International Students and Cultural Navigators

A Study on Social Support, International Students, and Academic Advisors

Stephanie Palmer

Department of Education
Faculty of Educational Sciences

University of Oslo

April 2019
International Students and Cultural Navigators

A Study on Social Support, International Students, and Academic Advisors

Stephanie Palmer
© Stephanie Palmer

2019

International Students and Cultural Navigators: A Study on Social Support, International Students, and Academic Advisors Stephanie Palmer

http://www.duo.uio.no/

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo
Abstract

The number of international students worldwide has steadily increased over the past several years. Although the United States no longer hosts the most students by percentage, it is the most popular destination in absolute numbers. These students are particularly at risk of academic stress due to experiencing a new culture in the form of the university campus. International students need social support that can help alleviate this stress. Since a university campus is an example of a culture, academic advisors are considered cultural navigators to help guide international students through university. This uses Strayhorn’s (2015) role of the academic advisor as a cultural navigator. A series of models from Kuh and Whitt (1988), Sam and Berry (2010), Tinto (1975), Tierney (1999), Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), and Schlossberg 1989) provides support for this view of academic advising. As cultural navigators, academic advisors are in a unique position to provide international students with social support to help reduce their stress related to schoolwork.

This study is concerned with how academic advisors can provide social support to their international students. Social support is divided into four categories according to JS House’s (1981) theory of work-related stress and social support. Through interviews with academic advisors on a university campus in the Southwestern United States, this study examines how and to what extent academic advisors offer the four categories of social support to their international students.
Acknowledgments

So many people have helped me over the past two years, and they have all made my time in Oslo and Albuquerque so enjoyable.

First, I would like to thank Camilla Bakke and the rest of the staff in the Comparative and International Education program at University of Oslo. I peppered you with so many questions over the past two years, and you always responded quickly and cheerfully. Thank you for your time and patience.

I would also like to thank the faculty who taught us so much about gathering data and doing research.

Second, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Terfot Ngwana. I appreciate all of the time and effort you put into answering my emails, reading my rough drafts, and providing me with feedback. You allowed me to explore different avenues in my research, while at the same time directing me back to the main path if I deviated too far.

Third, I want to acknowledge my cohort and our shared experience of getting our degrees. From attending classes in the snow to the difficulties of arranging interviews, we have been each other’s sounding boards and practice committee panels. We did it!

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support, both moral and financial, throughout my studies. Many of them have been on the receiving end of my occasional frustrations, and they have stayed with me through it all. Thanks for reading my rough drafts and listening to my ideas.

I hope that I have not forgotten anyone, and I appreciate all of your help.
Note about Word Usage

It is important to note that the words *university* and *college* are often used interchangeably in United States colloquial language. Both are used informally to refer to four-year institutions (“Merriam-Webster,” n.d.), although technically a university offers Master’s and PhD degrees in addition to Bachelor’s (“Merriam-Webster,” n.d.). Two-year institutions, such as community colleges, are referred to only as *colleges*. In addition, *college* may also refer to a subunit of a university that offers a specialized set of courses (“Merriam-Webster,” n.d.). The literature typically disregards this last definition and often uses *university* and *college* to discuss four-year higher education institutions. I will also use these two words interchangeably in this study due to the prevalence of this phenomenon in the literature.
# List of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................ i  
Acknowledgments........................................................................................................................... ii  
Note about Word Usage ................................................................................................................. iii  
List of Contents .............................................................................................................................. iv  
1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1  
  1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 1  
  1.2 Research Questions ............................................................................................................... 3  
2 Background .................................................................................................................................. 5  
  2.1 Internationalization and Globalization .................................................................................. 5  
  2.2 International Students and Higher Education ....................................................................... 7  
  2.3 The International Student Experience ................................................................................... 9  
3 Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................. 13  
  3.1 Definition of Social Support ............................................................................................... 13  
  3.2 House’s Theory of Social Support ...................................................................................... 15  
  3.3 Work Stress and Academic Stress ...................................................................................... 17  
  3.4 Cultural Perspectives .......................................................................................................... 18  
4 Literature Review....................................................................................................................... 20  
  4.1 Academic Advisors: A Short History ................................................................................. 22  
  4.2 Advising Theory and Advising Approach .......................................................................... 26  
  4.3 Advisor-Advisee Relationship ............................................................................................ 30  
  4.4 Cultural Navigators and Student Retention ........................................................................ 35  
5 Social Science Research ............................................................................................................ 45  
  5.1 Research Strategy ................................................................................................................ 46  
  5.2 Research Design and Method ............................................................................................. 50  
  5.3 Research Process ................................................................................................................. 54  
  5.4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations ............................................................................... 57  
6 Findings and Discussion ............................................................................................................ 60
1 Introduction

*Educators cannot neglect the needs of international students coming to the United States or underestimate the intellectual, strategic, or financial resources they represent.*

Hanassab & Tidwell (2002, p. 306)

*Effective academic advisors, as cultural navigators, care about their students and they signal in meaningful ways that students matter.*

Strayhorn (2015, p. 62)

1.1 Introduction

The number of international students enrolled at higher education institutions has been steadily increasing for the past several years (Ammigan & Perez-Encinas, 2017, p. 1). In 2008, “there were more than 3.3 million tertiary international students worldwide” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 700). By 2010, that number had increased to 3.6 million (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013, p. 6). The most popular destination countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 700). The United States alone hosted almost one million international students in 2014-2015, “a 10% increase from the previous year and a record high in international enrollments” (Zhang & Dinh, 2017, p. 33). This indicates that the interest in studying abroad is a global phenomenon, and one that does not show any signs of abating. As a result, it is imperative that higher education institutions “are aware of the needs of international students to provide them with services that enhance their college experience” (Girish, 2016, p. 4). One of the most critical services is that of academic advising (Zhang, 2016, p. 155).
The importance of academic advising in “student retention, personal development, and academic success” (Zhang & Dinh, 2017, p. 33) has been well and thoroughly documented. Accordingly, universities in the United States have recognized and promoted academic advising to their students (Mottarella, Fritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004, p. 48). The primary goal of academic advising is to encourage and ensure college student success in the form of degree completion (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 56). To that end, student retention is largely influenced by a supportive college environment (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013, p. 8) that includes an advisor to “help guide students until they arrive at their academic destination or at least until they feel comfortable steering” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). As noted by Qiang (2003), “Academic advising is a point at which student behavior and institutionally controlled conditions meet to potentially influence student achievement” (p. 9). This highlights the importance of academic advising as a crucial connecting point between the institution and the international student.

Although the importance of academic advising has not been underestimated, there are few studies that examine how advisors support their students (Young-Jones et al., 2013, p. 9). If academic advisors are expected to have a meaningful relationship with the international student (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 57), how do they create that relationship? There are a multitude of academic advising approaches available, including team (O’Banion, 1972/1994), developmental (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009), prescriptive (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009), or a blend of all of these. However, the “establishment of a solid, warm, and supportive relationship can be the foundation of advising regardless of the specific approach” (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 57). That said, there is little research on what constitutes a supportive relationship in academic advising. With this in mind, I plan to explore how academic advisors set out to provide meaningful support to their students.

By interviewing academic advisors on a university campus in the United States, I wanted to discover how they provide social support to their international students. I used JS House’s theory of social support (1981) to provide the theoretical framework for this study. In addition to exploring how academic advisors give social support to their students, I intend to determine whether any social support categories are mentioned more often during the interviews. Due to the high number of tasks generally assigned to academic advisors, I also want to explore whether they could reasonably be expected to offer all levels of social support in their limited time.
Multiple studies have been conducted on theories of academic advising as well as the students’ perceptions and desires regarding advising. While this is undoubtedly important, there is a definite need to study the advisors’ views of the situation (Zhang & Dinh, 2017, p. 22; Aiken-Wisniewski, Smith, & Troxel, 2010, p. 4). Aside from the desire to understand how advisors support their students, this information is useful for future training and workshops. Advisors are encouraged to share best practices amongst themselves, but this leads to practice without empirical support (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010, p. 5).

Most advisors receive up to one day of formal training each academic year (Robbins, 2012, p. 218), and the majority of that time is spent on understanding the campus’ organizational structure (Robbins, 2012, p. 219). In Zhang and Dinh’s (2017) study on academic advisors in engineering, none of the advisors had “received training…about intercultural communications, cultural diversity, or strategies for working with international students” (p. 41). In 2014-2015, one out of every five international students entered an engineering program (Zhang & Dinh, 2017, p. 33). Information about academic advising and social support for international students would be useful for expanding current training programs for future advisors.

1.2 Research Questions

My research questions are based on the following conclusions regarding international students and the university.

- International students are especially vulnerable to academic stress due to joining a culturally different university.
- JS House (1981) developed a theory of social support and stress reduction in the workplace. Comprised of four categories, the social support must come from others in the workplace in order to be most effective.
- In view of the importance of international students to universities in the United States, it is imperative that the students receive adequate social support throughout their studies. When school is understood to be equivalent to work in relation to stress, then social
support given by university affiliates would reduce academic stress felt by international students. Social support structures are linked to improved retention rates in international students.

- For all incoming freshmen and transfer students, including international, attending the university is an entirely new experience. Many studies on organizational culture conclude that each university campus is a unique culture.

- Academic advisors are considered crucial to international student retention and eventual graduation. There are many studies on academic advising, but student perceptions show that it is the manner of the relationship rather than the advising approach that is most important. This differentiates between the advising approach, the advising theory, and the advisor-advisee relationship.


This leads to my research questions:

- How and to what extent do academic advisors, functioning as cultural navigators, perceive that they provide social support to undergraduate international students on a university campus?

- What are the limitations on academic advisors to provide social support?
2 Background

*Internationalization of higher education is seen as one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization, yet at the same time respects the individuality of the nation.*

Qiang (2003, p. 249)

*...the presence of international students on campus is a great opportunity to provide domestic students with intercultural experience.*

Campbell (2012, p. 224)

In the previous section, I outlined the reasons why this study is of importance to the field of academic advising. Now I will explain the importance of international students to higher education institutions, with a particular focus on the United States. With the rise of internationalization and the budget cuts of the recession, higher education institutions in the United States are placing more emphasis on the recruitment of international students. As long-term but often temporary residents to a new culture, international students face multiple obstacles that can bring on additional academic stress. One of the most prominent obstacles is the lack of social support in a new environment.

2.1 Internationalization and Globalization

People and nations are more connected now than ever before. People are increasingly mobile and choosing to study, work, and live in countries where they were not born. In higher education, this interconnectedness is demonstrated through knowledge transfer and sharing, international
research projects, and international student recruitment, among other things. The growing prevalence of interconnectedness has been called both internationalization and globalization, often used interchangeably. In the literature, internationalization and globalization are generally understood to be related phenomena that are possibly competitive but not mutually exclusive. In higher education, that is an important distinction, as it has implications for the entire identity of each institution.

In essence, “globalisation [sic] tends to assume that borders and national systems as such get blurred or even might disappear” (Teichler, 2004, p. 7). In this sense, globalization goes beyond influencing the actions of a given nation. Rather, it changes the very beliefs of a nation, “...remaking the heartlands where national and local identities are formed and reproduced” (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 11). Globalization takes place in the nation’s center, bringing about a cultural shift in value systems.

In contrast, internationalization “refers to any relationship across borders between nations, or between single institutions situated with different national systems” (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 11). Rather than changing the reasoning or values behind a given policy, for example, internationalization is simply the conversation between two nations or their representatives. “Internationalisation [sic] in this sense takes place in the borderlands between nations and leaves the heart of those nations largely untouched” (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 11). It does not represent a blending of nation-states, but instead a growing communication between two or more nation-states who maintain their own individual cultures and identities. Whether this is successful in view of acculturation theories will be discussed later.

In higher education, the focus until recent years has been on internationalization rather than globalization, particularly through international students and study abroad programs. In these ways, international communication could take place between higher education institutions without affecting the cultural identity of those institutions or the nations in which they are located. However, as will be discussed later on, current academic advisor roles support multicultural societies (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59) where students’ cultures of origin are validated (Tierney, 1999, P. 84). This indicates that maintaining an unchanging cultural identity at a host institution is not possible.
Disregarding this complication, the increasing emphasis in the rest of the world on global interconnectedness has spurred higher education institutions in the United States on to make their campuses increasingly international in order to stay relevant in today’s society. One of the most common ways to increase internationalization in a higher education institution is to recruit more international students.

In this study, international student refers to a matriculated student receiving their degree from a higher education institution. For this reason, short-term study abroad, exchange, and English as a Second Language (ESL) students are excluded. This is because those students are often assigned advisors through offices specifically designed for those programs. I am interested in how academic advisors provide social support to matriculated international students who are integrated into the department.

2.2 International Students and Higher Education

The importance of international students to higher education institutions in the United States cannot be understated. The presence of international students promotes globalization as cultures collide and interact. However, they are valued not only for their contributions to the culture and diversity of the campus, but also for their economic additions to the institution.

A dominant factor in international student recruitment worldwide is economic. Universities recruit international students with an eye on their own financial interests (Qiang, 2003, p. 249; Andrade, 2006, p. 132), and in fact international students are becoming “integral to the financial health of many higher education institutions” (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 6). When many states in the United States enacted budget cuts because of the recession, higher education institutions began searching for alternative methods to gain revenue (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 3). For example, in 2014-2015, “international students together contributed $30.5 billion and supported 373,381 jobs to the U.S. economy” (Zhang, 2016, p. 154). Since those budget cuts are largely still in place, the financial appeal of international students has not waned.
As global interconnectedness increases, employers have also focused more on the international experience (Harder et al., 2015, p. 42). International experiences typically result in increased intercultural competence (Campbell, 2012, p. 217), a skill that is in great demand in the workplace (Jones, 2013, p. 95). Intercultural competence “means operating effectively across cultures and challenging our own values, assumptions, and stereotypes” (Jones, 2013, p. 97), an ability that is increasingly important (Deardorff, 2011, p. 65).

International student recruitment is one way of “expanding campus diversity” (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 6). Campbell’s (2012) study found that host students interacting with international students on the host campus still improved their intercultural competency skills (p. 217). Because of employer preoccupation with international experience, “international enrollment serves as a critical marker of a higher education institution’s prestige” (Lee, 2010, p. 66). Campuses that can recruit and retain international students imply that their students are more likely to be gainfully employed upon graduation.

Successful international student recruitment is partially dependent on the currently enrolled international students. True to the concept of internationalization, an international student is the connection between the educational representatives of two nations. On the one hand, there is the host institution that agrees to provide the educational training to the student necessary for a degree. On the other, there is the international student who is committed to completing the necessary requirements to earn that degree. This connection is of great importance. International students frequently share their experiences and levels of satisfaction with peers in their home country, influencing their decisions about whether to study abroad (Lee, 2010, p. 67). As Zhang (2016) notes, “A positive student experience in the host country is likely to enhance mutual understanding between nations and promote goodwill; however, a student’s unsatisfactory experience could produce a totally opposite effect” (p. 154).

Thus far, international students in the United States seem to have an overall positive experience. Although a smaller percentage of international students worldwide are attending institutions in the United States than previously, the absolute numbers were still the largest in the world as of 2012 (Choudaha et al., 2013, p. 7). This is largely due to the “sheer size of [the United States’] higher education system and its ability to absorb international students at a higher rate” (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 7). Even with these numbers, there is still room to for additional
international students, and higher education institutions in the United States are highly motivated to attract more.

Higher education institutions in the United States are focusing particularly on recruiting Bachelor’s level students rather than those working toward a Master’s or PhD (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 11). This is because students at the Bachelor’s level usually do not receive financial aid, and so the revenue going directly to the university is higher (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 11). With a rising middle class in several countries and government-funded scholarships in others, there are also more students who have the means to apply for undergraduate studies abroad (Choudaha et al., 2013, p. 6). In 2012, for the first time, there were more international undergraduate than international graduate students studying in the United States (Choudaha et al., 2013, p. 6).

2.3 The International Student Experience

There are many documented reasons why students choose to earn their degree abroad. These include “the chance to explore a different culture, learn new ways of thinking and behaving, make new friends…improve their cross-cultural knowledge and skills…develop new outlooks, increase their self-esteem and confidence, and mature as a result of their independent life experiences in another culture” (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010, p. 33). With more students willing and financially able to pursue a degree in another country, the United States has been able to promote its higher education institutions to more students with more success. However, “institutions cannot simply admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to life in a new country and educational system” (Andrade, 2006, p. 133) without some assistance. After all, they have many hurdles to overcome on their journey to academic success.

