along with related tasks, tracks (pre-med, pre-law, etc.), and goals. Students who have a solid understanding of their 4-year degree plan are more able to articulate their questions, concerns, and desired courses in their departmental advising appointments, so preparing students for this transition where they will be expected to discuss and communicate their larger plan, including potential tracks, is crucial. I concentrated on responses to Question 2, “What is your understanding of your four-year degree plan?,” and to the second half of Question 4, “Do you understand your course recommendations for the upcoming semester? How do these courses fit into your larger degree plan?" (Appendix B). Figure 4.4 shows the breakdown of respondents' understanding of their degree plan.

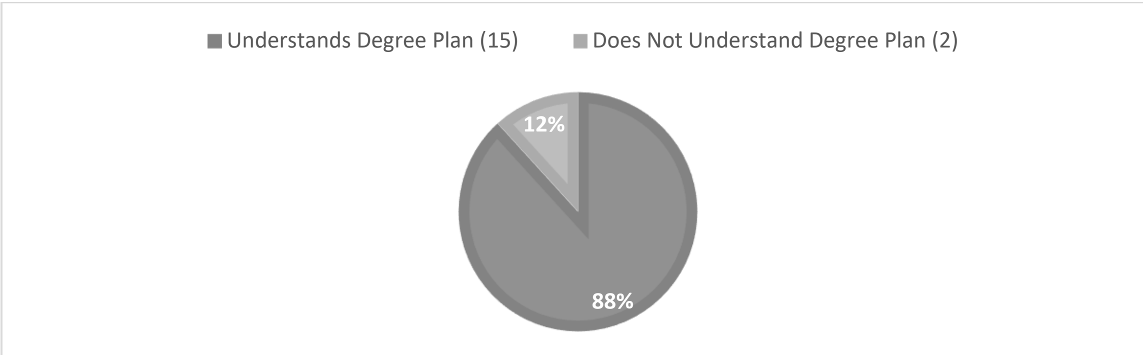

Figure 4.4 *Understanding of Overall Degree Plan*

Understands Degree Plan. When looking through responses of students who reported that they understood their degree plan, I noticed commonality between understanding their degree track (e.g., pre-med), credit hours needed for full-time status and on-time degree completion, and specifics of their graduation timeline. All 15 students who reported they understood their degree plan exhibited at least one of these themes, as illustrated in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 *Themes Reflecting Understanding of Degree Plan*

Theme	Student responses	
	n	%
Tracks	5	33
Credit Hours	3	20
Graduation Timeline	11	73

Tracks. Five students (33%) referred to their degree track, such as pre-med or pre-law, evincing their understanding of the big picture of their degree plan. Students on such tracks cannot evade requirements for the Psychology degree, but instead must meet additional requirements. Students who fail to complete courses for their declared track may not be eligible for the next step in their educational journey, such as medical school. Likewise, students on a track who put aside degree requirements for their Psychology major or Carolina Core courses may fail to earn an accredited bachelor's degree, which would also derail their educational journey.

Some students in this category reflected on the understanding of their degree plan with the addition of their declared track. Student 11 wrote,

> I understand my course recommendations, a great majority of them help fill my pre-med requirements with one class filling a major requirement and a possible one for a core class, depending on if I decided to take that class or another pre-med requirement.

Sometimes students have to understand their degree plan if they remove a track, such as to identify the courses they still need and how previous courses could fit into their degree plan. Student 2 wrote about such understanding by stating, "I decided I no longer wanted to pursue law school (pre-law track) so when I asked about dropping my law and society minor you helped me decide that it was the best decision for my graduation plan." Sometimes changing a specific track can also mean changing other aspects of the degree plan, such as a student's minor, so these conversations and ultimate understanding are critical for the student to feel confident in their 4-year degree plan. Students who declare on a specific track in addition to their major, even if they ultimately decide to drop it, must understand both facets to understand their degree plan and complete requirements for a timely graduation.

Credit Hours. Three students (20%) referenced credit hours as evidence of understanding their degree plan, namely that a 4-year Psychology degree is paced at 30 hours a year or 120 total hours for completion. Students must comprehend that if they do not complete 30 hours in the Fall and Spring semesters, which breaks down to roughly five courses a semester, they must make up those hours, whether in the Summer or Winter terms or by taking additional hours during the year. Student 5 discussed this concept while writing, “I need to be a full-time student and usually need 15 credit hours a semester in order to complete all my degree requirements in four years.” Student 4 elaborated on this idea by writing, “I will take 30 credit hours a year to get to my expected hours needed but can take more to graduate early.” Within the big picture of their degree plan, a student’s understanding that they must complete courses in a timely manner, equaling to 30 credit hours a year, is essential.

Graduation Timeline. Representing the most salient theme in this category, 11 students (73%) referenced their graduation timeline as the main factor for their degree plan understanding. Sometimes this theme manifested in students’ wishing to graduate early and being acutely aware of their expedited plan. Although such students typically bring in credit hours to help them toward their goal of graduating in less than 4 years, they still need a mapped-out degree plan to ensure they are taking the correct courses at the correct time. Student 1 wrote about the concept of planning for early graduation by explaining, “I plan to graduate in three years with a psychology major, Chemistry minor, and on the pre-med track.” This student had clear goals, including a desire to pursue medical school, so fitting all the pieces together to form the student’s degree plan was imperative. Other students who illustrated this theme were on the traditional 4-year trajectory but recognized the value of knowing how their courses fit together in their degree plan, so as to avoid unnecessary courses, which could delay their degree. Student 8 wrote, “My four-year plan will allow me to go to graduate school on time.” Like Student 1, Student 8 had the next step of their educational goal mapped out. Their understanding of their degree plan can ensure on-time completion of their degree, which can, in turn, facilitate success as they take their next steps.

Does Not Understand Degree Plan. Two students (12%) responded that they did not understand their degree plan but in unique ways. Student 17 was very short and direct by just writing “No” when asked about their understanding of the degree plan. Without a detailed explanation, I can only infer that explaining what one does not understand may be difficult. This short answer also led me to consider that the student may have been frustrated and could potentially believe that any additional response may have been overlooked or deemed irrelevant based on existing perceptions of the advising experience. In contrast, Student 7 responded in great length:

> I don’t have a great understanding of my four-year plan. I have met with my advisor, and she will ask me what classes I want to take and tells me to read course descriptions when I ask for her opinions on any of the classes I’m

> considering. Even though I have read the course descriptions and am still confused, no other answers are provided.

This answer offers a lot of insight as to why a student may not understand their degree plan. As an advisor, I can give information on specific courses and encourage students to read course descriptions, but I do not recommend specific courses when students have a choice because I want the students to exercise their autonomy. However, this student's response suggests my rationale for providing options instead of specific recommendations is unclear. The student's confusion about the options, in turn, left them uncertain about their degree plan.

Analysis. Students who reported they understood their degree plan mentioned specific criteria, such as understanding their graduation plan. To understand the specifics of their recommended courses for the upcoming semester, they must understand how the courses fit into the big picture of their degree plan while also understanding certain themes like credit-hour completion, declared tracks, and graduation plans. When assessing the data provided by the students who did not report a good understanding of their graduation plan, I realized I must be much more transparent and direct in my approach of advising specific courses. Although my theoretical framework encourages allowing students to design their own academic plan, this point is moot if the students do not understand why they are being asked to make certain decisions and choose specific courses. Intention, conciseness, and clarity are key for me in my advising practices to increase the chances that my students understand what I ask of them.

Understanding of Specific Requirements to Achieve Their Degree Plan

This category aligned with the second half of RQ 2, whether students understand the requirements for their degree plan. As opposed to the broader view of the prior category, this category pertained to the immediate next steps for their degree plan, including specific courses they were advised to take during the upcoming semester. I pulled relevant data from the first half of Question 4, which asked, "Do you understand your course recommendation for the upcoming semester?" I sought specific evidence of their awareness of the courses and my rationale for advising those specific courses. For example, a student advised to take MATH 111 might be aware that MATH 111 is the prerequisite for one of the progression courses in Psychology, PSYC 220. Such awareness enables students to understand how a specific requirement fits into their overall degree plan. Figure 4.5 illustrates the breakdown of this data.