Enrolling and succeeding in college presents a challenge for all students. There are multiple groups of students on a university campus, such as first-generation, underrepresented minorities, women in STEM, LBGTQIA, and veterans. Every group has its own set of challenges and difficulties to overcome. To make matters more complicated, students typically belong to more
than one group simultaneously. While some of groups may experience the same challenges, the specific combination tends to be unique for each set of students. In my study, I focused on the undergraduate international student population. Although international students could be both incoming freshmen and transfer students, I did not differentiate between those populations here. That is because the majority of international student challenges are the same for both groups, as they learn to navigate a new campus and a new culture.

Research has shown that many incoming students face the same challenges across all groups (Perry, 2016, p. 713). This indicates that many of the interventions and best practices that are used for one group could be applied to another (Perry, 2016, p. 713). For example, freshmen domestic students and first-generation doctoral students reported feelings of loneliness due to the new setting (Perry, 2016, p. 713), in addition to international students. Both domestic and international students must deal with common problems, such as “academic pressures, financial problems, poor health, loneliness, interpersonal conflicts, difficulty in adjusting to change and problems with developing personal autonomy” (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002, p. 459). These similarities could be useful when adapting student programs to different populations.

That said, studies have also found that adjustment to the university was lower among international students when compared to domestic ones both upon initial entry to the institution and after three months (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 469). This supports the claim that international students must cope with a variety of additional difficulties, including “language barriers, acclimating to a new culture, and different cultural philosophies and approaches to curricula” (Perry, 2016, p. 712). The international students may misunderstand non-verbal cues or fail to follow proper verbal conversation scripts (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 450). One of the most commonly recorded challenges is based in language proficiency (Andrade, 2006, p. 135).

Language is especially problematic regarding academics (Andrade, 2006, p. 135). International students have “difficulties understanding lectures in terms of vocabulary and speed” (Andrade, 2006, p. 135) and “lack the discussion skills” (Andrade, 2006, p. 139) necessary for traditional lecture classes in the United States. Colloquial language is an additional hurdle, as professors may have different accents, different styles of speaking, or use humor over the course of the
lecture (Andrade, 2006, p. 139). Reading assignments are also difficult, as international students often must read the same text multiple times to gain understanding (Andrade, 2006, p. 139). Additionally, low English proficiency could lead to reluctance on the international student’s part to seek out assistance, resulting in staff perceptions of irresponsibility or laziness (Lee, 2010, p. 69).

In addition to communication issues, multiple studies have shown that international students feel that their own home culture is either misunderstood or unknown in their new host culture. In one study, “over 60% of [international student] respondents felt that their culture was either not understood, or only understood a little—suggesting a need for increased cross cultural knowledge and understanding on campus” (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 39). This indicates that many of the university staff do not have training in how to effectively communicate with international students. While some of this is the result of low English ability (Andrade, 2006, p. 137), cultural communication styles may differ significantly (Andrade, 2006, p. 138) between advisor and international student. This could lead to additional challenges as international students become confused about advice and directions from the university.

Just as cultural differences may exist between students and advisors, it is important to point out that cultural differences also exist among international students. The difficulties outlined here with studying in a foreign country are fairly broad and commonly experienced among international students in the United States. However, Tidwell and Hanassab’s (2007) study found significant differences in students’ individual experiences according to seven geographical categories (p. 319). These included Africa, the Americas, Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007, p. 319). This indicates that university staff should not only have general knowledge about international students, but also an “awareness, knowledge, and understanding about each cultural group” (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007, p. 321). This knowledge could significantly improve communication between the academic advisor and the international student.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, international students do not have easy access to friends and family (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, pp. 459 – 450), a social support resource that is greatly helpful when transitioning to a new culture. Being separated from this resource is particularly significant, because social support is a validation of “a person’s self-esteem and self-
image…by significant others” (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 462). Although social support is generally beneficial to all students, it is “especially important to students who are away from home for the first time, are from an ethnic or minority background, [or] have limited English proficiency” (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004, p. 22). International students typically move far away from their previous social support networks, and many of them report feelings of anxiety, disappointed expectations about the host country, and feeling isolated from family and friends and alienated in their environment as a result (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 459). Therefore, a source of social support is important in “ensuring that international students succeed in their new environment” (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 34).

Research has shown that students who have social support networks “adjust to college life more quickly and effectively” (Girish, 2016, p. 10). A study by American College Testing (ACT) found that college retention is “influenced by non-academic factors, such as…social support” (Lotkowski et al., 2004, p. 13). Students who “master course content but fail to develop…social support…may still be at risk of dropping out” (Lotkowski et al., 2004, p. vii). The existence of social support “can help sojourners feel supported and more in control” (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 462), aiding in student retention and eventual graduation. Therefore, it is imperative that universities have replacement social support options available to the international students. Academic advisors are one university resource that can “help bridge the gap between the academic and social support [international students] need” (Girish, 2016, p. 15).

International student challenges, especially the loss of social support, should receive a great deal of attention from the host universities. However, research has indicated that “student affairs staff may have an incomplete picture of international student needs, a concern since they are largely responsible for support programs” (Andrade, 2006, p. 142). Future trainings for new academic advisors will need to take international student challenges into account, especially since that population will likely only increase in the next few years. As one aspect of increasing academic advisor awareness, this study aims to discover how and if academic advisors can become a replacement source of social support for international students.
3 Theoretical Framework

Universities which only focus on the academic needs of international students therefore ignore important factors in their potential success or failure in the new educational context.

Sherry et al. (2010, p. 34)

As indicated earlier, international students must confront not only unique academic struggles, but they must do so in a completely new culture without their traditional structures of social support. Social support is imperative in student academic success, as research indicates that knowledge of coursework alone is not sufficient.

Social support is widely regarded as a nebulous term with several possible definitions. One of the most widely accepted definitions in the literature is found in JS House’s (1981) theory of social support and work stress. In it, House breaks down the concept of social support into four categories. While not all of the categories are necessary for social support to be effective, they all contribute towards feelings of well-being. If the four categories are represented, then most likely work-related stress is reduced. By applying this concept to universities, it follows that the provision of social support can alleviate academic stress in international students, leading to higher retention rates and successful college careers.

3.1 Definition of Social Support

There are many theories regarding social support, and most of them focus on only one aspect of the concept. Social support is an idea “that everyone understands in a general sense but it gives rise to many conflicting definitions and ideas when we get down to specifics” (House, 1981, p. 13). As stated previously, one of the most commonly cited definitions of social support is from
House’s (1981) theory of work stress and social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 313; Heaney & Israel, 2008, p. 190; Tardy, 1985, p. 189; Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997, p. 96; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000, p. 7). This theory defines social support as “social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 4). In this study, I focus on the social resources that are actually offered to the international students from the viewpoint of the academic advisors.

House divides social support responsibilities into four primary categories (Ngoc Nguyen, Tanjasiri, Kagawa-Singer, Tran, & Foo, 2008, p. 358). House (1981) notes that other researchers have also created categories related to social support (p. 24). However, not all of the categories in those other studies were ultimately considered examples of social support (House, 1981, p. 24). Instead, they were only connected to the primary concept. In his own study, House (1981) viewed his four categories as different aspects of social support with varying impacts on stress and health depending on the situation (p. 24).

It is important to clarify that House’s four categories pertain to social support systems in general, meaning that multiple people may provide support through various combinations of the categories (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, p. 358). However, Ngoc Nguyen et al.’s study (2008) found that it is possible for one health navigator to fulfill all four categories for each of their patients (p. 360). In a similar fashion, I will examine how academic advisors are responsible for delivering all four methods of social support to their students. If academic advisors do not perceive that they provide all four social support variations, then universities will need to consider how best to fill that gap.

House’s four categories of social support are emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, pp. 358-359). According to House, emotional support is the “conveyance of empathy, moral support, love, trust, concern, and caring” (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, p. 358). It is regarded as the most important aspect of social support, as it is generally included in some form in most social support theories (House, 1981, p. 24). In addition, “its impact on stress and health is clearly documented” (House, 1981, p. 24). It is perhaps the most common example when defining social support.
Instrumental support, on the other hand, concerns the “offering [of] tangible aid and services…that directly assist a person in need” (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, p. 358). For example, people provide instrumental support when they “help other people do their work, take care of them, or help them pay their bills” (House, 1981, pp. 24-25). This goes beyond offering advice and requires specific action on the part of the supportive person.

Informational support is based on “providing advice…and other information that a person can use to address problems” (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, p. 359). While instrumental support is completing the task for someone else, informational support “is not in and of itself helpful, rather it helps people to help themselves” (House, 1981, p. 25). An example of informational support is providing information about different options to someone and allowing them to then make the final decision.

Finally, appraisal support involves “giving affirmation and constructive feedback that is useful for self-evaluation” (Ngoc Nguyen et al., 2008, p. 359). Appraisal support is similar to informational support in that no task is actually completed. However, appraisal support is a source “of information that individuals use in evaluating themselves” (House, 1981, p. 25).

3.2 House’s Theory of Social Support

Social support is instrumental in international student retention and academic success, because it “meets important human needs for security, social contact, and approval, belonging, and affection” (House, 1981, p. 31). This constitutes a positive relationship between social support and well-being (House, 1981, p. 31). By influencing health, House (1981) suggests that social support “may buffer people against the impact of the irreducible crises and stresses of work” (p. 9). It is social support’s ability to lighten the effects of stress that forms the basis for House’s theory.

Due to House’s definition of social support, there is a clear connection between social support and mitigating work-related stress. Stress has a negative impact on well-being, but social support
has a positive one. Past studies have already confirmed the success of social support in helping people to “cope with and adjust to difficult and stressful events, thereby buffering themselves from the adverse mental and physical health effects of stress” (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008, p. 518). By increasing levels of social support, the negative impacts of stress on health decrease (House, 1981, p. 32).

According to House (1981), social support hinges on “understanding… who gives what to whom about which problems” (p. 28, emphasis in original). In this situation, “it is clear that the who and what depend on the whom and which” (House, 1981, p. 28). Put another way, some sources and kinds of social support are better suited for specific individuals facing specific problems. In House’s (1981) theory, “work-related sources of support…are most effective in both reducing occupational stress and buffering the impact of such stress on health” (p. 85). This means that social support sources from the workspace are more effective in reducing work-related stress than sources from outside work. The common thread between all social support, however, is the necessity for stable relationships with other people (House, 1981, p. 29).

In order for a stable relationship to develop, the supportive person must be both accessible (House, 1981, p. 123) and trained in social support (House, 1981, p. 125). Accessibility depends on “direct, face-to-face relations” (House, 1981, p. 121) and mental availability (House, 1981, p. 123). People are generally not automatically knowledgeable about providing social support, so the majority need some degree of training (House, 1981, p. 125). Knowing these relationship requirements can help ensure timely and effective social support, so that organizations can “synthesize, create, and enhance such support where it is weak or nonexistent” (House, 1981, p. 90).

It is necessary to note that, although House’s social support categories are widely referenced, there is a lack of research tools available to measure them. The Interpersonal Relationship Inventory (IPRI) was “designed to implicitly measure emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, [but] the subscales are support, reciprocity, and conflict” (Langford et al., 1997, p. 98). Landford et al. (1997) therefore implies that the subscales do not directly relate to the social support categories (p. 98). That said, Cohen and Wills’ (1985) study found evidence for a buffering model “when the social support measure assesses the perceived availability of interpersonal resources that are responsive to the need elicited by stressful events” (p. 310). This
supports House’s theory that interpersonal connections have a buffering effect on stress. Unlike House’s (1981) theory, Cohen and Wills’ (1985) model is not located in the workplace, and therefore positive interpersonal connections could mitigate stress in other situations. For example, academic advisors with good interpersonal relationships with their students could help alleviate the students’ stress.

3.3 Work Stress and Academic Stress

For my study, I have equated work stress and academic stress due to the similar ways they affect students and employees. I am using Ganster and Rosen’s (2013) definition of stress for both academic and work stress: “the process by which…psychological experiences and demands (stressors) produce both short-term (strains) and long-term changes in mental and physical health” (p. 1088, italicized in original). Put another way, stress is the “process by which environmental events initiate a series of cognitive and physiological reactions that ultimately affect well-being” (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1088). In this definition, the environmental events are the stressors, and the individual’s reactions are the strains (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1088). For the purposes of Ganster and Rosen’s (2013) research, as well as my own, environmental stressors are those that cause psychological reactions rather than physical ones (p. 1088).

Workplace stress has been connected to specific stressors, including “interpersonal conflict, lack of control, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, role conflict, work hours, and work load” (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1095). Possible instances of strain include “anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, frustration, health complaints, illness, physical symptoms…and burnout” (Ganster & Rosen, 2013, p. 1096).

Academic stress is associated with “performing assignments under tight time and deadlines, having an unreasonable load of projects and exams such as having several assignments due at once, not completing academic assignments on time, expecting to be able to complete several tasks, and difficulty dealing with instructors” (Rayle & Chung, 2007, pp. 23-24). Similar to workplace stress, it can lead to anxiety, depression, and dropping out of university altogether.
(Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 23). However, research has shown that social support systems at college can help first-year college students manage their academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 24).

3.4 Cultural Perspectives

Due to the nature of my research, it is important to point out that this is a Western perspective of social support. Indeed, “relatively few studies have considered cultural differences in the use and effect of social support” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 518). As such, there is little research on how cultural backgrounds may influence an individual’s use of social support (Kim et al., 2008, p. 518). Because there are international students from around the world studying in the United States at any given time, many different perspectives could be represented. As mentioned previously, academic advisors and international students can have varying cultural viewpoints. It is possible that certain international students understand social support differently from their academic advisors.

At least two studies have found cultural differences between how Asian, Asian Americans, and European Americans understand social support, and “this difference appears to be accompanied by a cultural difference in how people judge and evaluate the support-seeking act” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 520). This judgement and evaluation seems to revolve around the distinction between explicit and implicit methods of receiving social support.

The Western perspective generally adheres to an explicit form of social support (Kim et al., 2008, p. 522), but this is only one aspect of it (Kim et al., 2008, p. 522). Explicit social support typically “involves the elicitation of advice, instrumental aid, or emotional comfort” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 522). Implicit support, on the other hand, is the “emotional comfort one can obtain from social networks without disclosing or discussing one’s problems” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 522).

Both studies on cultural differences and social support found that it is more common for Asians and Asian Americans to engage in implicit support (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 361). From an
academic advisor perspective, this indicates a need to “consider more indirect and contextual cues” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 524) when working with international students from this cultural background. To that end, studies have shown that the “mere perception of having socially supportive networks has long been known to be stress reducing” (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 361), thus social support accessibility could be equally as important as its mobilization.

The primary difference between a Western perspective and other perspectives is how the social support is requested and given. The content remains largely the same, as “transactions involving the seeking and receiving of help through appraisals, tangible assistance, informational support, or emotional support” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 519). As such, my definition of social support is constant. However, academic advisors on a university campus would need to consider other cultural perspectives when evaluating student needs.
4 Literature Review

Notably important to all participants is the depth of the advising relationship. Participants also value...the emotional nature of the advising relationship.

Mottarella et al. (2004, p. 57)

Research shows that students who make a connection to at least one adult on campus experience higher levels of satisfaction and higher retention rates than students who do not.

Smith (2002, p. 39)

“We, then, must see our roles as cultural navigators who help students negotiate higher education successfully”

Strayhorn (2015, p. 59)

Academic advising is proven to have a positive impact on student success (Zhang, 2016, p. 155). An influential study published by Beal and Noel in 1980 found that academic advising was instrumental in promoting student retention at the university (p. 93). In fact, it was one of the “three major areas promoting student…retention across 947 institutions of higher education” (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 48). Student satisfaction with advising can result in increased student commitment to the institution, leading to increased rates of retention (Coll & Draves, 2009, p. 215). Since the publication of Beal and Noel’s (1980) study, academic advising has gained importance on university campuses (Mottarella et al., 2004, pg. 48).