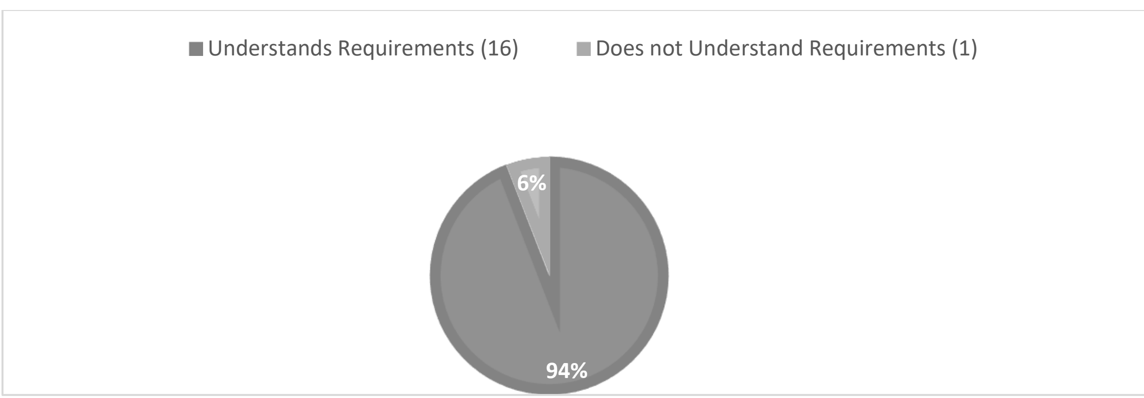

Figure 4.5 *Understanding of Specific Requirements and Recommendations*

Understands Requirements. Of the 17 Psychology students who responded to the survey, 16 (94%) expressed their understanding of course recommendations for the upcoming semester and why they were being advised for those specific course requirements. Of all the predetermined categories, this one yielded the strongest evidence of student understanding. Although the 16 students clearly exhibited their understanding, no clear-cut themes emerged, likely because the conversations I have with students about specific courses are very individualized, so my explanation for a recommended course can vary from appointment to appointment. Student 8 wrote, "I understand my upcoming courses. They are helping towards [completion of] my core, major, and minor classes." From this response, I inferred that the five courses this student was advised to register for included at least one core course, one major course, and one minor course. Student 8 was familiar with these specific categories and requirements, implying insight into their larger degree plan. Similarly, Student 3 demonstrated awareness of upcoming courses, adding, "They are foundational and will allow me to take more advanced major courses in the future," a response that implies prerequisite courses in their schedule and awareness that such courses would prepare them for their next-level courses, whether in the major or Carolina Core. For example, the student may have been advised to register for PSYC 101 to begin working on major progression courses. Their response shows an understanding that moving forward with other major courses is contingent on completion of such prerequisites.

Does Not Understand Requirements. Of the 17 students who responded to the survey, only one (6%) did not understand their course recommendations or specific degree requirements for the upcoming semester. Student 17's response to Question 4 was simply "No," inhibiting further insight into the lack of understanding. As I previously stated, students may struggle to articulate what they do not know or understand, thus only able to express their lack of understanding.

Analysis. Analyzing the data related to this predetermined category was encouraging, given that 94% of students reported they understood their specific degree requirements, which means they understood how the courses I recommended for the upcoming semester fit into the larger picture of their degree plan. The direct conversations I have with students about what they need to register for in the upcoming semester appears to be well received and understood. However, 6% of students did not understand how specific requirements tie into their larger picture, suggesting I can continue to improve. I need to make sure that I am consistently explaining the "why" behind every course I recommend to a student, rather than just naming the courses. If students do not understand the rationale behind their specific courses and requirements, they may become frustrated, wondering why some courses seem irrelevant, so being very intentional in making these connections for these students will be critical for improving my practice.

Interview Analysis

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, the goal of my interviews was to meet with students I had advised during their first and/or second year in the Psychology major but who had since qualified for a departmental advisor. To reach this specific audience, I ran a report of all Psychology students who had earned at least 90 credit hours as of April 5, 2022, denoting Senior status, a large majority of whom would graduate in May 2022, which alleviated some ethical concerns. The population included some true third-year students, but because they had already moved to a departmental advisor, I anticipated they would feel comfortable being interviewed, given that I was no longer their advisor.

I sent an email to all eligible students (N = 482) to request their voluntary participation in an interview regarding their advising experience as Psychology majors (Appendix C). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the Psychology department allows students to schedule their advising appointment with any advisor of their choosing, not necessarily their assigned advisor, so I expected this initial report to include students who had never met with a departmental advisor once they were eligible to do so, students who had met with both a departmental advisor and me since earning 40 credit hours, and students who had only been advised by a departmental advisor once they earned 40 credit hours. Because this action research study aimed to improve my practice, I believed that any insight from students with 90 credit hours or above who had experienced advising in the Psychology department would be beneficial, so I did not filter the report any further. The invitation email included a Calendly link for students to schedule a 30-minute interview slot (Appendix C). Of the 482 students, five students used the link, and four completed an interview. The student who did not come in for their interview did not respond to follow-up emails, but I reached my target sample of four to seven participants.

Interview Participants

All four students I interviewed met the study criteria, meaning they had earned at least 90 credit hours at the time of their interview, met with both a UAA and a departmental advisor at least once each, and graduated in 2022. Stephanie, David, and Catherine entered the university immediately after high school, and all three came in as Psychology majors, whereas Madison was a non-traditional student because she transferred to the university in Fall 2020 from a community college in the Midwest. I am using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and will disclose more information as needed to contextualize to their responses.

Predetermined Categories

As discussed in Chapter 3, I used a semi-structured interview approach, driven by 12 predetermined questions but adapting the order as needed to ensure a more fluid and open conversation (Appendix D). Consequently, students' answers varied widely in detail, depth, and order, but each interview encompassed all 12 questions in some fashion. Because the answers to my questions were woven throughout each interview, I coded the transcripts using similar predetermined categories (Table 3.1), but with the modification I explained in Chapter 3 to account for the reflective nature of interviews. Combining the third and fourth categories was more amenable to the natural flow of conversation, as participants' responses fused the larger scope of their degree plans and specifics for the upcoming semester. The four Psychology majors all had different tracks and long-term goals, so their experiences were vastly different, but the predetermined categories surfaced common themes.

Perceptions of the Advisor–Advisee Relationship

For this category, I used answers that fell under Questions 5–7 and 9, which focused primarily on students' descriptions of their appointments with different advisors, steps that could have improved the experience, and any insight they were willing to share on why they returned to me for advising if they did not remain with their departmental advisor (Appendix D).

Perception of the UAA. All interviewees had met with me at least once in my capacity as their UAA, and some, as I will expand on later, returned to meet with me multiple times. Stephanie, for example, met with me twice her freshman year, then met with a departmental advisor twice during her sophomore year, but then made an appointment with me late sophomore year and has been seeing me for advisement ever since. Stephanie shared some negative reflections on her initial advising experiences with me during her first year, stating, “The Psychology major was very overwhelming and confusing, and I couldn’t get the classes I needed.” Although Stephanie referred to the advising experience itself, the remark also reflects her perception of my role as the UAA. She clearly came into our meetings expecting to understand the curriculum, potentially from a broad standpoint as well as the next steps she needed for progression, and to be advised for the necessary courses. She elaborated, “Essentially nothing was open [at the designated registration time] because you register last essentially as a first-year student, and so I was not really aware of alternate options.” This detail reiterates Stephanie’s belief that understanding the curriculum is key for students to identify alternatives if they cannot enroll in their recommended course(s).

Madison, as a non-traditional student admitted in the Fall 2020 academic term, had a different experience. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, advising appointments for incoming students for orientation were virtual. As the UAA, I typically advise all incoming students at orientation, but because of the shift in format during Madison’s entry term, she initially met with a departmental advisor before being assigned to my caseload for the fall. When reflecting on that initial virtual appointment, she described it as “extremely frustrating,” adding,

> I was a transfer student from [an out-of-state technical college], and the registration and advising process were completely different, and I felt overwhelmed. When I tried to get back in contact with my advisor from orientation, I couldn’t. That was when I ended up emailing you for the first time and we connected.