Academic advisors are typically the first university staff to establish contact with incoming students and therefore represent crucial resources for them (Smith, 2002, p. 39). In addition, students generally go to the academic advisor first in “both positive and challenging aspects of
the academic and social experiences in college” (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010, p. 4). Studies have concluded that the continuation of this contact is the “essential element in retaining students” (Coll & Draves, 2009, p. 215). Academic advising “is the only academic service that guarantees prolonged interaction” (Coll & Draves, 2009, p. 216) with students, and so the advisor is instrumental in the “development of positive attitudes, relationships, and experiences for students” (Coll & Draves, 2009, p. 216).

International students particularly value academic advisors who create a “welcoming atmosphere…in which they feel recognized, supported, and validated” (Zhang, 2016, p. 166). At the start of their studies, international students begin with “aspirations of being successful, but they simultaneously sense loss of family ties” (Smith, 2002, p. 39). Searching for replacement social support structures, international students “perceive their advisors as important resources of support for their study…as well as in their transition to the new culture and learning environment” (Zhang, 2016, p. 161).

However, in spite of its acknowledged importance, there is little agreement on what truly constitutes academic advising and what it should include. For all its history, academic advising is still widely regarded as pre- or paraprofessional (McGill, 2018, p. 97; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010, p. 72; Habley, 2009, p. 76; Tuttle, 2000, p. 18; Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015, p. 62). Historically, it has periodically been incorporated into
faculty advising, student personnel work, and counseling (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 61). The lack of consensus has led to many studies on about academic advising theories, academic advising approaches, and the advisor-advisee relationship, often resulting in blurred lines between the three.

4.1 Academic Advisors: A Short History

The challenge of defining academic advising is difficult, because there are so many administrators who do it. They could include “professional full-time staff advisors, faculty advisors…staff who serve dual roles as academic advisors and career advisors, staff with dual roles of academic advisors and mental health counselors, and even institutional administrators with titles of deans, associate and assistant deans…coordinators—as well as others” (Robbins, 2012, p. 217). Advisors also describe their own positions with a wide array of alternative titles, including “‘mothers’, ‘curricular accountants’, ‘counselors’, ‘middle men’, ‘glorified clerics’”, and others (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 66).

The “roles, responsibilities, job titles, and compensation vary wildly” (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 60), but academic advisors are primarily responsible for advising on “general education requirements, serving as liaison to academic departments and schools, and maintaining academic records” (Tuttle, 2000, p. 17). These usually involve “assisting students with class scheduling, adding and dropping classes, declaring and changing majors, approving graduation plans, helping those with unsatisfactory academic progress, interpreting academic policies, and referring students to other campus services” (Tuttle, 2000, p. 17). Depending on the institution, some academic advisors might even have additional job duties not related to advising (Robbins, 2012, p. 217).

To complicate the matter, different institutions tend to offer different structures of academic advising. There are three general models of advising: decentralized, centralized, and shared. Decentralized advising is “coordinated by individual academic departments or academic sub units” (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 14). On the other end of the spectrum, centralized advising is
“coordinated by a single administrative unit on campus” (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 14). Shared academic advising is in between these two extremes, with a “combination of decentralized and centralized components for a hybrid approach” (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 14). Even in these three categories there is some debate, as some subcategories include faculty advisors or both campus and department advising resources (Kuhtmann, 2004, p. 102). In general, more institutions are opting to use a shared model of advising (Kuhtmann, 2004, p. 99).

The university where I conducted my research employs the shared model of academic advising. While departments or groups of departments have their own academic advisors, there is a central advising office located in the middle of campus. The central advising office is responsible for coordinating the primary trainings for academic advisors on campus. In addition, the largest college had its own advising office that coordinated between its different departments. This allowed for a certain degree of synchronization in academic advising training, as many advisors were required to attend regular events hosted by the central office. New academic advisors are required to attend a specialized series of trainings, while continuing ones attend biannual conventions with breakout sessions on relevant topics.

These three primary models of academic advising have developed over time. Academic advising in the United States matured into its current rendition at the same time that higher education became more easily accessible. Although academic advising had existed in the United States in some form since the 1800s, it was not until the “tidal wave of enrollments in the 1960s and 1970s” (Cook, 2009, p. 18) that it was recognized as separate from other student services. In addition to adapting to the sheer number of incoming students, academic advisors had to account for students from a wide array of backgrounds and a broader range of curricular options (Cook, 2009, p. 18). It all “set the stage for the development of complementary ways to advise students” (Cook, 2009, p. 18).

The “first known formal system of advising” was established at Kenyon College in Ohio in 1841 (Cook, 2009, p. 18). In this system, each student was paired with a faculty member (Cook, 2009, p. 18) who advised in “academic, social, or personal matters” (Shaffer et al., 2010, p. 66). A little later in 1876 and 1877, The Johns Hopkins University created a unit of faculty advisors (Cook, 2009, p. 19) to “give students direction in selecting elective course work” (Shaffer et al., 2010, p.
For the next several decades, faculty advisors were the primary form of academic advising in the United States (Cook, 2009, p. 22).

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that academic advising was recognized separately from counseling in student personnel work (Cook, 2009, p. 22). Two seminal publications on academic advising, one by Crookston and the other by O’Banion, were both published in 1972 (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 61). Their ideas on academic advising approaches are explored later on. In 1977, the first national academic advising conference was held in Vermont (Cook, 2009, p. 23; Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 61; Shaffer et al., 2010, p. 66). Two years later, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was established with 429 members (Cook, 2009, p. 23; Shaffer et al., 2010, p. 66).

Nearly forty years later, NACADA has expanded to more than 10,000 members, with the majority primarily employed as academic advisors (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 13). Since its beginning, NACADA has published a journal on academic advising (Cook, 2009, p. 23), and it is involved in an online degree program through Kansas State University (KSU) (Cook, 2009, p. 27). In 2008, NACADA and KSU coordinated the first master’s degree program in academic advising (Cook, 2009, p. 27). A year later it was still the only graduate program in academic advising available in the United States (Habley, 2009, p. 80), but the high number of NACADA members indicates an interest in the field (Habley, 2009, p. 82).

In addition to NACADA, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was established in the 1980s to publish “guidelines for both practice and preparation for the student affairs profession” (Keeling, 2010, p. 9). The first edition was published in 1986 and addressed sixteen areas of student affairs (Keeling, 2010, p. 9). The CAS standards are periodically updated, and the sixth edition published in 2006 covered thirty-five areas (Keeling, 2010, p. 9). NACADA actively encourages members to use the CAS standards as criteria when planning student programs and services (Keeling, 2010, p. 9), although institutions are expected to implement the standards according to their unique needs (Keeling, 2010, p. 9).

The focus areas of CAS are designed to encourage academic advisors to “positively impact academic achievement and retention, enhance the critical thinking and reasoning skills of students…and produce a globally aware and socially responsible adult” (Hughey, 2011, p. 23).
Additionally, academic advisors are expected to aid students in making decisions, such as career choices, or in overcoming hurdles in their personal lives (Hughey, 2011, p. 23). Based on this description, perhaps it would be easier to define what academic advisors are not expected to accomplish, rather than what they are.

Even though academic advising has been practiced for a few hundred years in the United States, it was only recently that researchers attempted to define and shape the field (McGill, 2018, p. 88). One of the most prevalent discussions centers on whether academic advising can be considered a profession. This differentiates between the colloquial and academic uses of the word. It seems that academic advising is typically defined as a profession in the colloquial sense, in that it is an occupation (McGill, 2018, p. 94).

In the academic sense, a profession has specialized certification, continuing education for members of the profession, and a code of ethics to govern professional behavior (Habley, 2009, p. 76). While academic advisors are held to an ethical standard and attend regular trainings and conferences, academic advising is lacking in the realm of scholarship and required certification (Shaffer et al., 2010, p. 71). Most professions require a graduate level education in order to be prepared for the rigors of a position (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 62). According to Shaffer et al. (2010), “professionals are educated over time…until they are considered experts; paraprofessionals are trained, in limited sessions (often on-the-job)” (p. 73). Paraprofessionals are typically trained in their career, while professionals receive an education (Shaffer et al., 2010, p. 73).

The lack of standardized education and research in academic advising contributes to the confusion over the definition of academic advising (McGill, 2018, p. 97). Without multiple graduate level programs, academic advisors have never truly discussed the “specialized knowledge, skills, methods, and scholarly principles” (Habley, 2009, p. 76) required for their careers. These skills and principles are typically based on a theoretical foundation and understanding of a profession, and academic advising has not come to a consensus on those topics. The need for research is most likely due to academic advisors’ “overwhelming responsibilities…as well as the fact that faculty advisors are much more likely to conduct research in their own disciplines than on academic advising” (Tuttle, 2000, p. 21). Until these issues are addressed, academic advising will probably never come to agreement on the theories
and understandings of the field. In spite of this, I will examine the literature regarding three main concepts in academic advising: theories, approaches, and the relationship with the student.

4.2 Advising Theory and Advising Approach

Academic advising has been described as “counseling, learning, mentoring, guiding, encouraging, advocating, navigating, education, teaching, and even as friendship” (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 43). As evidenced here, academic advisors themselves have problems in defining the “purposes, values, theoretical perspectives, and methods of advising” (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 45). Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) are careful to point out that this is a common issue in many academic fields, including history and sociology, because the fields are constantly expanding and changing (p. 45). Part of the difficulty here is due to lack of research into academic advising and the small number of graduate studies available in the field. However, defining academic advising is made significantly more complicated by the wide variety of students who seek it and their multitude of needs.

As mentioned previously, there are several groups of students who all have different academic and personal challenges. A short list of such groups includes “adult students, ethnic and racial minority students, international students, distance students, preprofessional students, military veterans, LGBT students, students on academic probation, students returning from academic dismissal, [and] students with emotional or mental health issues” (Robbins, 2012, p. 220). When considering how these groups can overlap to create new challenges, “it becomes clear that each individual academic advising interaction is unique” (Robbins, 2012, p. 220).

Most academic advising theories agree that advisors aim to “engage students in thinking about the larger purposes of their educations” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 11). How they go about doing that depends on the approach. However, some have suggested that just as there is no one type of university student, “neither is academic advising defined by a single theory” (Robbins, 2012, p. 218). Grites and Gordon (2000) agree that “it is rare for any advisor to use only a single concept in practice” (p. 14). Depending on the student’s immediate concerns, academic advising
“can and should integrate many theories [and] frameworks” (Grites & Gordon, 2000, p. 14) as part of its praxis.

Advising approaches are generally placed on a scale first put forward by Crookston in 1972 with his formative study on developmental advising. Crookston places developmental advising opposite what he termed prescriptive advising (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 65), creating an academic advising continuum. Prescriptive advising is the “traditional approach” (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 18) in which the advisor “knows all the requirements, provides sound answers to a myriad of logistical questions, and steers students in the right direction when they are lost” (Smith, 2002, p. 40). Lowenstein (2005) points out that it is a “straw man philosophy because it has no advocates or adherents, which is not to say that it has no practitioners” (p. 65).

On the other end of the scale is developmental advising. Developmental advising is more concerned with “facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation skills” (Crookston, 1972/1994/2009, p. 78). A central part of this approach “focuses on the student’s potentials, [and] developing the student’s self-direction” (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 18). In the years since Crookston’s study, it has become the dominant paradigm in advising (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 65). Additional proposed models fall in between these two points on the spectrum, although developmental advising still holds sway.

In spite of its importance, there is no unanimous definition of developmental advising (Barbuto, Story, Fritz, & Schinstock, 2011, p. 67). It has been used to describe interpersonal communication, teaching, or coaching strategies (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005, p. 5). This misunderstanding stems from a much larger confusion of terms: advising approach, advising theory, and advisor-advisee relationships. These three concepts are often intertwined when discussing the same academic advising framework, leading to uncertainty and disorder. I suggest that many researchers inadvertently link the three ideas together, so that an advising approach assumes certain advisor-advisee relationships, and the advising theory is often left out altogether.
Fig. 4.2 Author’s Illustration of the Three Components of Academic Advising

Whether they realize it or not, many researchers have already argued that academic advising is at its heart an educational pursuit (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005, p. 6; White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 11; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 43; Lowenstein, 2005, p. 71). It is an “important activity in the process of education” (O’Banion, 1972/1994, p. 10), because it aids students in accomplishing the primary goal of higher education: to “help students come to new understandings about their own academic journey, and develop skills to inform other decisions they make in the future” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 13). Even NACADA supports the “role of advising as an educational endeavor” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 11).

Academic advising is at the intersection of a student’s personal growth and their development of critical-thinking skills associated with learning (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006, p. 26; Grites & Gordon, 2000, p. 13). Critical thinking and personal development are intertwined through the educational experience. During advising sessions, academic advisors can encourage students to
improve their critical thinking skills by “harnessing multiple ways of thinking and knowing…connecting diverse learning experiences, and…translating skills across various settings” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 11). By coming to a “deeper understanding of the rationale underlying their chosen curriculum” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 17) and understanding the “external and internal factors that affect their academic goals” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 17), students examine their personal choices by critically considering the connections between their classes.

If researchers are generally in agreement on the educational goal of academic advising, the disagreement must be how to best achieve it. This then is the advising approach. Rather than focusing on theory, “advising approaches may be better defined solely by the advising tasks conducted than by the theory on which they are based” (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 57). Many studies seem to combine the advising approach and the advisor-advisee relationship, discounting the reality of an advising session.

Many studies view prescriptive advising as inherently ineffective (Smith, 2002, p. 40) and the antithesis of a successful advisor (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 66). Several researchers fail to address that all academic advisors “tend to be involved in the informational…advising responsibilities” (Kuhn et al., 2006, p. 25). While it is true that academic advising should not be exclusively prescriptive, there are certain advising tasks that are simply prescriptive in nature. Fielstein, Scoles, and Webb (1992) define prescriptive advising as course selection advice, registration guidelines, and checking student enrollments (p. 10). These constitute some of the basic position requirements as an academic advisor.

On the other hand, many researchers assume that developmental advising is inherently supportive and caring towards students (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 57). This again confounds the concept of developmental advising. As Mottarella et al. (2004) note, using a prescriptive approach does not imply that the advisor is “uncaring, unsupportive, and cold” (p. 57). As an advising approach, developmental advising includes conversations on familial or friendship problems, encouraging the student, and discussing challenging viewpoints on values or beliefs (Fielstein et al., 1992, p. 10). The definition of developmental advising should not be based on the advisor-advisee relationship, but rather what the academic advisor and student accomplish during their meetings.
When considering the student perspective, one study found that prescriptive advising can be used in initial interactions and slowly build towards more developmental conversations (Smith, 2002, p. 47). Many students are not prepared for involved discussions on personal challenges and vocational ideals when they first come to campus (Smith, 2002, p. 47). By providing accurate information first, the academic advisors “set the stage for pursuing more developmental conversations in future interactions” (Smith, 2002, p. 47). The act of imparting “sound advice without intimidation” (Ford & Ford, 1989/2009, p. 63) encourages the student to communicate more personal issues. This supports another study which found that advising sessions were “more informational and prescriptive for incoming 1st-year students and [became] more consultative and developmental over students’ sophomore and junior years” (Robbins 2012, p. 220).

Studies have also shown that students are more concerned with the nature of their relationship with the advisor (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 59) rather than the applied academic advising approach. The primary question then is how advisors build a relationship with their students that can eventually lead to developmental advising discussions. A successful relationship is continual and caring, “in which an advisor gives time, support, and encouragement to the mentee” (Kuhn et al., 2006, p. 26). The specific advising approach matters less than the academic advisor’s attitude towards the student. In the next section, I will explore different conceptualizations of the advisor-advisee relationship.

4.3 Advisor-Advisee Relationship

As discussed earlier, academic advising is above all else an educational endeavor (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 13). However, student retention relies on more than the academic development of the student. By establishing a stable and caring relationship, the advisor “provides a foundation for meaningful dialog and interactions” (Hughey, 2011, p. 22), allowing for deeper conversations about personal and occupational goals. To begin such a relationship, the
academic advisors must “be able to set an environment for advisees to feel comfortable to share their stories, ask their questions, and engage in self-discovery” (Hughey, 2011, p. 24).