As Madison and I continued to converse about her later experiences with advising during her first year at Carolina, when I served as her UAA, she remembered this time as “smooth” and explained, “I definitely had my hand held initially in the beginning and it was just always a good time.” In light of my problem of practice, students’ rough transitions to their departmental advisors, Madison’s perception of me as a UAA appears to be positive but acknowledges the handholding approach. Given the confusion she experienced during her orientation appointment with a departmental advisor, I likely explained things in great detail at our advising appointments. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, this conversation suggested ways to improve my advising practice.

Another interviewee, David, was unique as a double major in Psychology and Political Science. His long-term goal was law school, and he entered with enough credits to accomplish the double major, as well as a Business Administration minor, and graduate on time. David declared the double major at his Spring appointment freshman year, so I was the only advisor with whom he met during his first year. For clarity, students who declare a double major are encouraged, but not required, to see advisors from both departments. David met with a Psychology departmental advisor the fall of his sophomore year, yet he continued to meet with me for the duration of his undergraduate experience. He only remembers meeting with a Political Science advisor once during his senior year to verify he had completed all required courses. When asked about his overall experience with me as his UAA, he stated:

> My advising experience has been tremendous. The biggest thing you helped me with was deciding what to do with my time because I could have graduated early, but I did not want to. I was concerned at first about fitting in the double major and minor you suggested, but I trusted you and knew it was something I wanted to do.

David's answer exhibits a multilayered perception of his advising experience, displaying a clear level of trust in me and my recommendation of the double major of Political Science and the Business Administration minor to align with his long-term goal of practicing corporate law. As he stated, he was initially hesitant because he was trying to add some coursework but did not know if he had enough time for an entire second major and minor. When we mapped his remaining courses with both degree audits and determined he could complete everything on time, he made the decision right there in his Spring-semester, freshman-year appointment because of his trust in my judgment. David also began his response with a direct statement on his overall perception of his experience with me, which was "tremendous," leading me to conclude that his overall perception of his advising experience with me as his UAA was positive.

Finally, Catherine, as an Honors student, also had an Honors advisor in addition to her Psychology advisor. Honors advisors help identify Honors sections of specific courses recommended by students' major advisors or help them choose specific available Honors courses for general course recommendations. Honors students are expected to meet with both advisors every semester, but their major advisor is the only one who can remove their advising hold, enabling the students to proceed with registration because Honors advisors are considered secondary advisors. However, honors students are also among the first group of students to register. Catherine met with me during her first two semesters freshman year and then continued to meet with a departmental advisor during the remainder of her time as a student. She is the only student I interviewed who did not return to me for advisement beyond the first year. When asked about her advising experience during the first year and her overall perception of the role of the UAA, she responded:

> I guess to me it just wasn't very helpful. It's more of like something I have to do to register for classes, but it isn't helpful. It was just a back-and-forth conversation of courses, but nothing any deeper or meaningful.

Catherine's answer implies a total breakdown in her appointments with me while I was her UAA. The appointment seemed, to her, to focus solely on course recommendations without any deeper meaning. From an appreciative advising standpoint, her appointment should have been the exact opposite—a discussion of how she was adjusting to university life, what her future goals were, and how we might co-create at least a broad outline of a plan for reaching those goals. Her perception of how I handled the appointment did not show any evidence that appreciative advising occurred, and her response also indicated that she did not value the time we spent together. She was only there to get her advising hold removed so that she could register for courses.

Perception of the Departmental Advisor. Stephanie met with a departmental advisor during her first and second semester of her sophomore year. She then also met with me during her Spring semester sophomore year after meeting with her departmental advisor and has been meeting with me ever since, although she is officially assigned to the departmental advisor. I asked Stephanie to describe her experiences with her departmental advisor and share any takeaways from those encounters. She reflected:

> I remember just wishing I had scheduled with someone else. When I got the link to schedule an appointment, at the time I didn't realize it was with someone else. I was just so focused on choosing as early of a time as possible to meet with my advisor, I didn't even notice it wasn't with you. The meeting itself I just remember as being really straightforward. I left with my [advising] hold lifted, but I remember feeling very confused and overwhelmed because you would normally give me very specific courses, and with her [departmental advisor] it was just kind of broad suggestions.

I asked Stephanie to elaborate, and although she could not remember any specifics in terms of actual courses, she did add:

> When I meet with you, my form always has specific courses on it, such as PSYC 226. When I met with her, my form would just say things like major course or

> Carolina Core course. It wouldn't really give me any additional details, so I wasn't exactly sure what I should be registering for.

The form to which Stephanie referred is the advisement form students receive in the follow-up email after their appointment, which both UAAs and departmental advisors use, but the actual information on the form is not standardized. My advisement forms have specific courses on them, such as PSYC 400 or HIST 101. Departmental advisors typically write more generic things, such as "Choose 3 major, one of my courses, and one Carolina Core course." Although both methods may lead to five recommended courses, Stephanie's perception of the departmental advisor's approach indicates confusion because of her prior expectations based on my approach.

As an action researcher, I was curious about her rationale for choosing to schedule with me again after just two appointments with the department. Stephanie explained:

> I didn't realize I could meet with any advisor I wanted to. I emailed you after I met with her [the departmental advisor] because I didn't understand what she advised me for. I came in and saw you during lunch one day, and you basically readvised me. I remember begging you to advise me for the next year, and that's when I learned I could choose who I met with. I never went back [to a departmental advisor].

Stephanie's responses illustrate my problem of practice. She never directly stated that she was unsatisfied or unhappy with her departmental appointment. In fact, she mentioned that she left with her advising hold removed and an advising form with five recommended courses. However, her expectations for that appointment vastly differed from her departmental advisor's, clouding her overall perception of the departmental advisor and the experience itself.

Madison also provided good insight in terms of the disparities between the two different advising levels within Psychology. After her first year, she met with a departmental advisor once and then continued to meet with me until graduation. As with Stephanie, I first asked Madison to tell me about her experiences with and perceptions of her relationship with her departmental advisor and her overall experience with advisement on the departmental level. Madison explained:

> I feel like there's a disconnect between certain departmental advisors and students about, like, what needs to occur and how the appointments are occurring. I also didn't understand how the system worked, so there was a big learning curve. The [registration] system was pretty confusing to me, especially being a transfer student. I'm a millennial as you know since I took time off before coming here, but I feel like I'm young enough to understand technology. There just was no support there when I needed help. When I reached back out [to my departmental advisor] for help I never received a response.

As a reminder, students do not register for courses in their advising appointment, but rather during their assigned time within the 2-week registration window. In this instance, Madison was unable to get back in contact with her departmental advisor when she had questions during registration. Regarding departmental advisors' different understanding of what should occur in appointments and what is actually occurring in appointments, Madison stated, “I just don’t think they [departmental advisors] realize how time-sensitive everything is. If I can’t get in contact with them, it could make the difference in me being able to register for a class or not.” Madison’s answer also illuminates my problem of practice. Because students can schedule with any advisor in the Psychology department, if they are unable to access their assigned advisor’s calendar or are unable to get in contact when they have questions, they may contribute to overflow on my calendar due to the time-sensitive nature of registration.

David, the double major in Psychology and Political Science, only met with a departmental advisor once during the Fall semester of his sophomore year before returning to me for advisement during the remainder of his undergraduate years. When asked to reflect on his departmental advising experience, and his overall perception of his advisor, David responded:

> There isn’t really much to say. I walked in there and she had already taken my hold off. I remember she said she would only advise me for three classes because I was a double major and I needed to go see my [Political Science] advisor for the other courses. I was in and out of her office in less than 2 minutes.

As discussed in Chapter 1, UAAs are employed by the Provost’s Office and cross-trained for all majors in a given college. As a UAA in the College of Arts and Sciences, I am qualified to advise for double majors, whereas departmental advisors are employed at the college level and receive department-specific training. David’s situation thus further illustrates my problem of practice in that students who double major may experience confusion in their meetings with departmental advisors juxtaposed with their prior experiences with me. Going into his first departmental advising appointment, David was under the impression that his entire advisement would take place in that appointment but instead left with only a partial schedule of recommended courses. Although he did not directly label the experience as negative, his brief and somewhat dismissive response led me to conclude that his experience, like that of Stephanie and Madison, was not what he had expected.

When I asked David to comment on what swayed his decision or what his thought process was when he decided to return to me for advising, he explained:

> I went to my [assigned] departmental advisor only because I didn't want to get in your hair because I thought that I would be able to figure it out. But once I went to that [departmental advisor] meeting, I knew I needed to talk to you. So it's been a lot of sticking with you the entire time ever since.

David's response reinforced his earlier comments about how he left his departmental advising appointment with only a partial schedule, three recommended courses instead of five, because of his double major. Although he believed he could use his Degree Works and major maps to determine the other two courses, he still needed guidance.

Catherine was the interview participant who completely followed the advising model, meaning she met with me during her first year and then a departmental advisor for the remainder of her time. Given her lackluster experience with a UAA, I was curious whether her relationship with her departmental advisor was better, yet she described it as "frustrating." She explained:

> It just felt transactional. I want to pursue a PhD in Quantitative Psychology and when I asked [the departmental advisor] some questions about the field and graduate programs, she told me she didn't know anything about it. I just didn't feel like there was any benefit to me being there other than getting my hold removed.

A couple of items from Catherine's experience stand out. First, she described her appointment as "transactional," using one of the key words associated with prescriptive advising, departmental advisors' typical style. Although proponents of prescriptive advising argue that the quick, transactional nature of the appointments is of value to students because it prioritizes their time, Catherine wanted a deeper, more in-depth appointment. Second, Catherine's frustration also resulted from her departmental advisor's inability to discuss or answer questions about potential graduate programs and her intended career field. Although both UAAs and departmental advisors talk to students about their next steps in broad terms, advisors are seldom equipped to talk about specifics because of how much the requirements can vary.

Perception of the Overall Advising Model in Psychology

Because interviewees, unlike survey participants, had met with their departmental advisor at least once, for this category, I wanted to know if they understood why they had been reassigned. I pulled responses from Questions 10 and 11, which asked about a time they were unsure who their advisor was, how they navigated the transition to a new advisor, and if anything could have prepared them better (Appendix D).

As previously mentioned, Stephanie's transition to a departmental advisor was not that great. She shared:

> I didn't even know I had scheduled with a different advisor when I got the email. Then, um, I guess you could say the transition did not go super well. I didn't feel like [the departmental advisor] really understood what I needed, and then I started coming back to you.

Stephanie was clearly unaware that the change in advisor had occurred—or why. Her reiterating the fact that she had to return to me for advisement conveyed that I failed to give her the coping skills necessary to adapt to this change. Likewise, she did not seem to have the skills to be an active participant in those meetings. As an active participant, she may have been able to voice her needs during her departmental appointment.

Madison echoed a similar theme when I asked her how, if at all, she prepared for her first meeting with a departmental advisor. She stated, "I didn't go into it thinking it would be any different than meeting with you, but it was entirely different. So, no. No, I guess you could say I didn't prepare, and I was not prepared for the appointment." Although Madison was much more direct in her response than Stephanie, she also seemed to lack the necessary skills to succeed with departmental advising. Unaware that the appointment would be conducted in a different style, she, as she stated, was not prepared for the appointment itself. In terms of the advising model, Madison was aware of the change of her advisor, though she did not give any indication that she knew why the change had occurred. Overall, her response indicates that she did not fully understand the process and rationale behind the advising model in Psychology.

David had a similar experience. He was aware that his advisor had changed but unaware why the change occurred or what to expect in the new appointment. He explained, “Yeah I thought I could handle it. But like I said I wasn’t aware that [the departmental advisor] wouldn’t be able to talk me through all five classes.” This theme of having a general sense of a new advisor but nothing more in terms of the rationale or what to expect is apparent. As previously discussed, this lack of understanding ultimately prompted David to return to me, feeding my problem of practice.

When I talked with Catherine about her perception of the advising model in Psychology and her advisor assignments, she had the following response:

> I thought it was random. My honors advisor never changed, so I just thought my Psychology advisor continuing to change was just random. I have talked to some of my friends in different majors and they always had the same advisor, so I just thought it was something to do with Psychology. But I never really thought any more into it.

For context, Honors advisors are assigned by major, so students remain with them all 4 years unless the advisor leaves. In terms of her friends’ remaining with the same advisor, all colleges, and even departments within those colleges, have individual plans and models for advising. Given no standard, university-wide model, her friends may indeed have never changed advisors. Regardless, Catherine was clearly unaware of the advising model in Psychology and thus unprepared for the transition.

When reflecting on why the interviewees did not have a lot to say about the advising model or demonstrated a lack of understanding that one even existed, I continued to think about my problem of practice. Students who transitioned to a departmental advisor could not be expected to navigate their advising appointment effectively if they did not even know the change was going to occur. They also lacked coping skills to help them through this change in advisor and appointment style, as my theoretical framework emphasized.

Understanding and Perception of their Degree Plan and Requirements

Based on the survey responses, students' understanding of their degree plan played an important role in making them feel like they had a successful advising appointment. Students need to understand their course recommendations for the upcoming semester, the rationale for those recommendations, and how the courses fit into their larger degree plan. For the interviews, I reflected on this category with responses to Questions 2 and 8, which asked about their declared degree program and understanding of their degree plan and course recommendations (Appendix D).

Stephanie had the following to say:

> After this I am planning to go to grad school for Higher Education. I know we talked a lot about this because I was initially a double major with Dance because I thought I wanted to be a Dance teacher. So I do think my conversations with you definitely helped me figure out what I wanted to do, and then I looked into schools. I am doing grad school here, so it made the process a lot easier. The only time I ever was confused or had a problem with my course advisement is if a course was already full when I went to register. I was not always really

comfortable choosing an alternate course on my own, so you know that's when I would always send you an email or come by.

Talking with Stephanie about her future was easy, given her long-term goal to be an advisor. Because she was only interested in applying to UofSC for graduate school, we were able to discuss the specific process during appointments. Throughout the interview, Stephanie repeatedly referred to the stress of finding recommended courses and her lack of knowledge of what to do if a course was full. She had enough understanding of her degree plan to know why I was recommending what I did, but she was unable to take that additional step of using her Degree Works to choose alternate courses when necessary. This additional step would have been critical for her to be an active participant with her departmental advisor.

When I talked with Madison about her understanding of her degree plan and course recommendations over the semester, she gave me a mixed response:

> In the moment, like while I was with you, everything made sense. But then when I would go home and put a schedule together, I didn't really understand why I was taking some things, but I just trusted you. I knew I wanted to go into counseling, so we had the whole graduate school conversation, so I just was really focused on getting into graduate school. I remember having my final [Senior] Check with the Dean's Office confirming I was going to graduate, and I felt this sense of relief, but I was never really nervous about anything. It was just nice to get, you know, a confirmation.

Madison's answer gave me a lot of insight into her understanding and even more insight into her overall perception of her advising experience. I am encouraged to hear that she trusted me, but I do not believe students should register for courses simply based on trust. Madison's story is thus another example of the clear disconnect between specific course recommendations and rationales. Madison did know she wanted to go to graduate school for counseling, and she was very focused on that aim, which is why she added a minor in Counseling Education. She seemed to understand why she was pursuing a Psychology degree with a minor in Counselor Education, but she may not have understood why she was enrolled in every course during any given semester.

Regarding David's course recommendations and degree plan, he recounted a specific instance of confusion:

> I remember being confused and worried about that one class. It was one of the Management classes, I think, for my minor? You had advised me for it, and I knew I needed it for the minor, but I couldn't get into it. Every time I went to register for it, for like three semesters straight, I got an error and couldn't get into it. I remember then kind of questioning if a Business minor was something I could truly do. But, other than that, I knew I didn't need anything specific other than my degree and the LSAT for Law School.