A supportive relationship can “be the foundation of advising regardless of the specific approach and advising tasks to be accomplished” (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 57). Mottarella et al.’s (2004) study found that the “depth and emotional nature of the advising relationship contributes the most to student satisfaction with their advising” (p. 59). The advising approach did not affect student satisfaction levels. University staff and faculty, particularly academic advisors, are responsible for crafting an environment conducive for learning, and an essential aspect of that is a caring attitude towards the student (Ford & Ford, 1989/2009, p. 62).

There have been several models for advisor-advisee relationships over the years. Full-range advising sorts the relationships into one of three leadership categories: laissez-faire, transactional, and transformative (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 18). In this model, the advisor is in a leadership position similar to that of an office manager. Another option is that of appreciative advising. With six phases, this one also uses a leadership relationship model (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 18). However, the leadership role transitions from the advisor at the beginning, to shared in the middle, to the student in the end (Barron & Powell, 2014, p. 18). Finally, O’Banion (1972/1994) suggested a team approach model where the student is primarily responsible for directing the entire advising relationship (p. 15).

While leadership and decision-making are certainly important, none of these relationship models takes the educational goal of academic advising into account. The model needs to include the learning goal while acknowledging that students are in a new environment without preexisting support systems. Thus, the advisor-advisee relationship model needs to address how academic advisors can more effectively help students progress in this setting.

In addition, academic advisors work in “an increasingly complex system, which is often incomprehensible or mysterious to students and misunderstood by the world at large” (White & Schulenberg, 2012, p. 13). This description of a university as intricate and mysterious is similar to Kuh and Whitt’s (1988) portrayal of campus culture as an “invisible tapestry” (p. 112). Campus culture goes beyond the “social, economic, political, and linguistic systems” (Bennett, 1998, p. 2) that are more obvious to newcomers. It is also a group of people’s “everyday thinking
and behavior” (Bennett, 1998, p. 2), which can be harder to observe and learn. It is the “deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior as well as the shared values, assumptions, and beliefs that members have about their institution” (González, 2002, p. 195). Above all, the meaning of those values and assumptions “cannot be fully appreciated apart from the institution in which they occur” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 8), meaning that outsiders do not have the opportunity to learn the culture prior to arrival. Higher education is just such a culture (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58).

There are common cultural markers among all higher education institutions, including a codified language and acronyms (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). For example, some word definitions are only applicable in higher education, such as “exploratory” describing a student who has not yet chosen a major of study (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). Institutional culture impacts nearly everything related to the university (Kuh, 2001, p. 24), including undergraduate studies (Museus, 2008, p. 569). Culture is something that the institution has that sets it apart, such as history and values, and something that the institution does that influences students, staff, and faculty outcomes (Museus, 2008, p. 569; Kuh, 2001, p. 24). It is continually changing, as culture is shaped by the current members and influences their experiences and behavior (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). It “reflect[s] interactions among history, traditions, [and] organizational structure” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6).

In addition, multiple studies have concluded that each university campus is its own unique culture. Culture can be defined in a multitude of ways, but it is generally understood as common patterns of values, beliefs, and practices among separate groups of people that distinguish them from one another (Kuh, 2001, p. 25; Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6; Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). These deeper meanings are reflected in the “rituals, stories, language, and other artifacts [that] are observable manifestations of culture” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 42). In this way, the cultural assumptions and beliefs are some of the most powerful forces governing the behavior of institutional members (Museus, 2007, p. 29). As such, they “provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh, 2001, p. 25).

Museus (2007) examined institutional cultures along three main lines of analysis: artifacts, values, and assumptions (p. 31). The artifacts are the most visible category, including the “institutional mission statement, architecture, academic program, language, myths, stories,
symbols, rites and rituals, and ceremonials” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). The rituals and ceremonies are generally steeped in tradition, and members commonly use these to “cultivate a shared culture and to sustain and celebrate a sense of community” (Kuh, 2001, p. 28). Even though traditions may seem ridiculous to outsiders, they are respected and honored by the members of campus (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59).

Assumptions and values may be held by all institutional members, including “leaders, faculty, students, and other constituents, such as alumni and parents” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). Values may take two forms: espoused and enacted (Museus, 2007, p. 31; Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6). Espoused values are the beliefs that institutional members agree are important (Museus, 2007, p. 31). Enacted values are when those beliefs are put into action (Museus, 2007, p. 31). The culture of higher education embraces several such values, including a “students first” mentality and the importance ascribed to faculty-student relationships (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). Finally, assumptions are principles that influence what the institutional members think, their behavior, and their value systems (Museus, 2007, p. 31).

Many members of higher education institutions adhere to a cultural assumption about the purpose of education (Buller, 2014, p. 2). The educational goal of academic advising is incorporated into the overarching value system of the higher education institution. As stated earlier, higher education institutions aim to encourage both personal development and critical thinking skills. This mission is encompassed by the enacted and espoused values of the institution (Museus, 2007, p. 31). Academic advising aims to work towards this common purpose. These cultural values are taught to incoming members of the institution through exposure to cultural artifacts (Kuh, 2001, p. 28).

New members can be admitted into a culture through artifacts including “acts of socialization such as rites of passage, orientation, and purposeful ceremonies” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). However, if the institutional culture is very different from the prospective member’s culture of origin, then this socialization process becomes more difficult (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 462). The greater the gap between a “student’s cultures of origin (i.e. precollege cultures) and cultures of immersion (i.e. campus cultures)” (Museus, 2008, p. 572), the less likely the student will persist in their studies (Museus, 2008, p. 572). International students who depart university before graduation may do so, because they “do not successfully navigate the distance between
their culture of origin and the institution’s [culture]” (Kuh, 2001, p. 28). New members require a guide to teach them the cultural rules of the institution. Research has found that when international transplants receive support from someone in the host culture, they transition better and experience less associated stress (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002, p. 472).

Ensuring student success begins from the very first interaction between the student and the higher education institution (Kuh, 2001, p. 32). This is where the academic advisor becomes instrumental in student retention and success (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 61). Academic advising is where students “learn the rules of this culture—what a credit hour is, how many credits each course carries, and the number of credits required for a major, minor, or (ultimately) graduation” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 61). Academic advisors know how to navigate higher education, “things that [they] know from experience, from others’ experiences, from [their] training, [and] from research” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 61). Students without access to this resource are at risk for dropping out, “not due to academic underpreparedness, but rather due to cultural incongruity or their unreadiness…to develop the skills necessary for cultural navigation” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). This understanding of the campus as culture led Strayhorn to develop the concept of the advisor role as culture navigator.

Cultural navigators are “individuals who strive to help students move successfully through education and life” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). As cultural navigators, academic advisors are people who “know something about the new culture” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). They know the “codes of conduct, customs, dominant values, language, requirements, rules, and traditions” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). Cultural navigators know “how [the culture] operates, how to get things done, how to be part of it and feel a sense of belonging” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). They can then convey this knowledge to their students to help them acculturate to their new surroundings (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). Students unfamiliar with higher educational culture need a cultural navigator to show them the cultural artifacts, values, and assumptions (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). In summary, cultural navigators “make the implicit explicit, the hidden known, and the unfamiliar commonplace” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 62).
4.4 Cultural Navigators and Student Retention

As noted earlier, cultural navigators work in the intersection between two cultures: the student’s original culture and the institutional one. The challenges resulting from interactions between two cultures are termed acculturation, “which refers to the process of cultural and psychological change” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 472) that develops. In a groundbreaking article in 1997, Berry proposed four categories of acculturation (p. 9). The varying types of acculturation are based on the “compatibility (or incompatibility) in cultural values, norms, attitudes, and personality between the two cultural communities in contact” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 473). As previously observed, cultures are not stagnant, and “acculturation is a two-way interaction” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 473). However, one culture is generally in a higher position of relative power (Berry, 1997, p. 8). As such, acculturation can be examined from either the dominant culture or the subordinate culture’s point of view (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 477). The conversation between the two cultures forms the foundation for Berry’s theory.

There is a long history of acculturation on a global scale. Immigrants voluntarily go through acculturation by relocating to a new culture, while refugees and indigenous populations are often forced into the process (Berry, 1997, p. 8). Indigenous peoples typically remained stationary and the new culture came to them, while refugees experience the reverse (Berry, 1997, p. 8). Immigrants expect to have a moderately permanent interaction with the new culture, while others, such as international students, expect their interaction to be relatively short-lived (Berry, 1997, p. 8). In all cases, the acculturative process “may qualify as stressors and provoke stress reactions in an individual, particularly if the appropriate coping strategies and social supports are lacking” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 474).

Berry’s (1997) four categories are at the juncture of two issues from the subordinate culture’s point of view: cultural maintenance and contact and participation (p. 9). Cultural maintenance is the extent to which the previous “cultural identity and characteristics [are] considered to be important” (Berry, 1997, p. 9) and maintained. Contact and participation is the question of whether members of the subordinate culture should “become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves” (Berry, 1997, p. 9). It is important to note that the
dominant culture may limit the options or force certain choices onto the subordinate one (Berry, 1997, p. 10).

From the subordinate culture’s perspective, acculturation techniques are categorized as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 477). Assimilation is when the subordinate culture chooses to relinquish their cultural origin and frequently interact with the new one (Berry, 1997, p. 9). People who “place a high value on holding on to their original culture and avoid interaction with members of the new society” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 476) have opted for the separation strategy. The integration technique is when the individual maintains their original culture while simultaneously participating in the new one (Berry, 1997, p. 9). Finally, marginalization describes a low level of interest in cultural maintenance and a lack of interaction with the new society (Berry, 1997, p. 9). A later article by Sam and Berry (2010) has developed terms for these situations depending on the dominant culture’s attitude.

Because acculturation exerts change in both interacting cultures, the dominant culture also institutes strategies. If the dominant culture prevents newcomers from interacting with its members, then the subordinate culture experiences segregation. Similarly, newcomers may be forced to adopt the new culture. Berry (1997) calls this the pressure cooker, in a reference to the common term melting pot (p. 10). When the dominant culture supports the continuance of the subordinate culture with regular contact between the two, multiculturalism results (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 477). The last category is exclusion, which occurs when the dominant culture rejects members of the subordinate culture while disallowing the maintenance of their previous culture (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 477).

Other researchers have called these categories into question. While three of the categories were empirically supported, there is little evidence for the phenomenon of marginalization (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008, p. 281). Schwartz and Zamboanga (2008) suggest that what may appear as marginalization is “a sense of discomfort or lack of clarity in terms of who one is as a cultural being” (p. 281). This is because research does not indicate how cultural newcomers can “develop a cultural identity without drawing on either the heritage or receiving cultures” (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008, p. 281). In addition, there is evidence that the integration category could encompass several different acculturation strategies (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008, p. 276).
However, independent data has confirmed the separation, assimilation, and integration techniques of acculturation (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008, p. 281).

A central aspect of Strayhorn’s (2015) role of the academic advisor as cultural navigator is the multicultural technique. The goal as cultural navigator is to aid students in completing their higher education journey (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59), but this is not at the expense of their cultures of origin. Instead, academic advisors work with students to “dig deep into their cultural repertoires and identify the wealth they bring to campus” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). The students each bring their own cultural history with them, and that history represents a “cultural wealth—not deficits” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59).

Twenty years before Berry (1997) published his article on acculturation, Tinto (1975) studied early student departure from university. Tinto (1975) theorized that students drop out due to lack of integration into the academic and social fabric of the university (p. 96). In this model, the university is a “social system with its own value and social structures” (Tinto, 1975, p. 91), similar to Kuh and Whitt’s (1988) depiction of the campus as a culture. According to Tinto (1975), a student’s eventual departure is the “outcome of a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the institution” (p. 103), indicating that the institution influences the student’s decision.

In particular, Tinto (1975) focuses on the “degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment” (p. 107). While it is not necessary to adhere to the dominant social structures on campus, Tinto (1975) concludes that “students with more ‘conventional’ values, attitudes, and interests are more likely to establish close relationships” (pp. 107-108) with a wider variety of institutional contacts. Less conventional students are less likely to successfully integrate into some aspect of the university’s social structure. However, Tinto is also quick to point out that early departure is more a result of a “lack of congruence between the individual and the social climate of the institution rather than any specific failure on the part of the individual” (Tinto, 19775, p. 111). This is a deviation from previous studies which often placed the blame of dropout squarely on the student (Tierney, 1999, p. 611).

Although his study was instrumental in changing the discourse on early student departure (Tierney, 1999, p. 615), later studies noted Tinto’s (1975) limited use of culture in his model. As
Tierney (1999) remarks, Tinto (1975) takes a decidedly social integrationist view of culture (p. 604). Using Sam and Berry’s (2010) model, this is the equivalent of the pressure cooker strategy in which incoming students are forced to abandon their original cultures and adopt the values and assumptions of the institutional one (p. 10). Regardless of what may be enacted on campuses, most university in the United States profess to encourage just the opposite. With the greater diversity of domestic students beginning in the 1960’s (Cook, 2009, p. 18) and the growth in international students over the past few decades (Choudaha et al., 2013, p. 6), the social integrationist stance is simply not realistic or desirable.

Tierney (1999) in particular argues against the social integrationist aspect of Tinto’s (1975) model (p. 604). Rather than utilizing the pressure cooker strategy, Tierney (1999) supports the multicultural one “where difference is highlighted and celebrated” (p. 604). According to Tierney’s (1999) studies, when students “are able to affirm their own cultural identities, their chances of graduation increase” (p. 84). This goes beyond merely recognizing the existence of students’ original cultures (Tierney, 1999, p. 84) but also actively embracing the multiculturalist stance from Sam and Berry’s (2010) model.

Recognizing the validity of other cultures is one of the central components of intercultural communication. If academic advisors are to be effective cultural navigators for international students, they need to have the requisite intercultural communication skills. As was previously discussed, the advisor-advisee relationship is instrumental in ensuring student commitment to the institution (Mottarella et al., 2004, p. 59). As representatives of the host culture, academic advisors are responsible for “effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations” (Deardorff, 2011, p. 66). Intercultural communication is instrumental in establishing a meaningful connection with the student.

Intercultural competence is a complicated concept that requires more than historical or political knowledge (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 572). In simple terms, it is the “communication between people of different cultures” (Bennett, 1998, p. 2). Typically, communication is predicated on the similarities that “generally allow people to predict the responses of others…and to take for granted some basic shared assumptions” (Bennett, 1998, p. 1). However, in intercultural situations, using “one’s self as a predictor of shared assumptions and responses to messages is unlikely to work” (Bennett, 1998, p. 2).
The ultimate goal in intercultural communication is “the ability to see from others’ perspectives” (Deardorff, 2011, p. 67). This requires recognizing “knowledge as constructed and grounded in context” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 576) and gaining an “appreciation for ways in which social systems affect relations between and among culturally different groups” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 576). In individual interactions, this results in intercultural communications that are “independent, respectful, informed by cultural understanding, and mutually negotiated” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 580).

Cultural knowledge does not automatically imply intercultural competency. Intercultural competence is rooted in knowledge of the “historical, political, and social contexts” of the culture (Deardorff, 2011, p. 67), as well as an “understanding of how [individuals] generally misconstrue each other’s behavior” (Bennett, 1998, p. 6). Cultural knowledge is helpful in employing intercultural competence (Bennett, 1998, p. 6), but it is not sufficient on its own. Competency is only achieved when cultural knowledge is applied alongside the “skills for thinking interculturally” (Deardorff, 2011, p. 67). When these skills are applied during academic advisor meetings, the likelihood of establishing a connection with the student increases.

It is worth noting that intercultural competence is not equivalent to ethical or moral relativity (Bennett, 1998, p. 17). Intercultural competence is based on the recognition of other cultures and the validation of their existence. It does not pass ethical judgements on the beliefs and assumptions of those cultures (Bennett, 1998, p. 17), and instead provides metastatements (Bennett, 1998, p. 17) about cultural conditions. Metastatements are not opinions (Bennett, 1998, p. 17); they are statements acknowledging the behaviors that exist in different cultures (Bennett, 1998, p. 17). As such, it is possible to be interculturally competent while adhering to a strong ethical code belonging to a chosen culture (Bennett, 1998, p. 17).