The college that controls the Business Administration minor had changed the course requirements form when David initially declared, so the course he was trying to register for had gone back to a majors-only course, which explains the error he received. He was eventually able to register for the course to complete his minor. As with Stephanie and

Madison, David did not seem to understand his degree plan. He knew his long-term goal was law school, and he knew the specific courses he needed for degree requirements, such as the Management course in question, but his answer falls short of exhibiting full understanding of his audit.

Catherine also chose to answer with a specific example of course confusion. She started off with, “So, I know that Psychology advisors don’t know everything, but I did expect them to know about classes.” When I asked her to elaborate, she explained:

> I just think sometimes they come off as careless. I told my [departmental] advisor about a class I wanted to take. She told me I didn’t meet the prerequisite, but then my friend registered for the course without the prerequisite my advisor told me I had to have. When I then went to try to register for the course, it was full. I emailed my advisor to ask if I could get an override since I would have registered for the class days before but was told I couldn’t. She told me the class was full and there was nothing she could do without the instructor’s permission. It was just frustrating because the class was not offered this semester, so I was never able to take it.

This situation is extremely troubling, suggesting Catherine came prepared to her advising appointment, which is ideal, only to hear that a course she wanted to take was not available, when it may actually have been. She then interpreted her advisor’s response as dismissive. Such situations cause mistrust in advisors and negate the safe space that we strive to build. This situation also forced her to become much more aware of her degree audit, which is always a goal, but students should not have to endure such an experience to achieve that outcome.

Summary

The 17 students who responded to my survey and the four students who participated in an interview with me echoed many of the same themes. Even though 88% of survey respondents had an overall positive advising experience with me, that 12% of students did not gives me pause. In addition, three of the four students I interviewed had overall positive advising experiences throughout their time in their undergraduate career, but I would have preferred to see 100% satisfaction. Chapter 5, which evaluates the findings through the lens of my theoretical framework, provides an action plan for continual improvement, so more students can successful transition to their departmental advisors and enjoy a more positive advising experience overall.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Higher education institutions recognize that “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (Light, 2001, p. 81). What constitutes “good advising” can be ambiguous, but measuring certain characteristics, such as student satisfaction, can indicate whether an advising experience has succeeded. This concept was the driving force behind my study: by determining how to improve my practice, I sought to improve the advising experience of undergraduate Psychology students at UofSC.

As introduced in Chapter 1, students’ transition from a UAA to a departmental advisor is often tumultuous. In my experience, they were seldom prepared for their new advisor or advising method. Students were going from a developmental style of advising, which positions the advisor and the student as equal participants in the appointment, to a prescriptive style of advising, which is purely transactional, simply focused on producing course recommendations (Yarbrough, 2010). When students feel underprepared, uninformed, and overwhelmed at their academic advising appointments, their satisfaction—and thus overall collegiate experience—can suffer.

To resolve this problem of practice, I reviewed existing scholarship, detailed in Chapter 2, on appreciative advising, positive psychology, and adult transitions to form the basis of an action research study. The purpose of my study was to determine how to be more proactive in helping students prepare for and successfully navigate the transition from me to a departmental advisor. Specifically, I sought to ensure a trusting and positive relationship by establishing clear communication with my first- and second-year students about the advising model in place for Psychology students. Moreover, I sought to ensure students had a degree plan in place, understanding not only their immediate next steps for courses, but also the big picture of degree progression and requirements. The research questions I developed to achieve this goal were:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and the overall advising model in Psychology?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it?

With a limited window for data collection, I did not implement an intervention within the scope of the study, but this chapter presents an action plan for future semesters.

Synthesis of Findings

Looking across the findings in Chapter 4, I concluded that both the surveys and the interviews gave me insight into my research questions. This section presents a concise summary of what I learned. In turn, I am better prepared for helping students navigate their transition from me to their departmental advisor.

Research Question 1

My first research question hinged on learning how students viewed their relationship with their advisor, including me and—for interviewees—their departmental advisor. I also aimed to learn if students were aware of the advising model in

Psychology, and more specifically, if they were aware they would transition to a departmental advisor from me as their UAA and when that transition would occur.

Advisor–Advisee Relationship

The advisor–advisee relationship is crucial to improving the advising experience of undergraduate students. As detailed in Chapter 4, I analyzed participants' advisor–advisee relationship by categorizing their responses as positive and negative and referring to parts of my theoretical framework—appreciative advising and positive psychology—to make sense of the data. Appreciative advising, as Chapter 2 explained, emphasizes collaboration and "asking positive open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 27). In partnership with appreciative advising, positive psychology promotes contentment and well-being for the past, hope and optimism for the future, and flow and happiness in the present (Lindley et al., 2006).

Across the first- and second-year students' survey results, four themes emerged that suggested why students had a positive experience: I was helpful, I was knowledgeable, their appointment with me was timely, and I was understanding. My interviews with the third- and fourth-year students echoed these themes. Noticeably, these themes also directly illustrate and align with my theoretical framework. For example, students in both participant groups who indicated having a positive experience credited that positivity to my being helpful, which evokes the Dream and Discover phases of appreciative advising.

In the Discover phase, appreciative advisors pose “positive open-ended questions” with the aim of “learn[ing] about students’ strengths, skills, and abilities” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). In my advising appointments, I strive to ask students how things are going—what is going well and what they may need some assistance with. Such questions spark discussion about their existing strengths and skills, such as time management, as well as conversation about their perceived weaknesses, enabling me to refer them to campus resources, such as the Student Success Center. Specific examples of this approach emerged in my interviews with Stephanie and Madison when both reported feeling overwhelmed in trying to navigate their degree plan and course registration process and thus found my explanations and assistance helpful. That so many participants, in both my survey and interview samples, viewed me as helpful, which strengthened their relationship with me as their advisor and ultimately contributed to their positive advising experience, suggests I am successfully using this phase of appreciative advising in my own practice.

The Dream phase focuses on “inquiring about students’ hopes and dreams for their future” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). Discussing such topics requires a level a trust between the advisor and the advisee so the student feels comfortable disclosing their future plans. With my survey participants, this groundwork would have been established in their Fall 2021 appointment, and with my interview participants, it would have begun even earlier, depending on their admit year. Again, that so many respondents viewed me as helpful, which made their overall advising experience positive, suggests I effectively used appreciative advising in our conversations about their future, showing mastery of the Dream phase.

My findings also align with the Design phase of appreciative advising, when advisor and advisee “co-create a plan for making their dreams a reality” (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). That 33% of survey respondents who had a positive advising experience found me to be knowledgeable points to my success with this phase. One specific example that shows my mastery of this phase appeared in my interview with David. His advising experience was positive because he trusted me as his advisor to help him map out his complex degree plan, which allowed him to graduate on time with his desired double major and minor. Appreciative advising “is concerned not only with specific personal or vocational decisions but also with facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavior awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills” (Crookston, 1994, p. 78). David knew he came in with a large number of credits but also wanted to make the most out of his collegiate experience and stay all 4 years without wasting them. Our extensive, multifaceted conversations helped him determine if the strenuous path he envisioned was possible, due to his trust in my assessment of his situation. This trust paid off when he did, in fact, graduate in May 2022 with both degrees and the minor, hence the positivity he expressed in his interview with me in late April 2022. My extensive understanding of the Psychology curriculum informs my conversations with students about the major, their goals, and specific course recommendations, which ultimately strengthens our relationship and contributes to an overall positive academic advising experience.

As for the students who emphasized our timely appointments in a positive light, the Don't Settle phase provides insight into their experiences. This phase of appreciative advising is when the advisor and advisee set high expectations for each other and hold each other accountable (Appreciative Advising Institute, 2020). I expect students to come to their appointments as active participants—with at least an idea of potential classes for the next semester and how they are doing in their current courses. As with the Dream phase, I would have established this precedent during participants' Fall 2021 appointment for their Spring 2022 courses. I also prepare for appointments on my end by looking at notes in EAB Navigate from any previous appointments and envisioning potential courses for the next semester based on their current schedule and degree plan. In my Spring 2022 appointments, I set the stage by following up on previous discussions and turning to students to lead the next steps of the meeting based on their questions or concerns. When they can see that I have honored my side of the arrangement by preparing for our meeting, they know I value their time and am committed to our 30-minute time frame. Completing their appointments in a timely manner increases the likelihood of a positive advising experience and thus a positive advisor–advisee relationship.

Finally, that respondents viewed me as understanding directly relates to both the Deliver phase of appreciative advising and the principles of positive psychology. The Deliver phase allows the student and advisor to "revise, modify, and prioritize the plan"

(Bloom et al., 2008, p. 96). The survey participants had met with me at least once in Fall 2021, even if they were first-year students, when we would have had conversations around why they were Psychology majors, what their long-term goals were, and what they hoped to accomplish at UofSC. Students are prone, especially in their first year, to change their minds about their degree path. Even though I hold them to the standard of being active participants and following through on the plan that we would have established in their Fall 2021 appointment, I also understand that plans change, unexpected events occur, and new weaknesses and concerns can arise. That students saw me as understanding reflects my approach to such conversations—inviting them to share any problems that arise or changes they want to make—and illustrates the trusting relationship that contributes to a positive advising experience.

Likewise, positive psychology is at work in that I meet students where they are in their collegiate career, while holding them accountable for their past and preparing them for the future. Even difficult conversations can occur without leaving the student feeling helpless or hopeless. For example, when discussing a major change or hardship withdrawal, I channel the theory of positive psychology to create a good space for the student during the appointment and ensure they leave with a clear plan for the future, as affirmed by participants' describing me as understanding.

Despite abundant data regarding students' positive perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship, some students nevertheless had an overall negative perception of the advisor–advisee relationship. Two students, or 12% of survey respondents, indicated having a negative advising experience with me. As discussed in Chapter 4, neither student felt like their questions were heard or properly answered, which led to their feeling ignored. Chapter 2 explained that appreciative advising is a form of developmental advising, wherein the student can bring just as much to the table as the advisor can (Yarbrough, 2010). Even though these students believed they came to the appointment prepared to be an active participant, that they left feeling ignored is completely at odds with developmental advising, hence their negative experience.

Similarly, Catherine's interview highlighted her negative advising experience during her first year. Although she did not mention me by name, as the only Psychology UAA during her first year as a student declared in the Psychology major, I can safely assume that her descriptions apply to me. That her appointment seemed like nothing more than a back-and-forth conversation of recommended courses for the upcoming semester suggests a complete breakdown of appreciative advising and sounds much more like prescriptive advising (Yarbrough, 2010). Catherine's perceived lack of rapport with me and feeling like she was not valued in the appointment translated to a negative experience.

The prior examples notwithstanding, the vast majority of participants, as detailed in Chapter 4, relayed a positive advising experience with me, and thus a positive advisor–advisee relationship. However, all four interview participants described negative advising experiences with their departmental advisor, and some themes echoed across the interviews: they felt dismissed as participants in the appointment, and they felt more confused about what they should be registering for in the upcoming semester than before the appointment. Stephanie said, "I left with my [advising] hold lifted, but I remember feeling very confused and overwhelmed because you would normally give me very specific courses, and with her [departmental advisor] it was just kind of broad suggestions." David echoed this experience by explaining:

> I walked in there and she had already taken my [advising] hold off. I remember she said she would only advise me for three classes because I was a double major... I was in and out of her office in less than 2 minutes.

These examples, among others in the in-depth interviews with these two participants, as well as with Madison and Catherine, suggest they felt dismissed, rushed, and confused because of the department's prescriptive approach to advising, wherein "the primary goal is course completion" (Yarbrough, 2010, p. 6). Because prescriptive advisors focus solely on course recommendations, they have no need or desire to build rapport or a relationship with advisees (Crookston, 1994). My interview participants' explanations of their departmental advising appointments exuded characteristics of prescriptive advising and lacked characteristics of appreciative advising or positive psychology. Specifically, their advisors did not seem to ask the deeper questions to have more meaningful conversations that lead to positive advisor–advisee relationships. Their appointments were simply short and transactional, limiting the chance of a positive advising experience.

The Advising Model

Although students' perceptions of their advisor–advisee relationships were relatively clear, whether positive or negative, their perceptions of the advising model were much more complex and varied.

As detailed in Chapter 4, I determined that survey respondents understood the advising model in Psychology if they were able to identify who their new advisor would be and how to schedule an appointment with them. I also assessed whether students were prepared to be active participants in their departmental advising appointments given the shift from developmental advising to prescriptive advising. Reassuringly, as shown in Figure 4.2, 11 students (65%) indicated awareness of the transition and were confident in their ability to schedule an appointment with their future advisor. In addition, as seen in Figure 4.3, 14 students (82%) reported feeling ready to actively participate in their appointments with a departmental advisor. This knowledge of the impending transition, relevant processes, and necessary mindset directly aligns with my discussion of the theory of transition in Chapter 2, specifically Schlossberg's 4S model, which argues that a successful transition hinges on four major factors: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). My survey findings suggest most students knew about, and were able to process, the transition from me as their UAA to their departmental advisor. Being confident in their ability to schedule an advising appointment with this new advisor and actively participate in future appointments also demonstrates the coping skills that can ensure a successful transition.

On the other side of that transition, only one interviewee gave any indication of understanding the advising model in Psychology. David explained his awareness of the change and how to schedule an appointment, but he was not prepared for the more prescriptive advising experience. Through the lens of my theoretical framework, therefore, David's experience fell short. Although he developed the coping skill of having the knowledge of key details and processes, he seemed to lack the necessary skills to be an active participant in his departmental advising appointments, which indicates he was not aware of the change from developmental to prescriptive advising.

Even more concerning, six students who completed the survey (35%), as seen in Figure 4.2, were completely unaware of the change to a departmental advisor, and 3 survey respondents (18%), as seen in Figure 4.3, reported a lack of confidence in their ability to be active participants in future advising appointments. Likewise, three of the four interviewees were unaware their advisor would change and were not prepared to be active participants. Collectively, these results illustrate a full breakdown of Schlossberg's 4S model while I was serving as their UAA. Without awareness of the impending transition, the students were unable to develop key coping skills, such as the ability to schedule an advising appointment or the capacity to be an active participant in their future advising appointments.

Research Question 2

My second research question focused on the extent to which undergraduate students understand their degree plan and the requirements to achieve it. As detailed in Chapter 4, I interpreted the first part of the questions as a big-picture understanding of their degree audit as a whole and the second part as an understanding of specific course requirements and recommendations.

Degree Plan

As seen in Figure 4.4, 15 survey respondents (88%) felt as though they had an understanding of their degree plan. Three themes emerged in support of this understanding: references to their academic track, credit hours, or graduation timeline (Table 4.3). These themes directly relate to the Design and Deliver phase of appreciative advising, as detailed in Chapter 2, and thus reflect positively on my approach. In the Design phase, I would have had conversations with the students about their goals to map out a plan that would lead to achieving those goals. Such a plan would have included discussion of the necessary credit hours to stay on track each semester, as well as additional courses needed for a specific academic track, like pre-med. Although students who participated in my survey only had one semester of grades and progression showing when they met with me for the second advising appointment prior to this study, I would have been able to tell if they were holding up their end of our plan by ensuring they were successfully enrolled in full-time, degree-applicable hours, as well as verifying they successfully completed their courses from the Fall 2021 semester (i.e., the beginning of the Deliver phase). I would have told students who had successfully completed their Fall 2021 courses and were registered for full-time hours that they were tracking successfully for an on-time graduation date. Students who had not completed all courses in Fall 2021 or were not enrolled in full-time, degree-applicable hours would have received a different message—that they did not uphold their end of their academic plan we created in the Design phase, meaning they were not meeting their end of the bargain in the Deliver phase, potentially altering their graduation timeline.

Of the students I interviewed, two were able to give specific reasoning or examples for being able to understand their larger degree plan as a whole. Stephanie explained:

> After this I am planning to go to grad school for Higher Education. I know we talked a lot about this because I was initially a double major with Dance because I thought I wanted to be a Dance teacher. So, I do think my conversations with you definitely helped me figure out what I wanted to do, and then I looked into schools.