Intercultural competence and multicultural techniques can encourage international students’ participation in the university. Tinto’s (1975) model suggests that international students are more likely to persist in their studies if they are integrated socially. However, his model does not explain why social integration should have this effect. Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2004) model can help clarify this connection.
Cultural newcomers usually experience a period of stress due to the dissimilarities between their previous and current cultures. Oberg (1960) was one of the first to use the term *culture shock* to describe that phenomenon (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 168). Ultimately, culture shock is caused by the “anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 1960, p. 142). Social cues can take many forms, such as “words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms” (Oberg, 1960, p. 145). Regardless of the form, the processes are typically, “as far as the individual is concerned, beyond his awareness” (Oberg, 1960, p. 145). That is, the individual is unaware until the processes are no longer present.

Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2004) expanded model of culture shock focuses on the individual’s reaction to the loss of these social cues. If an individual wished to employ the integration strategy from Sam and Berry’s (2010) model, their success depends on their ability to navigate the new culture while establishing meaningful connections with members of the host culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 169). In this model, meaningful connections are contingent on the individual’s knowledge of social cues in the new culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 170).

As stated by Museus (2008) earlier, acculturation increases in difficulty as the distance between the two cultures also increases. This implies that the individual’s prior knowledge of the new culture decreases as the differences between them increase, leading to decreased interaction with the host culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 180). Indeed, if the individual does not perform the “sets of behaviors considered appropriate by most members of a group in specific social situations” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 170), the likelihood of creating significant relationships with members of the host culture decreases (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 170).

The expanded model by Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) is based on Furnham and Bochner’s (1982) culture shock model, but they have incorporated additional variables. These include distance between cultures, the number of other individuals from the same original culture, presence of family members in the host culture, and the amount of social interaction with host members (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 171). Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) included these variables in their expanded model to show “how social difficulties occur in cross-cultural transitions” (p. 171, emphasis in original). The distance between cultures represents the
likelihood that a student possesses the culturally-specific social skills in the host culture. The greater the degree of difference, the less likely that the student has the requisite social skills and the greater the degree of culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 172). All relationships are inverse, in that as one variable increases, the other one decreases.

It is important to note that the previous cross-cultural experience variable was tested regarding its relationship with culture shock. No meaningful relationship was discovered, although other research has documented the importance of previous experience in decreasing the degree of culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 181). For this reason, Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) retained the variable in the model, although it is not connected with the other variables (p. 181).

Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) found that interaction with members of the host culture was an important mediating variable between culture shock and the other variables (p. 181). Their model hypothesized that “lower degrees of interaction with host members may decrease the likelihood that…students will learn the social rules and social skills pertaining to the host culture, thus increasing the degree of social difficulty in their interactions with hosts” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 172). In fact, “social interaction with hosts was the sole significant direct predictor of culture shock” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 180). Contact with members of the host culture consistently reduced the impact of the other variables, so that the degree of culture shock also decreased (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 181). Without it, “students are unlikely to learn and develop the culture-specific social skills that would enable effective cross-cultural interactions” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 181).

Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2004) research reaffirms that significant relationships are instrumental in promoting international student retention. One of the outcomes of a positive advisor-advisee relationship is encouraging a feeling of belonging on campus. Cultural navigators “help students belong and recognize that all students matter” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). Students who feel a sense of belonging on campus “find it very difficult to leave or drop out” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60), and so a sense of belonging encourages student success (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60). These students persist in their studies partly due to the social bonds on campus (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60). In fact, one of the most common influences on student retention is sense of belonging (Glass & Westmont, 2014, p. 108).
Students with a sense of belonging feel they are “cared about, respected, and a part of a campus community” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). It is a primarily social response, created by meaningful and supportive relationships (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 59). This is why a sense of belonging is so important in moments of isolation. In new environments, “individuals are prone to feel isolated, alone, and unsupported” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60). International students are especially susceptible to feelings of loneliness, partly because they are “expected to handle the same rigorous academic demands as domestic students without forms of social support’ (Glass & Westmont, 2014, p. 108). A sense of belonging helps to relieve the feeling of enforced seclusion.

A sense of aloneness is related to feelings of marginality. According to Nancy Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of marginalization and mattering, feelings of marginality come from the transition between an old life and a new one. These feelings increase when the difference between the old life and the new life is more dramatic (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 2). Incoming university students, particularly international students, typically experience feelings of marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 3). Marginality originates from the suspicion that the new life will not be as successful as the old one. The sense of belonging is missing (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 2).

Once the individual forms a supportive relationship in the new life, the feeling of marginalization is replaced by a feeling of mattering. Schlossberg (1989) describes mattering as a motivator that determines behaviors (p. 3). For example, a student that perceives themselves to matter may perform better academically due to the belief that their success matters to others. When students matter to an academic advisor, the student feels a greater sense of belonging and is less likely to experience academic stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 30). They are also more likely to continue their studies if an advisor demonstrates that they care (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60).

Schlossberg (1989) suggests the use of rituals to help lessen feelings of marginality (p. 5). Rituals provide a concrete gateway from the past life to the future one (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 5), easing the effects of marginality. Tinto (1975) also recommended rituals and rites of passage, but later researchers, including Tierney (1999) contended this strategy (p. 607). However, Schlossberg (1989) incorporates rituals into her theory differently from Tinto (1975). While Tinto (1975) takes the social integrationist view that all individuals must go through the same ritual (Tierney, 1999, p. 607), Schlossberg (1989) does not view the institution itself as a ritual in a society. Instead, all students enrolled in a certain institution experience the same rituals,
including freshmen orientation, enrolling in classes, and applying for graduation. These rituals provide a point of commonality with the other students, and the beginning of a shared culture.

Schlossberg’s (1989) theory has been applied to university students in the past. For example, one study found that first-year college students experience feelings of marginality as result of being “away from loved ones…searching for independence, building a new social support network, making life-altering decisions, and academic stress” (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 22). These studies found that “mattering to others at their colleges helped students feel more a part of the environment and was likely to reduce students’ levels of academic stress” (Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 30).

By helping an international student move through the marginality phase and into the mattering one, the academic advisor is helping the student achieve a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60). Cultural navigators can help alleviate those feelings of isolation by providing social support to the student. However, it is important to remember that the sense of belonging is not permanent. International students in particular are disposed to the marginality phase (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 2), as they experience the integration of their original culture and the campus culture. Cultural navigators must continue to provide social support as “the context or culture changes, time changes, or people change” (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 60).

To summarize, Strayhorn’s (2015) depiction of the academic advisor as cultural navigator is cohesive with several frameworks about the student and the university. Kuh and Whitt (1988), among others, suggested that each university campus is its own unique culture. Sam and Berry (2010) formed a framework of acculturation strategies that cultural newcomers could employ. Tinto’s (1975) research found that students who do not socially integrate into the campus are more at risk of early departure. Tierney (1999) supported a cultural integrity approach for incorporating new students into the campus social structure, in line with Sam and Berry’s (2010) integration approach. Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s model (2004) takes the student viewpoint, highlighting the importance of the advisor-advisee relationship in encouraging international student retention. Finally, Schlossberg (1989) documented the impact of a feeling of mattering on student retention. As such, academic advisors as cultural navigators are in a position to greatly influence an international student’s decision to continue their studies.
Educational institutions possess unique cultures

If dominant cultures embrace multiculturalism, subordinate cultures favor integration strategies

Students who depart university early may do so partly due to lack of social cohesion

Students allowed to culturally integrate are more successful academically

Relationships with members of the host culture are the primary indicators of culture shock

A feeling of mattering leads to a sense of belonging on campus

Fig. 4.4 Author’s Depiction of Support for Strayhorn’s Role of the Academic Advisor as Cultural Navigator
5 Social Science Research

[Social research] is done because there is an aspect of our understanding of what goes on in society that is to some extent unresolved.

Bryman (2012, p. 6)

In the previous chapters, I highlighted the importance of international student success to higher education institutions in the United States. I have confirmed the educational purpose of academic advising, validated the usefulness of multiple advising approaches, and explained the impact of the advisor-advisee relationship on international student retention. Numerous models from other researchers have supported Strayhorn’s (2015) role of the academic advisor as cultural navigator. These topics are central to my research question concerning academic advisors’ provision of social support to their international students. Now I will describe my data gathering techniques and explain my reasoning in determining which methods and methodologies are best suited to my research question.

From the beginning of my thesis planning, I knew I wanted to study academic advising. My own professional background is in advising and admissions, and I witnessed phenomena that piqued my curiosity. Since I worked exclusively with international students in short-term study abroad programs, these phenomena all concerned international student advising. I was particularly curious about the supportive roles that academic advisors take regarding their students. As central figures on campus, academic advisors are under pressure from several directions. The university leadership, department heads, the students, and accreditation groups all have certain expectations of academic advisors. I wanted to know how academic advisors interpreted those expectations and implemented student support techniques. I especially wanted to know how they went about providing that support to international students, particularly in light of the growing focus on intercultural communication and international student retention.
My research design is a comparative cross-sectional study to compare social support categories horizontally at the same moment in time. As a cross-sectional study, it is also non-experimental. The level of comparison is between the different categories of social support offered to students.

5.1 Research Strategy

As I began reading literature on academic advising, I realized that academic advisors have rarely been consulted about their own field of expertise (Zhang & Dinh, 2017, p. 33). I wanted to know what academic advisors thought about advising international students. With this idea in mind, I wished to conduct a study focusing on advisor perceptions of their own responsibilities.

There were several factors for me to consider when planning my research method and methodology. Burrell and Morgan (1979/2011) list four relevant factors (pp. 5-7) to consider when planning a research project, and Bryman (2012) contributes another three. Burrell and Morgan (1979/2011) summarize the four primary sets of assumptions in the social sciences concerning ontology, epistemology, human nature, and methodology (p. 1). Every social science researcher brings certain “explicit or implicit assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way in which it may be investigated” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 1) to their research planning. These assumptions have profound implications for the nature of the social science research to be conducted. Accordingly, I explored my own assumptions prior to beginning my thesis research.

Ontology concerns the researcher’s view of reality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 1). If the researcher assumes that reality is “relatively inert and beyond our influence” (Bryman, 2012, p. 6), then they ascribe to realism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). If the opposite is true and reality is “the product of one’s mind” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 1), then the researcher has a nominalist approach (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). These represent two poles on a continuous spectrum of views on reality, and some researchers may fall in between. I found myself in this midpoint position, as I assume that there is a somewhat inert reality that individuals may interpret in various ways.
The next set of assumptions centers on epistemology, or assumptions about the nature of knowledge (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 1). These assumptions range from a positivist stance (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3), where knowledge is “capable of being transmitted in tangible form” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p.1), to an anti-positivist one (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3), where knowledge is “based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, pp. 1-2). My assumptions fall more on the anti-positivist side of the scale, and I hold that personal experiences may color the understanding of knowledge.

Human nature refers to the relationship between people and their environment (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 2). Some researchers are deterministic, in that individuals are the products of their environment (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 2). Others assume a more voluntarist role, where the individual is “the master rather than the marionette” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 2). Again, most social science researchers do not adhere to one pole or the other, but rather assume something in the middle. I also assume that individuals are not fully controlled or are the controller but are a little bit of both.

The previous three sets of assumptions influence the type of methodology that the researcher employs (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 2). If the researcher ascribes to a realist, positivist, and determinist view of social reality, then they are most likely to use nomothetic methodology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). This perspective searches for “universal laws which explain and govern the reality which is being observed” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). Conversely, a nominalist, anti-positivist, and voluntarist viewpoint typically utilizes an ideographic methodology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). These researchers try to understand “the way in which the individual creates, modifies, and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979/2011, p. 3). Due to my previous assumptions and the focus of my research, I find myself decidedly on the ideographic side of the spectrum.

Bryman (2012) contributes an additional three factors that can impact social research strategy. First, there is the relationship between theory and research (Bryman, 2012, p. 5). If the theory is established first and the research conducted to support or refute it, then the researcher has created a hypothesis (Bryman, 2012, p. 6). This is called the deductive approach, and it is the most commonly used in research (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). Alternatively, the research may be more
open-ended with the possibility of leading to a theory (Bryman, 2012, p. 6), also known as the inductive approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). Researchers seldom use one of these exclusively, but one approach typically dominates the research process (Bryman, 2012, p. 26). However, some researchers have proposed a third approach: the abductive approach (Bryman, 2012, p. 401).

At first glance, my research focus lends itself more towards staying relatively open-ended, as I am interested in how and to what extent academic advisors provide social support. This indicates a tendency towards the inductive approach, but the participants’ perspectives are central to my research. As such, my conclusions are not widely generalizable, but instead are useful as a guide in similar situations. Abduction is based on this reasoning, where the researcher “grounds a theoretical understanding of the contexts and people he or she is studying in the language, meanings, and perspectives that form their worldview” (Bryman, 2012, p. 401). This means that the researcher’s conclusions are not only built on those perspectives but must satisfactorily address them (Bryman, 2012, p. 401). It is certainly related to the inductive approach, but it is distinctive in its “reliance on explanation and understanding on participants’ worldviews” (Bryman, 2012, p. 401).

Another factor to consider is the research project’s impact on practice (Bryman, 2012, p. 7). Some researchers are more concerned with gaining knowledge, while others believe that research should have more practical implications (Bryman, 2012, p. 7). Although the field of academic advising is certainly lacking in research, as stated previously, I am focused more on the applied consequences of my research. Understanding how academic advisors can and do provide social support to their international students can lead to more comprehensive training in the future.

Finally, the researcher’s personal interests have an outsize impact on their research topic and method choices (Bryman, 2012, p. 7). I previously mentioned that my background is in academic advising and international education, leading to my current thesis topic. This certainly constitutes a personal interest, but I have used this interest to raise awareness about the challenges facing international students studying in the United States. While my interest in advising is not in and of itself a cause for concern (Bryman, 2012, p. 7), it does mean that I have certain biases regarding academic advisors and international students due to my personal history. It is something that I needed to consider when planning my research and analyzing my data.
Based on these assumptions, as well as the focus of my overall query, my research strategy is qualitative. Although there are many different qualitative methods, qualitative research has three primary characteristics. First, qualitative researchers typically collect and analyze the data first, allowing the theory to evolve out of the analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Second, it holds an anti-positivist view of knowledge, where knowledge is interpreted by the individuals (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Finally, qualitative research assumes social reality is nominalist and impacted by the individual’s actions (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Qualitative research focuses on the individual experience, and the resulting theories are not meant for generalization to the wider population.

My research will be conducted within the critical realism paradigm of qualitative research. Critical realism holds that there are multiple perceptions about one single reality which exists outside of individuals (Bisman, 2010, p. 9). Guba and Lincoln (1994) also refer to this concept as historical realism (p. 110). Contrary to other qualitative paradigms, the connection between epistemology and ontology is blurred in critical realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Because there are multiple assessments of reality, knowledge is interpretive, and individuals understand reality through their own perceptions (McEvoy & Richards, 2006, p. 69). The researcher and the participants both bring their own perspectives to the research process, and the interaction between them reflects this (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The goal of critical realism is to find the tendencies or mechanisms that bring about events in reality (Bisman, 2010, p. 9). Because the mechanisms will not always have the same effect due to changing social structures, researchers cannot draw generalizations to the whole population (McEvoy & Richards, 2006, p. 73). Instead, a theory can explain a specific case with the possibility of applying it to similar cases (Bisman, 2010, p. 14). This is appropriate for my research, because I interviewed academic advisors on a particular campus in a specific area of the United States. As advising on other campuses and in other areas may be structured differently, my conclusions are not generalizable to other countries or even other locations in the United States. However, my recommendations may be applicable if the situations are similar.

Ultimately, critical realism aims to “seek out generative mechanisms that are responsible for observed regularities in the social world and how they operate in particular contexts” (Bryman, 2012, p. 74). In my own research, the observed regularity is the impact of social support on alleviating academic stress and improving retention rates in international students. The causal
mechanism is the quality of the advisor-advisee relationship which is the primary factor in successful academic advising. This relational transaction takes place in a specific context, that of the campus culture.

5.2 Research Design and Method

Within the broad framework of critical realism, I conducted a comparative cross-sectional design with case study elements. The research design is a “structure that guides the execution of the research method and the analysis of the subsequent data” (Bryman, 2012, p. 46). The unique characteristics of a cross-sectional design are the research interest and the timing of the data collection. Cross-sectional designs are used to display disparity between specific variables, necessitating the examination of multiple cases (Bryman, 2012, p. 59). Data collection occurs nearly simultaneously across all cases (Bryman, 2012, p. 59), meaning that temporal relationships between variables are difficult to confirm.