Madison echoed a similar theme of knowing what she needed for her next steps:

> I knew I wanted to go into Counseling, so we had the whole graduate school conversation, so I just was really focused on getting into graduate school. I remember having my final [Senior] Check with the Dean's Office confirming I was going to graduate, and I felt this sense of relief, but I was never really nervous about anything. It was just nice to get, you know, a confirmation.

Both Madison and Stephanie reflected on the degree plan we had co-created to help them reach their goal of graduating with an undergraduate degree in Psychology, as well as the process of ensuring they were completing the requirements to embark on their next steps of graduate school. Because they felt confident in both regards, they expressed an understanding of their degree plan as a whole.

Despite ample evidence across both data sources of students' working knowledge of their degree plans, which indicates my successful appreciative advising approach, 2 (12%) survey respondents did not believe they had an understanding of their degree plan (Figure 4.4). One of these students detailed their confusion by writing:

> I don't have a great understanding of my four-year plan. I have met with my advisor, and she will ask me what classes I want to take and tells me to read

> course descriptions when I ask for her opinions on any of the classes I'm considering. Even though I have read the course descriptions and am still confused, no other answers are provided.

This response highlights where appreciative advising broke down in this student's advising appointment. Evidently, the student was trying to design a clear degree plan with me, but because they felt dismissed when asking questions about specifics of certain courses, they ultimately left with a lack of confidence in the plan.

Catherine echoed these sentiments when I asked about her level of understanding of the degree plan, and she stated, "So, I know that Psychology advisors don't know everything, but I did expect them to know about classes." Like the survey response, Catherine's example shows a failure to design a clear and concise plan to reach graduation. She apparently felt dismissed when she asked for additional details that she expected an advisor to be able to comment on and discuss. Both instances exhibit a clear breakdown in the appointment when designing the degree plan, which caused the students to question those plans.

Specific Requirements and Course Recommendations

Figure 4.5 showed that 16 (95%) survey participants expressed their understanding of course recommendations for the upcoming semester and why they had been advised for those specific courses. No clear themes emerged to expound on this consensus, likely due to the specific nature of the conversations in our appointments. Because I individualize every appointment to the student in front of me, I never have the same conversation twice. Nevertheless, I believe such understanding rests on students' experiencing a safe and welcoming environment where they could disclose their goals to me and design a plan to accomplish them. For example, Madison reflected, "In the moment, like while I was with you, everything made sense," which shows that in our appointment, she had successfully discussed what she was hoping to accomplish, we had designed her plan, and we were able to have conversations about how she was delivering on that plan. Such responses illustrate my success with the Disarm, Dream, and Design phases of appreciative advising.

Only 1 (6%) student did not believe they understood their recommendations or specific degree requirements for the upcoming semester (Figure 4.5), and with the simple response of "No," I have no way to gain further insight from that participant. However, I suspect that articulating their confusion regarding classes and next steps was difficult if they did not believe we enacted a specific plan in the first place.

My interview participants also illustrated a breakdown in understanding specific requirements and recommendations within their degree plan, whether due to meeting with me or a departmental advisor. Samantha gave one example:

> The only time I was ever confused or had a problem with my course advisement is if a course was already full when I went to register. I was not always really comfortable choosing an alternate course on my own, so you know that's when I would always send you an email or come by.

Samantha was aware of the recommended courses but unclear on how they fit into her degree plan, so she was not confident in choosing alternatives. Madison shared a similar sentiment by explaining, "When I would go home and put a schedule together, I didn't really understand why I was taking some things, but I just trusted you." As I noted in Chapter 4, trust in my advisement is both comforting and concerning because students need their own understanding of how recommendations with their larger degree plan. These moments when I evidently did not fully implement an appreciative advising approach nevertheless gave me insight for improving my practice.

Action Plan

When reflecting on my problem of practice and the data I collected to resolve it, I also revisited the related scholarly research and literature on my theoretical framework to build an action plan. Because I was unable to implement an intervention within the scope of my action research study, I have yet to resolve my problem of practice. I have, however, constructed an evidence-based plan for improving my own practice, which, in a future semester, can help me reach my goal of successfully resolving the problem. Beyond the implications for my practice, this section also presents my plan to promote a uniform advising style throughout the department.

Implications for Future Practice

I was encouraged by students' overall perceptions of the advisor–advisee relationship and their advising experience. Moving forward, the positive trend in my data indicates the need to continue to implement appreciative advising and positive psychology in my advising craft. Specifically, to continue and even increase the number of students who have a positive relationship with me and their overall advising experience, I need to ensure from the very first advising appointment that I am creating a warm and welcoming space, getting an idea of their goals and dreams for the future, facilitating the co-creation of a degree plan to reach their goals and dreams, and discussing my role in their academic success, as well as holding them accountable to the plan we create. To improve my practice in this area, I must give merit, clarity, and ample attention to the questions and concerns my students raise in their appointments. When they fulfill their end of the bargain by coming to the appointment as a prepared and active participant, I cannot fall short on my end by dismissing their questions or concerns, which caused some of my participants to feel rushed or dismissed. If, instead, I affirm all students as active participants in their appointments, I will have better prepared them for the transition to departmental advising, instilling the confidence they need for future appointments. If I can also better my practice to where all students have a positive view of their relationship with me as their advisor, they may start their advisement with their departmental advisors on a more positive note. Otherwise, a negative experience with or perception of me as their advisor could carry forward to their new departmental advisor, preventing a successful transition and thus hindering resolution of my problem of practice.

As for helping students understand the advising model, ensuring that students are aware they will shift to a departmental advisor when they earn 40 credit hours will be crucial. The goal is for students to not be left in "The Black Hole" that I detailed in Chapter 1. If students can understand that the advising model in Psychology is a hand-off model, also known as shared-split model, where students will move to a departmental advisor once they earn a specified amount of credit hours, 40, there should be less confusion during the period of new advisor assignments (Gordan et al., 2008). I can help with students' clarity on this model by showing them a visual, specifically to illustrate when they will move off my caseload and be assigned to a departmental advisor (Appendix E). In addition, I must also ensure they can successfully schedule an advising appointment with their future advisor, such as by verifying their working knowledge of EAB/Navigate, the scheduling platform. As shown in Figure 4.2, six (35%) students were unaware of the impending transition, suggesting my theoretical framework, specifically the theory of transition, can improve my advising practices in the future. Full transparency on my end from the very first appointment regarding the department's advising model will be key. I need to illustrate the model in a clear and concise way, emphasizing the turning point at 40 credit hours. Because so many students come in with AP, IB, and dual enrollment credit, having this conversation during the students' first-year appointments will be crucial (i.e., before some of them fall off of my caseload). Doing so would amount to taking direct action to resolve my problem of practice because some students continue to schedule with me simply due to a lack of awareness or understanding. Fuller transparency on my part can lead to fuller knowledge on theirs.

Furthermore, the theory of transition promotes the concept of ensuring the individual experiencing the transition has the kind of coping skills in place for a higher likelihood of successfully navigating that transition. For my own practice, one skill that I can instill and assess in students is the ability to schedule future appointments. I can make sure students know how to use EAB/Navigate and demonstrate this process as necessary in my appointments. Students receive email from me during their first year with a direct link to EAB/Navigate to schedule their appointment with me. When they change to a departmental advisor, they no longer receive a campaign email and have to know how to navigate the EAB website to get to their departmental advisor's calendar to schedule an appointment. Ensuring students know how to access this calendar can increase the likelihood they will schedule with their new advisor instead of me, thus alleviating my problem of practice.

Another coping skill I need to ensure is that students have a clear explanation of the different advising styles, roles, and goals of UAAs and departmental advisors. To successfully navigate from a developmental style of advising to a prescriptive style of advising, they need to know that the appointment will be much more transactional and that they will be expected to arrive with more advanced knowledge of the curriculum. I also need to clarify that my role as a UAA includes helping them transition to the university and the major, whereas the departmental advisor's role is to help them transition out of the university by meeting all degree requirements for graduation. This difference contributes to the different advising styles, so knowing about this difference is crucial for preventing students' feeling overwhelmed in their departmental advising appointment and feeling the need to schedule a follow-up appointment with me.