The three primary concerns with research design are reliability, replicability, and validity (Bryman, 2012, p. 46). These criteria are used to evaluate the quality of the research project (Bryman, 2012, p. 46). Reliability focuses on “the question of whether the measures that are devised for concepts in the social sciences…are consistent” (Bryman, 2012, p. 46). Replication relies on the researcher to detail their research process, otherwise it is impossible to replicate the results in subsequent studies (Bryman, 2012, p. 47). Validity is comprised of three subcategories, but all of them concern the veracity of the study’s results (Bryman, 2012, p. 47). Internal validity focuses on causality (Bryman, 2012, p. 47), external validity on generalizability (Bryman, 2012, p. 47), and ecological validity on the applicability of the research conclusions to everyday life (Bryman, 2012, p. 48).

These criteria are much more aligned with quantitative research values rather than qualitative ones (Bryman, 2012, p. 398). However, they are widely accepted because “to reject notions such as reliability and validity could be taken…as indicative of a lack of concern with rigour [sic], which is not a desirable impression to create” (Bryman, 2012, p. 398). Alternative criteria for
qualitative research have been suggested, but none of them have garnered a significant following as of yet (Bryman, 2012, p. 398).

Even though cross-sectional designs often rely on quantified data to evaluate variable relationships (Bryman, 2012, p. 62), it is a commonly used design in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012, p. 62). In such projects, the researcher often “employs unstructured interviewing or semi-structured interviewing with a number of people” (Bryman, 2012, p. 62). This provides large amounts of data, which are also a prerequisite for cross-sectional designs (Bryman, 2012, p. 59). Cross-sectional designs are not inherently inductive or deductive in nature, so it is easily applied using both research strategies (Bryman, 2012, p. 69). Although the qualitative aspect of my study presents complications with internal and external validity, replicability, and reliability, the ecological validity is usually increased through use of conversational data collection techniques (Bryman, 2012, p. 62-63).

My research design also has a comparative aspect. By contrasting the provision of the different social support categories, I introduced comparison into an otherwise cross-sectional research design. The comparison aims to “seek explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different…contexts” (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). My discussion of the findings will consider both these goals, by comparing instances of the social support categories and trying to understand the complete context of the study. This does not impact the quality criteria, as a comparative design is “essentially two or more cross-sectional studies carried out at more or less the same point in time” (Bryman, 2012, p. 74). What this indicates is that “when specific research illustrations are examined, they can exhibit features of more than one research design” (Bryman, 2012, p. 69). While the main framework of my research design is cross-sectional, it does have a comparative component.

In addition, there are case study elements to my research project. Case studies involve an “intensive examination of the setting” (Bryman, 2012, p. 67). While my research is not a true case study, the unique elements of the university setting impact the variables. Indeed, as previously stated, every university has distinctive aspects to its campus culture, influencing the structure of academic advising and the degree of intercultural competency. Both these variables contribute to the quality of the advisor-advisee relationship, so that the setting provides a “kind of backdrop to the findings” (Bryman, 2012, p. 68).
Cross-sectional designs in qualitative research typically use interviews to gather data, and I have already mentioned the use of interviews in my research. Interviews may be used in both qualitative and quantitative research, but I have focused on one type of qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviewing tends to be more flexible, allowing the researcher to emphasize the interviewee’s point of view (Bryman, 2012, p. 470). This is often achieved by encouraging the interviewee to talk about what they consider to be important, even if it seems irrelevant to the interview question (Bryman, 2023, p. 470). Related to this, the researcher does not have to strictly follow an interview guide of questions and may choose to follow up on the interviewee’s statements with new questions (Bryman, 2012, p. 470). The goal in qualitative interviewing is to gain a vivid and detailed account from the interviewee (Bryman, 2012, p. 470).

Qualitative interviewing is typically either unstructured or semi-structured (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). I have employed the semi-structured technique, because I had a relatively clear idea about my research focus prior to beginning (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Semi-structured interviewing is more directed than unstructured, so that the researcher can ask the interviewee about topics related to the research focus (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). It incorporates an interview guide of questions or issues, although the interviewee still has the freedom to veer off topic (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Even with this freedom, the researcher strives to ask all the interviewees similar questions on the same topics (Bryman, 2012, p. 471).

For the data analysis portion of my research, I implemented thematic analysis. Other researchers in the critical realist paradigm have also successfully used this analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Critical realism recognizes that individuals interpret their social reality differently (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), and thematic analysis “allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Thematic analysis concentrates on “identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas with the data, that is, themes” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 10). Themes are patterns that the researcher identifies in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

One of the main attractions of thematic analysis is that it is flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). It can be applied both inductively or deductively (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58), although I have taken a more deductive approach. In the deductive approach, the researcher “brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data” (Braun &
Clarke, 2012, p. 58). I identified my primary topics from JS House’s social support theory and my discussion of academic advising prior to my analysis of the data, indicating a deductive approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), deductive thematic analysis is “often critical in its orientation and constructionist in its theoretical framework” (p. 59), focusing on understanding how the social reality is created (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 59).

Thematic analyses that are more constructionist have a tendency to focus on latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Latent themes are more interpretive (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83), and they seek to identify the “sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The constructionist perspective assumes that “meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inhering within individuals” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). The latent themes are the underlying social assumptions that shape the semantic themes that form the actual words and phrases of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

The themes are made up of codes that are “developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10). They are not the full explanation for the significance of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 61), but instead they “identify a feature of the data…that appears interesting to the analyst” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The codes are then grouped together in meaningful ways that are analyzed and interpreted to create the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

During the process of analysis, the researcher focuses on creating themes that are not too broad, are not repetitive, and are directly related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 66). To accomplish this, the researcher is continually moving between the raw data, the coded data, and the growing analysis itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The raw data are not stored away once the codes are created, but they are repeatedly referenced to check for cohesion and validity in the themes.

There are certain challenges with thematic analysis that need to be addressed. Braun and Clarke (2006) have compiled a list of the most common difficulties that researchers encounter with thematic analysis. One of these is the mistaken use of the interview questions as de facto themes.
in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). Although my questions indirectly address the themes, they are not interchangeable. It is only through coding the data that I built my themes.

In the analysis of the data, there are additional pitfalls that I needed to avoid. These include a “weak or unconvincing analysis, where the themes do not appear to work, where there is too much overlap between themes, or where the themes are not internally coherent and consistent” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 94). It is important that the themes and the findings are clearly related, and that the themes support the researcher’s claims (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 95). In my data analysis, I have been careful to keep these recommendations in mind.

After careful consideration of my own assumptions and chosen research strategy, I planned my research using a comparative cross-sectional research design with case study elements. In addition, I considered various data analysis options and determined that thematic analysis was the most applicable. Once I reached these decisions, I began collecting my data.

5.3 Research Process

I conducted my research on a university campus in the Southwestern United States, which I will refer to as Southwestern Metropolitan University (SMU). Although SMU has multiple campuses, they are spread out over one state. Due to time constraints, I limited my study to the largest campus, called the Main Campus. As of Fall Semester 2018, there were just under 25,000 students on campus. Of these, 17,000 were earning their undergraduate degree. Roughly 400 of these students were international.

Total student retention rates at SMU are on par with the national average. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 62% of first-time freshmen who were fully enrolled in open admission public universities returned to the same institution for continuation of their studies from 2015 to 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). According to internal SMU statistics, the current retention rates for the 2015-2016 cohort at the university are just
under 60%. Although NCES does not provide statistics for only international students, SMU’s international population has a slightly higher retention rate with 74% for the 2015 cohort.

Although there are other campuses in the United States with larger populations of international students, SMU is unique in that it has a well-developed central advising office. Due to the training that every advisor is required to attend, this allowed me to assume advisors were given the same information regarding their job requirements. Universities that are more decentralized could have very different advising positions across campus. At SMU, the advisors in different departments hold equivalent positions.

Most departmental academic advisors work with undergraduate populations. Some advisors are specifically hired for large populations of graduate students, or the graduate students may have faculty advisors. As I wanted to focus on staff in career academic advising positions, I chose to meet only with those advisors who worked primarily with undergraduate students. The professional development services at SMU are also directed at undergraduate academic advisors in particular. The biannual Advisor Institute that offers campus updates and breakout sessions on advising strategies is offered specifically to academic advisors who work with undergraduate students. This dovetailed well with the more recent recruitment strategy of bringing in more undergraduate students to higher education institutions in the United States.

As noted previously, my research data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews. After receiving approval for my research from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), I first gathered together a list of the names and emails of academic advisors on campus. This was done by going through the departmental websites and scanning the staff pages for employees with “advisor” in their title. I then composed an introductory email explaining my purpose in conducting the research and attached a letter from University of Oslo confirming my identity. Those who wrote back were offered interview slots outside of normal working hours. I was able to meet with all but one of the advisors who wrote back to me. I attempted to meet with that advisor twice, but the person left our meeting place early both times. After the second time, we did not reschedule.

In total, I conducted six interviews that each lasted an average of forty-five minutes. All advisors were housed in different departments, and one was part of the international office. One was in a
technical school, two were departmental advisors, one was a college advisor, and one had been a departmental advisor and had just recently moved to another position. As that advisor’s new position had begun rather recently, I felt that their views on academic advising were still valuable.

During the course of the interviews, it became necessary for me to change my interview schedule. I had originally intended to ask about the different advising strategies employed with international and domestic students in order to provide the various kinds of social support (see Appendix A). However, the first interviewee indicated that they did not employ different advising strategies with various student populations. Instead, each student was treated as a unique and individual case, and the academic advisor did not have a predetermined strategy for meeting with students of different backgrounds. I quickly modified my interview schedule to reflect this (see Appendix B). Subsequent interviews confirmed that predetermined advising strategies were not commonly employed.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Five of the interviews occurred in private office settings with no background noise. One interview took place in a nearby coffee shop, as the advisor’s office was difficult to reach after working hours. Due to the background noise, there are occasional moments in this interview recording when I could not understand what was being said while transcribing. Those moments are noted as [unknown] in the transcription. As all interviewees have full-time jobs, it was difficult to set up times to meet. Because of this, I did not have the available time to send the transcriptions back for member checking, although all interviewees are aware they may request the transcriptions at any time.

After transcribing the interviews, I examined the transcriptions to identify codes in the data. I coded the data twice. With my limited amount of time to complete my thesis research, I did not have the opportunity to ask another researcher to code the data as a way of confirming my own codes. As such, I attempted to recreate that situation by coding the data on two separate occasions. The first time I coded the data was immediately after transcription. This allowed me to record my first impressions of the data with a fresher memory of the interviews themselves. The second round of coding occurred two months later, giving me the ability to examine whether I identified the same codes.
Although I successfully completed six interviews, there were certain challenges in arranging them. Aside from time constraints in interviewing academic advisors outside working hours, there are other items that must be noted. In the following section, I discuss several of these concerns.

5.4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

As I discussed earlier, one of the most difficult aspects of this study is understanding the role and function of an advisor. For the purposes of this study, I focused on staff who serve at least a part-time role as official academic advisor to undergraduate students at the departmental level. This avoided including views of interim advisors who had not participated in the university-wide training every semester. In addition, the inclusion of academic advising as part of the official position duties indicated that the person was interested and invested in the field of academic advising. It is possible that there are staff who are knowledgeable about the university and advise on some student-related matters, but they likely do not have a background in academic advising.

It is also true that several university campuses employ full- or part-time international student advisors. SMU has an international office that serves only the international student population. I was able to meet with one of these specialist advisors. Although her interactions with international students are markedly different from those of departmental academic advisors, I found that her perspective provided an important point of comparison. Because she was less focused on the academics, the international student advisor discussed more aspects of social support and the particular challenges facing international students in the United States.

It is impossible to interview all academic advisors working at universities in the United States at a given time. Therefore, I used non-probability sampling in the form of purposive sampling to gather participants who were deliberately chosen based on the research question (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). As a result, the representativeness and external validity of this study will be very specific. In addition, the size of the sample is very small in comparison to the number of universities that host international students in the United States, never mind those in other...
countries. The advising strategies in other countries could be very diverse due to the variance between host cultures. However, my research could lead to further questions regarding academic advising in the United States.

As previously mentioned, my sample size is unfortunately rather small. I was only able to interview six advisors, although this represents all but one of the advisors who responded to my initial email invitation. I sent out a reminder email one month later, but this did not result in additional interviews. Due to the sheer volume of work expected of academic advisors, it is not surprising that few of them had the time to meet with me. However, I found the perspectives of the academic advisors I did interview to be interesting and relevant to my research question. Although the sample size was limited, my findings could be useful when considering how best to serve the international student population on other campuses.

The relatively small size of SMU presented certain challenges regarding the participants’ confidentiality. Anonymity was not an option, as I met with each of the participants in person to conduct the interview. However, my questions about academic advising could potentially lead to criticisms about colleagues, departments, or the university itself. As a result, the participants and I each signed an agreement in which I promised to conceal the participants’ identities to the best of my ability (see Appendix C). The participants are each given a pseudonym in this study, and these are Martin, Ashley, Jane, Terri, Jackie, and Mary. I have also omitted details from the interviews and the study that could lead to their exposure. This allowed the participants a certain freedom during the interviews, and some chose to take advantage of it.

The agreement and consent form we both signed is based on a template from NSD. Upon the NSD’s approval of my thesis project, I created the consent form to address both participant confidentiality and their ability to withdraw their interview at any point prior to publication. Each participant signed a form, and I signed it in their presence prior to beginning the interview. I have saved the signed consent forms in a secure location for examination upon request.

It is worth noting that advisors are not typically part of the research process (Aiken-Wisniewski, Smith, & Troxel, 2010, p. 4). Instead, it is the faculty and graduate students who conduct most of the research (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010, p. 4). The “absence of the advisor in research impacts topic selection, daily practice, and the professional development of individual academic
advisors” (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2010, p. 4). My previous experience as an academic advisor helps to address this need. I formulated my research questions based on my observances of the students and the other staff. There is certainly a need for more advisors to conduct research in their field, but I hope to add to the existing knowledge.
6 Findings and Discussion

...the university is here to challenge you on a whole bunch of things that you wouldn't necessarily ever challenge yourself on, that you have, may not have ever heard about...if you're really willing to look at it, it's going to challenge a lot of your fundamental understanding of things...

Mary, Interviewee

My primary research question focuses on both the concept of the advisor as a cultural navigator and JS House’s (1981) four categories of social support. My secondary research question concerns the ability of academic advisors to provide that support. In interviewing the academic advisors, I created an interview schedule that indirectly addressed these key concepts. In coding the transcribed interviews, I developed seven themes: international student challenges, academic advising approaches, theories of academic advising, role of the academic advisor, social support, training for academic advisors, and academic advisor challenges.

6.1 The Academic Advisor

First, the interview with the international student advisor, Ashley, confirms the unique challenges confronting the international student population. Ashley notes that “cultural differences are, you know, of course depending on where they’re [the international students] coming from”. However, there were certain difficulties that cross borders and are common to all international students. These include adapting to the high academic expectations of students in the United States and the need for students to advocate for their own education through asking questions and meeting instructors during office hours. According to Ashley, international
students and US American students also typically do not mix socially, and international students tend to form groups according to nationality to offer support to one another.

As mentioned earlier, most of the academic advisors do not specify different advising strategies for international students. However, Martin does remark on the hurdles that international students face, especially concerning visa status. International students are required to enroll in a specific number of credits every term, otherwise their student visa will be revoked. According to Martin, “if you have an international student, you have to be really, really careful in that situation, right? Because it can affect their visa, and they could potentially be deported if it’s the wrong decision”. In addition, both Martin and Terri mention the difficulties in advising a student whose first language is not English.

Ashley’s description of international student challenges includes several of the main issues mentioned in the literature. The students’ exposure to a new country and culture, and the differing expectations of the student along with distinct teaching methods typical to the United States are primary concerns in international education. Ashley also touches on the lack of social support structures available to international students, and the establishment of proxy structures through contact with other co-nationals. However, Ashley does not remark on the English proficiency of international students. It is possible that, because she works only with international students, it does not seem worth mentioning. All of her students are at varying levels of English fluency, so there is no comparison with domestic students.