To improve my ability to help students understand their big-picture degree plan and specific requirements and recommendations, I must be intentional, concise, and clear when explaining such details. In relation to my problem of practice, when students move to their departmental advisor without a full and clear understanding of their plan, the recommendations from their future advisor are likely to be confusing or even incorrect, increasing the likelihood they will return to me for help. While channeling appreciative advising, I can strike a balance by establishing and explaining their degree plan and course requirements in a clear and concise way, without hand-holding, so they can be active participants in future appointments. Departmental advisors may assume that all students on their caseloads have a mastery of the Psychology major in terms of the degree requirements for the audit, but my data suggest otherwise.

In addition, departmental advisors expect students to come prepared with the courses they need for the next semester. Unlike UAAs, they are not there to build a degree plan with the student, but rather to help the student execute it. My data suggest some students are not aware of their plan, inhibiting their full understanding of the course recommendations. Therefore, I need to implement a change by ensuring all students are aware not only of my recommendations for the next semester, which 94% were as illustrated in Figure 4.5, but that they also are aware of the big picture and thus set up for success as active participants in their future advising appointments. This shift can help resolve my problem of practice by reducing the likelihood that students will feel the need to schedule a follow-up appointment with me for clarification after meeting with their departmental advisor.

Again, due to the time limitation of my data term of Spring 2022, I was unable to develop a theory to fully implement my grounded theory approach of my action research. My plan is that as I continue to implement the above strategies and coping skills in my advising craft, I will develop a solidified grounded theory to implement to successfully improve undergraduate Psychology students' academic advising experiences.

Systematic Change

Although future intervention and change in my own practice can help students successfully navigate the transition to a departmental advisor, fully resolving my problem of practice will also require change at the department level. If possible, I would like to discuss my findings with members of the Psychology department. I can collaborate with those who have a stake in undergraduate advising experiences, such as the department chair, undergraduate director, and departmental advisors, so we can improve the overall advising experience for all of our Psychology students. My data can demonstrate for them just how much of a problem the transition from a UAA to a departmental advisor can be. My study clearly shows that students are woefully underprepared for and do not have positive experiences with a prescriptive style of advising, with ramification for their advising experience as a whole. I do acknowledge that my sample size for my interviews was small, but the data nevertheless definitively show students' dissatisfaction with departmental advising.

As stated in Chapter 1, the Psychology major is large, encompassing 1,463 active undergraduate students as of Fall 2021, when my caseload was 402 students. The two departmental advisors served the remaining 1,061, giving them a caseload of roughly 530 students each. Instead of the 30-minute appointments conducive to developmental advising, they are forced into 15-minute appointments, so prescriptive advising is the only way they can meet the academic advising demand. The addition of a second UAA in

Fall 2021 and two new staff advisors in Spring 2022 signaled promising change in the department, although one of the staff advisors was a replacement for the departmental advisor who transitioned into the new UAA role. In other words, the department now has two UAAs and three departmental advisors. Nearly doubling our capacity should result in smaller caseloads, which would enable all advisors to schedule 30-minute appointments, making appreciative advising feasible department-wide. My study showed that students are more likely to have a positive advising experience with appreciative advising, so encouraging all advisors to use this approach could resolve my problem of practice by making the transition much less traumatic.

Recommendations for Future Studies

I acknowledge that my study was limited to a small sample of students, encompassing 17 survey responses and four interviews. My recommendations for future studies are therefore two-fold. First, a practitioner could implement a study in a department where advisor transitions occur but changes in advising style do not. For example, if the Psychology department agreed to my action plan and all advisors began using appreciative advising, I could conduct the same study in a future semester to compare the results to my existing data from students who experienced the transition to prescriptive advising. Second, a practitioner could evaluate student satisfaction with their advising experience in a department where students never change advisors. Comparing their results to mine could reveal differences in satisfaction related to transitions. To get a larger sample size for either study, practitioners could have students complete the survey within their appointment. To maintain anonymity and mitigate pressure related to positionality, advisors could invite students to complete the survey in the department lobby. In addition to increasing the response rate, this approach could also yield much more detailed responses because the appointment would have just occurred, and the information would be fresh in participants' minds.

Summary

Advisors can never fully control how a student will feel when they walk away from an appointment. Prior to this study, I already practiced a developmental style of advising. Now more than ever, I believe that an appreciative approach leads to the highest chance that students will succeed as active participants in future advising appointments, whether with me or their departmental advisor. Moreover, through appreciative advising, I have the highest chance of ensuring their advising appointment is positive.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL TEMPLATE FOR SURVEY REQUESTS

Hello!

It was nice talking with you today. I have attached your recommended course advisement for Fall 2022.

Survey Request: Please complete this survey to give feedback on your advising experience. Your participation will be used for a 2022 doctoral research study. Your completion of this survey is completely voluntary and will not impact your ability to be able to register for courses. (https://forms.gle/4r5ngtC5s8UKeJLk9)

Registration Date: **April X @ XX:XXpm.**

Recommended Courses for Fall 2022:
COURSE 1
COURSE 2
COURSE 3
COURSE 4
COURSE 5

Fall 2022 Schedule: The Fall 2022 schedule is available now for you to view it on SSC in Schedule Planner. Log into SSC, Student Tab, Advisement Planning, Schedule Planner.

Holds: I have removed your advising hold. You are not showing any other holds at this time.

Degree Works: Please review your Degree Works for accuracy. You can access your Degree Works in SSC under the Advisement Planning tab.

Special Notes: None 😊

If you have any additional questions, please let me know.

Kelsey Grant
Undergraduate Academic Advisor II
College of Arts and Sciences: Psychology

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

Survey questions appeared in an online form that allowed participants to reply in text boxes.

1. What are the last four digits of your UofSC VIP ID?

2. What is your understanding of your four-year degree plan?

3. How would you describe your advising appointment(s) with me?

4. Do you understand your course recommendations for the upcoming semester? How do these courses fit into your larger degree plan for graduation?

5. How will you be able to tell who your new departmental advisor is moving forward? How do you schedule an appointment with them?

6. What techniques did you discuss at your advising appointment to help you in future advising appointments? What tools do you have to be an active participant in your future advising appointments?

7. How else could your advising appointment have helped you understand your degree plan?

8. How else could your advising appointment have prepared you to be an active participant in future appointments?

9. Was your appointment in-person or online?

10. What is your classification at the time of your appointment (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, or Senior)?

APPENDIX C

EMAIL TEMPLATE FOR INTERVIEW REQUESTS

Hello!

I am conducting a qualitative research study in Spring 2022 that will analyze advising practices for undergraduate Psychology students. I am requesting your involvement in this study by participating in a 30-minute interview about your advising experiences while being a Psychology student. Your participation is completely voluntary. All interviews will take place in the undergraduate Psychology Suite, Barnwell 237, between April 18–20.

If you are interested in participating in this study and being interviewed about your advising experiences, please go to the following link to sign up for a specific time.
https://calendly.com/grantkl2/advising-practices-interview

Best,
Kelsey Grant
Undergraduate Academic Advisor II
College of Arts and Sciences: Psychology
Office: Barnwell 237

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I asked these base questions of all participants, posing additional questions as needed.

1. What is your full name and standing (sophomore, junior, or senior)?

2. Are you a double major? If so, what? Are you coded for a special track (pre-med, pre-law, etc.)?

3. How many times do you remember meeting with me for advising? How many times have you met with your current advisor?

4. What is your understanding of the advising model in Psychology?

5. How would you describe your advising appointments with me?

6. How would you describe your advising appointments with your departmental advisor?

7. How was the first meeting with your departmental advisor? What were some things that went well, and some things that may have not gone well?

8. Did you feel prepared with your immediate course recommendations and overall four-year degree plan at the time that you moved up to your departmental advisor? How comfortable were you with navigating Degree Works?

9. Did you ever come back to me for advising once you officially moved up to a departmental advisor? If so, why?

10. Was there ever a time in the transition from me to your departmental advisor that you did not know who your advisor was? How did you navigate this time if so?

11. What are some things I could have done to better prepare you for the transition to a departmental advisor?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your advising experiences or perception of advising in Psychology?

APPENDIX E

SHARED SPLIT / HAND-OFF ADVISING MODEL