In contrast, the academic advisors who do comment on international students focus on their English fluency. This is likely because academic advisors often must convey complicated processes and guidelines, so it is imperative that the student understands. Lack of English fluency often leads to confusion, so the advisors must be creative. Terri states that she will turn her computer monitor to face the student before going through a process together, so that the student can at least see what is meant to be accomplished.

However, there are no other remarks about international students, or the potential differences between them. The advisors specify that they do not attempt to group students together, so this may only be an indication of that tendency. Conversely, it may also indicate that the advisors have little knowledge of the different cultures represented in their student body. Researchers
have noted this phenomenon before in the literature. While this study does not prove that trend, it does not disprove it either.

My second theme concerns advising approaches. Jane, Mary and Jackie discuss the different advising approaches, especially prescriptive and developmental advising. All three agree that the advising approach does not indicate whether the advisor in question is effective or not. They use prescriptive and developmental advising interchangeably, according to the needs of the student and the nature of the advising meeting. Jane describes her use of advising approaches in the following way:

   I would have to say that I always get a little nervous talking about the theories and everything, just because, you know, I've been doing it long enough to where they all kind of blend together. I know the lingo, but I don't really, a lot of times I don't really think about it, because they're all in there and I use them interchangeably, you know, and I can use them all within the same advisement session.

Interestingly, Jackie and Mary also indicate that prescriptive advising typically occurs first in order to establish a relationship with the student. Both Smith (2002) and Robbins (2012) mention this phenomenon, although only in passing.

   Jackie: Prescriptive advisement, you know, is really, just getting the students to actually trust me is the baseline of finishing, so getting them to see that I’m not trying to make them take classes that they don’t need, I’m not trying to extend their period here.

   Mary: Those questions, you know, start out very, pretty fundamental or very basic because they just don’t know. It’s, this is their first experience outside of high school, so you have to explain a lot…and if they come back and see you on a regular basis then you can start, you know, as you build on the information they’ve gotten then you can start seeing it shift.

Jane does not address prescriptive and developmental advising in so direct a manner, but she also describes a building nature to academic advising. Her freshman and senior students typically need of more advice and help. This can be expected, as freshmen are just beginning to navigate
the system and need guidance. Seniors must ensure that they have satisfied their graduation requirements and registered for commencement. Sophomores and juniors can largely navigate the system on their own, leaving time available for more developmental advising. Due to the nature of those advising meetings, it can be inferred that freshmen and seniors desire more prescriptive advising in the form of direction for completing assigned tasks. This then creates a circle of advising rather than the progression as described by Jackie and Mary.

This supports my earlier conclusion that the advising approach does not indicate the caliber of the advisor. Instead, academic advisors use all the advising approaches available to them in an effort to best help the student. Jackie’s, Mary’s, and Jane’s depictions of patterns in advising approaches point to a need to view academic advising in a different light. Rather than debating the virtues of various approaches, researchers and academic advisors could work together to develop a progressive or cyclical plan of advising approaches.

In this instance, the field of study did not seem influential on the type of advising approach. Jackie’s field is in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), Mary focuses on social sciences, while Jane is based in a technical school. It would be interesting to see whether certain areas of study lent themselves more to the progressive or cyclical plan, and what aspects are important in determining that. This would aid in developing the field of academic advising, since researchers are debating an issue that academic advisors seem to have decided for themselves.

My third theme concerns the academic advisors’ theories about their own field. To gain this insight, I asked the advisors what they considered to be the goal of academic advising and how they worked towards that goal. To gain this insight into the participants’ academic advising theories, I asked how they defined the goal of academic advising. Most of the advisors are in agreement that academic advising is an educational endeavor that focuses on the critical thinking skills and personal development of the student. Ashley does not present a theory of academic advising, possibly due to her area of specialization in international student advising.

In discussing their thoughts on the subject, five of the advisors consider the students’ personal growth as central to academic advising theory. Martin defines academic advising as “trying to help students find out who they are”. Similarly, three of the academic advisors, Mary, Jane, and Jackie, primarily view university as a time when students are free to explore areas of interest and
establish career and educational goals. For example, Mary explains that “That’s what university is for, is help you find your, what you like and what you don’t like”. Jane and Jackie also discuss the students’ freedom to study different fields and change career goals. Interestingly, Jackie and Mary specifically mention how the separation from the students’ families could lead to pursuing other interests.

Martin, Terri, Jane, and Mary link the concept of personal growth with critical thinking skills, similar to Grites and Gordon (2000) and Kuhn et al. (2006). Put together, the intersection of these two concepts creates the goal of academic advising for at least these four participants.

Martin: You're also trying to be a mentor type of person to help your students realize themselves and their full potential and resolve issues in a way that helps them grow as a person, as well.

Terri: [The advisor teaches the students] how the whole degree comes together, and how, like, the school, life, and experience come together with, like, the resources and, you know, everything.

Jane: [The freshmen students and I] also talk about what, you know, as far as those different components of the degree, what are some of those opportunities, what can they do?

Mary: If you, you know, if you're really willing to look at [the university], it's going to challenge a lot of our fundamental understanding of things if you don't get threatened by it.

In these quotes, the academic advisors all reference student growth and learning. Martin uses the phrase “full potential” to discuss the student’s learning in the classroom, as well the student’s personal growth. Terri prefers the term “whole degree” as a proxy for the student’s critical thinking skills. She also includes student growth through the words “life, and experience”, implying that the student matures while attending university. When Jane speaks of academic advising theory, she uses the future tense. In this quote, Jane mentions critical thinking through understanding the degree as a whole. The freshman student’s development is viewed as
impending upon participation in opportunities at the university. Mary’s quote is similar, in that involvement in the university will lead to the student’s personal and learning growth.

These individual theories on academic advising support my own thoughts on the subject as stated earlier. According to several authors, academic advising is primarily educational in nature. The academic advisors at SMU appear to agree. As Terri phrases it, “The advisor teaches basically the whole curriculum as a whole”. Rather than focusing on classwork for individual courses, the advisor teaches students how the degree is comprehensive with interrelated classes. In addition, the academic advisor encourages the student to grow and mature through participation in the degree and the university at large. By establishing this one unifying theory, academic advisors are free to modify their advising approaches as necessary in order to accomplish their educational goals.

My fourth theme is the academic advisor role for students on campus. All six of the participants discuss the role of the advisor as a guide in the cultural navigator sense. However, five of the academic advisors are not just cultural navigators for the campus. They aid the students in discussions about life after university, whether concerning possible career paths or relevant internships. Ashley does not have this expanded view of her role, most likely to due to her area of specialty in international student advising. An international student’s career planning would likely take place with the international student’s major advisor, rather than with the international specialist.

According to the academic advisors, their role for the students is to both encourage individual interests and manage expectations. In accomplishing this goal, the academic advisor becomes a cultural navigator by directing the student to relevant resources. This objective is best phrased by White and Schulenberg (2012): “Today it is the role of the academic advisor to teach students how to put together a course of study that is individually meaningful” (p. 13). Due to the wider definition of curriculum as used by Terri and other academic advisors, part of creating a meaningful course of study includes internships, job experience, and networking. It could also include connections to resources that are necessary to allow the student to study, such as childcare, financial aid opportunities, and counseling. In the majority of cases, this means directing the student to another person or office to get the assistance they need.
Martin: [I] interpret the rules and policies that [SMU] has in place, that our department has in place and interpret those for the students basically, so that they are able to navigate the system, make decisions, just based on the fact that it's really complicated and difficult to go through everything that's laid in place in the catalog or all the different places, so try to search for that as the student, it's just really overwhelming.

Jane: So just knowing that they have just one person, that I may not have every answer, but I at least know who should have that answer, and then I also provide, you know, resources for faculty, for other staff, for, you know, so other advisors, you know, so it's kind of a, just kind of keeping all of the knowledge, all of it right here, and being able to spout it out.

Ashley: We handle all things dealing with their immigration status and needing and maintaining their status and all the rules around that…in addition to providing immigration advisement, which is what our expertise is, we also receive all kinds of questions and then we try to match them with the resources that can help them with that particular issue.

These sentiments resemble the base of Strayhorn’s (2015) concept of the academic advisor as a cultural navigator. At one point, Strayhorn (2015) describes academic advisors as bridges that “connect students with the resources they need to be successful in higher education” (p. 58). As the people on campus who are arguably the most interconnected, academic advisors are in a prime position to link students and resources. Among the academic advisors interviewed for this project, Jane, Mary, Ashley, and Terri all comment on their role as the connecting piece between faculty, other staff, students, and various campus offices. Martin does not describe his role as connecting various people on campus, but he does state his goal of aiding students in navigating the campus. Jackie focuses on her connections with campus resource centers and ensuring students have access to those centers.

Both Mary and Jackie talk at some length about the need to manage expectations with students. This often requires academic advisors to meet with students about changing a major or field of study, even if the student had not previously expressed interest in doing
so. The meeting is typically necessitated by failing or below average grades on the part of the student. Jackie usually focuses on the student’s true interests, attempting to discover whether the student preferred to study another subject. Mary describes similar meetings in the following way:

Mary: It can be a very emotional thing, it can be, you know, there's, there's all these things that come in to how they decide what they want to be, some of them it's related to their family, some of it's related to something that's just an inspiration to them, so you know, hopefully it works for them, but it doesn't always, so you just have to say, well, you know, that's not working for you, but that doesn't mean that there isn't something that does.

This relates back to the role of the academic advisor as a cultural navigator, as well. As a person knowledgeable about campus culture, the academic advisor is also aware of the specific requirements for earning a degree. The student may not realize that they can only retake a class so many times for a grade, or that certain grades will contribute to their overall credit count but not towards their major credit. In these situations, the academic advisor takes it upon themselves to meet with the student and explain these requirements. It is ultimately the student’s decision to change their major, but the academic advisor can provide the discussion and resources so that it is an informed decision.

It is intriguing that there seems to be a split between those academic advisors who focus on course- or career-related questions and advisors who take a more comprehensive view of the university experience. While all six see themselves as valuable resources for the students, they take different views on their areas of responsibility. Martin, Mary, and Terri are more concerned about students understanding the academic purpose of university. In contrast, Jane, Ashley, and Jackie take all aspects of attending university into account. Jackie is particularly passionate about student identity and its impact on academic study. Ashley and Jane take a more practical approach, in that they provide resources on childcare and financial aid, among others. In all three instances, the academic advisor does not limit themselves to purely program-related knowledge and connections.
It is easy to assume that this divide is based on the age of the academic advisor, but Martin is quite young. This is one of his first positions after finishing his undergraduate degree. On the other side, Jane has been in an advising position for at least ten years. It would be interesting to interview academic advisors about what they consider to be their realm of expertise. A follow-up question could ask what the realm of expertise should include, and if its current iteration is either too broad or too narrow in the opinion of the academic advisor.

As state previously, previous research has shown that student academic success requires a comprehensive understanding of academic advising. In addition, Strayhorn’s (2015) conceptualization of the academic advisor as a cultural navigator also incorporates a broader view of academic advising. If future studies should find that academic advisors believe their area of responsibility should be narrower in scope, then universities need to consider how students will receive guidance on matters other than classes and career.

My next theme is training for academic advisors. I was interested in whether international students were specifically considered at any of the trainings at SMU. According to the participants in this study, academic advisor training is fairly broad and nonspecific. All academic advisors attend a biannual training that discusses any upcoming changes in the policy that could affect students. Most of the advisors seem generally supportive of the biannual trainings.

Martin: [The biannual trainings are] like big conference-like things that we hold, like, twice a year, and again they kind of tell us what's going on, the administrative side and any changes coming down the pipeline, like, for example, the core changes that are coming next year, but they also give room for different advisors to talk about ideas that they have, how to help certain populations and things like that, so there's always…ways to help advisors be better.

Jane: There's a portion of the day that is dedicated to updates and, you know, they'll have somebody from the registrar's office and the financial aid and, you know, and there will be more time dedicated to the course curriculum changes and the course number changes and how they affect us and, but then there's also a portion of the day that’s kind of set aside, that's more conference-like where there are breakout sessions or, and best practices and things like that.
Jackie is less enthused of the biannual trainings, in that she believes that the trainings should be more specific in topic and longer in duration. There are opportunities to attend trainings at the resource centers on campus, but these are not mandatory. Jackie is aware of this particular opportunity and has attended several extra trainings. Many of the other academic advisors I interviewed do not seem to know about these optional trainings.

This echoes my own thoughts regarding academic advising specifically for international students. With the exception of the international student office and Martin, none of the advisors seem familiar with international student requirements. Ashley mentioned that the international office offers trainings through the breakout sessions at the biannual meetings, but it seems that few academic advisors take advantage of it. As an optional training, many academic advisors may feel that they simply do not have the time to attend extra trainings. However, this is detrimental to the international student population if academic advisors do not consider the unique credit and grade requirements for student visas or the challenges presented by limited English fluency.

The interviews with the academic advisors confirm my conclusions after considering the literature on the subject. Keeping in mind the small sample size, three of the participants confirm the use of multiple advising approaches with the same student and even in the same meeting. Five participants hold to an educational view of academic advising theory, and four of them define education as the improvement of critical thinking skills and the student’s personal growth. All six view themselves as cultural navigators for their students, and five have an expanded understanding of cultural navigator that includes career planning and networking. Three of them advise specifically on issues related to coursework or potential careers. The other three also advise on matters that may impact the student experience, such as financial aid and childcare. Finally, the central advising office on campus does not require focused training in advising international students, nor any other subpopulation of students.

Overall, these interviews support my conclusion that the advisor-advisee relationship is crucial in improving student retention. This is indicated by the fact that the academic advisors unanimously agree that they hold a cultural navigator role for the students. It is the only academic advising theme with complete agreement between advisors. The advisor-advisee relationship is evidently important to every academic advisor, and they work hard to present themselves as student
resources. Having discussed my findings regarding the academic advising themes, I will now consider the theme of social support.

### 6.2 Social Support

None of my interview questions directly addressed the notion of social support. Instead, I asked the academic advisors how they set about accomplishing their goals regarding their students. In answering my question, the advisors often described actions that depicted one of JS House’s (1981) four social support categories. While some of the categories were better represented than others, all four made appearances. Informational and emotional support were more common, while appraisal and instrumental support appeared only rarely. In fact, Martin was the only advisor to mention instrumental advising and therefore address all four categories.

Five of the six advisors mentioned providing emotional support to their students, although in different forms. As mentioned previously, emotional support is generally regarded as the most critical category of social support (House, 1981, p. 24). Ngoc Nguyen et al. (2008) describe emotional support as the “conveyance of empathy, moral support, love, trust, concern, and caring” (p. 3). This definition is strongly related to several other concepts important to the field of academic advising. There is the trust aspect, which also arose with the notion of escalating advising approaches. The concern component of emotional support is linked to the role of the academic advisor as cultural navigator, particularly when managing expectations. Caring could be conveyed when academic advisors present themselves as reliable resources for their students.

Interestingly, the academic advisor’s view of their role for the students reflects their preferred manner of emotional support. Three of the advisors describe actions built on a trusting relationship with the student. In each instance, the student must have a good relationship with the advisor for the successful provision of emotional support. These are the same three advisors who judged the academic advisor’s role to include both academics and other aspects of life while attending university. Ashley focuses on being a resource for international students, saying “All international students know, go to [the international office] for anything and everything”. Jackie
continues her passion for student identity and how that intersects with education, explaining that “A lot of it’s just getting them to see that, like, I’m on your side, and I am a safe space for you to come and talk to”. Finally, Jane is especially concerned with the caring element of emotional support. She describes the importance of the students “just knowing, you know, they have that connection [to me], and it might be something that minor, but at least they know that I'm here”.

The other two advisors who mention emotional support focus more on academic and career support. Martin and Mary’s preferred methods of emotional support reflect their narrower stance on the role of the academic advisor. Martin describes the academic support for the students, both from himself and from the department as a whole. Mary links emotional support back to the importance of university in general by offering students different strategies for succeeding in their classes. While Martin and Mary are certainly empathetic and caring towards their students, they do suggest a more limited view of emotional support that is concerned only with academic-related issues.

Many of the academic advisors’ examples of social support are evidence of informational support. In fact, only emotional support is mentioned more often. Considering the nature of academic advising, this is predictable. The academic advisors’ primary function is to provide students with information about their classes, degrees, and the university at large. Ultimately, informational support is the transmission of knowledge from the advisor to the student. As Jane phrased it, “[Telling the student about opportunities] put a lot of, that puts it into [the students’] hands instead of me just telling them what to do”. It is important to note that the academic advisor does not complete the tasks for the student. That action describes instrumental support, rather than informational.

Mary, Jane, Terri, and Martin all discuss the challenges of conveying relevant information to students, and the different methods they use. Mary relies primarily on printed “road maps”, Jane mostly meets with students in one-on-one meetings, and Terri holds mandatory student workshops. Martin uses email as his primary method of communication, but he expresses frustration with the students for failing to read his emails and ignoring the information.
Mary: I develop the handouts for students, so that they know basically what all the requirements are, and what the courses are when they're offered, so they have all the information there, so they can look at it and really figure it out.

Jane: Just making sure that they're aware of every opportunity that comes along, whether it's scholarships or internships or just a really cool class that might be coming up or, you know, oh you're in your final semester and you will graduate in the spring.

Terri: They have to attend the new student learning workshop before they can register for their second semester, and that's a lot of what that does, it goes over how to go through your audit in detail, where to find things like registration dates and deadlines, and how to use, you know, the online kinds of resources.

Martin: I wish I could tell them that [using email] is one of the skills that maybe you're not going to class for, but this is really useful for when you go to the actual world, because this is, I don't think this is something that's going to go away.

Undoubtedly, one of the primary challenges facing academic advisors is how to ensure students are receiving current and reliable information. This not only concerns the information itself, but also whether the students are reading their emails or attending scheduled appointments. As demonstrated by these academic advisors, several different methods may be used to try to reach the largest number of students possible.

As stated earlier, Martin is the only academic advisor who referred to instrumental support. In the interviews, academic advisors often describe “babying” or “handholding” students. As Jane says earlier, the goal is typically to place the decisions into the students’ hands. Terri phrases it another way when she said, “I don't feel like I'm here to do it for them”. This implies that although the academic advisor can provide the student with information, the student is expected to make the final decisions, sign up for the classes, and contact the financial aid office. When academic advisors complete these actions for the student, there is concern that the student is not responsible for their own education. However, this can have drastic results for the student. Martin describes the situation this way:
I wish there was a softer gap, or at least more support, and one of the things I wish I could do would be outreach more, you know, talk to them and kind of put more effort into that even though it seems like you're babying them in a sense, so I can definitely see that argument where it's like you're just doing more handholding and they should not be getting that, because it's kind of like they should be accountable, so I can definitely see that, but again I don't think they're actually ready for that, because I think the consequences for letting them, just kind of hoping that they take care of everything, I think the consequences are too big.

Martin represents one side of the argument regarding instrumental support. Out of this sample, he is decidedly in the minority. It would be interesting to conduct a follow-up research project concerning the use of instrumental support and its effectiveness. Since the primary concern of academic advisors is that the students will not learn educational responsibility, it would be interesting to compare success rates of universities or departments that employ instrumental support with those that do not.

A second implication is that academic advisors do not have the time or resources to enact instrumental support. Academic advisors typically have a heavy workload, and “[they] can be overwhelmed with too much student contact and too little time to provide even adequate advising” (Tuttle, 2000, p. 19). By placing more responsibility in student hands, advisors can allow more time to meet with students and less time completing administrative work. The academic advisors I interviewed work with between three hundred fifty and five hundred students, depending on the department or departments. Martin in particular finds this frustrating, as the administrative work often takes up the majority of his day. In his words, “you need to take care of all these things, so you don’t have the time to just go out and talk to [the students] and kind of, like, bridge the gap”.

Finally, four academic advisors describe instances of appraisal support. This is potentially difficult for academic advisors to provide, as its primary form is feedback to the student. Academic advisors are not always in a position to provide feedback, as they do not give out final grades for any classes. However, they do have access to the students’ records, and so they can provide feedback on the overall university experience. Mary and Jackie’s meetings with students who were failing or performing poorly in their degree follow this type of appraisal support.
Martin and Jane describe two additional forms of appraisal support. Martin is in a fairly unique position in that he receives feedback from graduated students’ employers, which he then passes on to his current students. The most common comment he receives concerns students’ “soft skills”, including teamwork and verbal and written communication. Jane, on the other hand, regularly meets with students and discusses how “what [the student has] done in their four years with me are aligned towards that future goal…or about how that future goal has changed”.

Each of these advisors provides appraisal feedback to their students, but the support can take many different forms. Future trainings in academic advising could take a moment to discuss the notion of appraisal support and its role in student success. By knowing how they are performing, students have a better grasp of what is required for them to succeed in university. It is important to point out that appraisal support is not necessarily comparative. It is enough to provide feedback that allows the student to evaluate themselves and their own success without reference to other students in the major.

All four of JS House’s (1981) categories of social support were mentioned over the course of the interviews. Examples of emotional and informational support were by far more common than instrumental and appraisal support. The repeated references to emotional support is crucial, as it is generally considered to be the most important social support category. However, the advisors differ over whether to offer emotional support for issues that fall outside academics or career planning. Academic advisors are expected to offer large degrees of informational support, and the data indicate that they do.

References to instrumental and appraisal support occur less often. Only one advisor mentions instances of instrumental support, and it is more a desire to offer instrumental support rather than the actual provision of it. Four advisors describe examples of appraisal support. Two of them provide appraisal support by managing student expectations, one passes along feedback from potential employers, and a fourth advisor monitors and responds to students’ course and career plans.
6.3 Challenges for Academic Advisors

All six advisors commented on the challenges and difficulties that arise when advising large numbers of students that all have unique concerns. As Jackie, Mary, and Jane already mentioned, not every student requires concentrated help all the time. However, every student’s record should be checked regularly to ensure that they are enrolling in and passing major-related classes. Out of the participating advisors, Terri has the largest number of students with five hundred. Jane and Jackie each advise around three hundred fifty students, and Martin advises two hundred. Mary does not specify, but she is responsible for nine majors. Due to Ashley’s role as international student advisor, her students are required to speak with her about immigration requirements, travel outside the country, permission to work, and many other topics. With four hundred international students on campus and two international student advisors, she likely meets with two hundred students on a regular basis.

Martin and Mary in particular explain how the individualistic nature of academic advising can lead to great demands on their time.

Martin: It can get pretty overwhelming at times, because there's so many changes, there's so many individual situations, and it definitely keeps you on your toes, keeps you really busy.

Mary: Everyone that I have [has] at least, almost at least one exception, if I'm going to average it out at least one exception per student, probably more than that, because there are multiple exceptions that have to [be approved].

The struggle between administrative work and meeting with students is especially evident when it comes to training. Both Mary and Martin commented that they receive useful information and advice for working with students, both from the central campus advising office and from NACADA conferences and newsletters. However, it is difficult to implement these recommendations when that requires restructuring part of their advising process. It might even require establishing an entirely new aspect of advising. Sometimes academic advisors do not have the time to read the recommendations, even though they acknowledge it is likely helpful.
There are simply too many other urgent demands. As Mary explained, “When is that supposed to happen? When am I supposed to read these articles? How am I supposed to when I can barely keep up with everything I have to do? So it’s, I mean, it’s, it is good information…but how do you implement that when you’re just going nonstop?”

Jackie’s academic advising area adds another dimension of difficulty, because every undergraduate student has to complete at least one class in her major as part of general education requirements. In addition to the students majoring in Jackie’s field, “a good part of my emails were actually students that weren’t in my population but had general…questions”. There are 17,000 undergraduate students on the SMU campus. These students are expected to complete their general education requirements in the first year or two, and hopefully the majority do. However, that is still an additional 8,500 students who potentially contact Jackie with broad questions about her major. Even if she redirected those students back to their own major advisor, each of those emails requires a response.

As noted in the discussions about instrumental support and trainings, the demands on academic advisors can affect their interactions with students. The large number of administrative tasks, in addition to the need to meet with students in one-on-one meetings, means that sometimes advisors must curtail or limit certain activities. Academic advisors often do not have the time available to attend extra trainings, even though this would only improve the advisor-advisee relationships with students in those populations. While students should learn a degree of independence and decision-making skills while attending university, there are times when the academic advisor could offer instrumental support. However, this requires time, which advisors simply do not have.

6.4 Recommendations from Findings

Throughout the findings sections, I have interspersed the discussions of themes with some of my own thoughts on the results. I will now explain my primary recommendation for SMU and other higher education institutions with similar academic advising structures.
First, my results show that at this particular university, academic advisors seldom receive mandatory training in working with international students. The mandatory component of the biannual trainings concerns changes in university policy. The breakout sessions that follow may contain an international element, but not all academic advisors attend those particular sessions. Previous researchers have noted that while “advisors can meaningfully contribute to the success of international students, and the long-term success of international education, many advisors have received little or no training in how to best work with international students” (Hoback & Miller, 2014, p. 94). In the instance of SMU, this observation seems to hold true.

To help remedy this situation, the academic advisors and the international office on campus could work together to create an increased system of support for international students. If the international office were more involved in the academic advising component of the university, international students would benefit from the more comprehensive advising. As observed by Glass and Westmont, “partnerships would not only better serve students, they would help educators learn from each another [sic] in order to become more responsive to the ever-more diverse student population at American colleges and universities” (p. 117). The collaboration would lead to more knowledgeable academic advisors regarding this significant portion of the student population.

The academic advisors’ perspectives on the cultural navigator role were slightly surprising. When I began this project, I was not expecting a divide between academic advisors regarding their understanding of their cultural navigator role. I had not considered how academic advisors might incorporate different areas of responsibility into that role. Half of the advisors interviewed saw themselves as resources for course and career questions. The other half took the broader approach and included topics that were not directly related to the university but had an effect on the students’ studies. In reflecting on the implications of my study, it is critical to take this division into account.

Research has shown that “minority students’ problems are rarely isolated to one aspect (e.g., academic, financial, etc.) of their college experience” (Museus & Ravello, 2010, p. 54). As members of the minority population, this is certainly true for international students. As mentioned previously, international students face a wide array of challenges that are unique from the domestic student population. In order to encourage international students’ academic success,
academic advisors need to take a more comprehensive view of their cultural navigator role. This means that advisors should “try to understand nonacademic challenges faced by students…that might be influencing their academic experiences (Museus & Ravello p. 56).

A comprehensive understanding of the cultural navigator role could also impact the academic advisors’ job duties. Academic advisors are under pressure to complete an immense number of tasks in a limited amount of time. By working with the international office, academic advisors could share part of this workload. Perhaps international students could be directed to the international office for any questions that did not address career plans, academic path, or course requirements. If academic advisors were responsible only for those areas directly related to the university, they may have more available time to meet with students and complete other tasks. It is unclear whether the international students attending SMU already follow this suggestion, as the academic advisors did not specifically note when an international student came in for a meeting.

This arrangement could have the added benefit of providing social support to international students from multiple quarters on campus. With an international advisor and an academic advisor, the international student would have two sustained host cultural contacts on campus. Social support does not have to be provided by one person in order to reduce academic stress. If the international student receives all four categories from one or both advisors, their academic stress will go down and they are more likely to succeed academically. It is more likely that two advisors will provide some combination of the four categories of social support rather than just one. This would further benefit the international student population.
7 Conclusion

There's a need for passion and an interest in advising as a profession.

Jane, Interviewee

International students form an increasingly important revenue resource for higher education institutions in the United States. Institutions are intentionally recruiting more international students, and they need to have the resources in place to support the international population. Academic advising is one of the most effective areas for increasing overall student retention, and this is also true for international students. Therefore, academic advisors need to be aware of this vulnerable population and establish successful advisor-advisee relationships with international students. By taking the role of cultural navigator, academic advisors are in a position to provide the social support necessary to ensure international student success.

Before beginning my research, I reached the following conclusions regarding the international student experience at higher education institutions in the United States:

- International students are susceptible to high degrees of academic stress.
- JS House’s (1981) theory of social support indicates that employees who receive support from others in the workplace experience lower degrees of work-related stress. Social support has also been linked to higher retention rates in international students.
- Each higher education institution is an example of a unique culture.
- Academic advising has been shown to have a positive impact on student retention. Advisor-advisee relationships in particular improve retention rates among students in all subpopulations.
marginalization and mattering all support Strayhorn’s (2015) role of the academic advisor as cultural navigator. As such, international students can consider academic advisors to be a cultural resource.

7.1 Summary of Findings

My findings regarding academic advising support my conclusions drawn from the literature earlier. Half of the participants confirm the use of multiple academic advising approaches during the course of a single meeting. Five of the participants view academic advising as a primarily educational endeavor, while four state that education occurs both through personal growth and the development of critical thinking skills. Every one of the participants see themselves as cultural navigators for their students on campus, and five of them are cultural navigators for career planning, as well. Three academic advisors are cultural navigators for areas outside courses and careers.

All four of JS House’s (1981) categories of social support were mentioned over the course of the interviews. Examples of emotional and informational support were by far more common than instrumental and appraisal support. The repeated references to emotional support is crucial, as it is generally considered to be the most important social support category. However, the advisors differ over whether to offer emotional support for issues that fall outside academics or career planning. Informational support is offered using several different methods, including workshops, email, and handouts.

Instrumental and appraisal support are mentioned less often. Only one advisor discusses instrumental support. Four advisors describe examples of appraisal support. Two of them provide appraisal support by managing student expectations, one passes along feedback from potential employers, and a fourth advisor monitors and responds to students’ course and career plans.

As pointed out earlier, academic advisors have a limited amount of time available in which to complete a large number of tasks. The academic advisors must necessarily make decisions concerning what to do with their precious time, and this means allowing some tasks to go
uncompleted. This is most noticeable concerning the available trainings on campus. Even though most of the campus resource centers, including the international office, offer trainings focusing on their subpopulation of students, many advisors do not have the time to attend. While there are biannual mandatory trainings with the central advising office, the trainings offered through the resource centers are optional.

7.2 Implications for Further Research

My findings support my conclusion that academic advisors use all advising approaches available in order to best support their students. The type of advising approach has no bearing on the quality of the advising. However, there are still opportunities to further study approaches in advising. Three of the academic advisors indicated that, while they employ several advising approaches, there is an identifiable pattern. Two advisors noticed an escalating pattern, where primarily prescriptive advising eventually gives way to more developmental styles. One advisor described the pattern as more cyclical. In this pattern, freshmen and senior students require more prescriptive advising, while sophomores and juniors favor developmental. Further research could determine whether this holds true for the majority of academic advisors working with undergraduate students.

In addition, future studies could focus on the connection between the field of study and the students’ preferred advising approach. In my research, the field of study did not appear to have an influence. However, due to the limited nature of my study, more research is required in this area. I interviewed six academic advisors in total, and two of them specialized in STEM-related fields. If more academic advisors in STEM were questioned, a pattern of advising approaches may emerge.

Finally, few published studies mention the demands on an academic advisor’s time. It is imperative for future research to take the advisors’ workloads into account when recommending new advising strategies. Ideas in academic advising are only useful if the academic advisors have the time to employ them. However, many of the advisors interviewed for this study did not have
the time to read about and study new academic advising strategies, let along implement them. This indicates a need to either lower the number of students per advisor or increase the collaboration with other resources already on campus.

It would be interesting to study academic advisors’ views of their own field. Half of the academic advisors I interviewed saw themselves as student resources for classes and career planning. The other half were not only resources for these areas, but also for more tangentially related topics, such as childcare and student identity. As the field of academic advising is still developing, future research could identify areas of responsibility for the advisors. The crucial aspect is whether academic advisors should provide support for issues that are not directly aligned with classes or careers. In the event that academic advisors should incorporate more issues into their repertoire, then additional mandatory training is required in those areas. If not, then academic advisors should collaborate with the campus resource centers to ensure students receive the necessary support.
Bibliography

https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-14-020


Choudaha, R. & Chang, L. (2012). *Trends in International Student Mobility: (Research No. 01)* (pp. 1-23). WES Research and Advisory Services.


Keeling, S. (2010). The Influence of the CAS Standards on Academic Advisors and Advising Programs. *NACADA Journal, 30*(2), 9–18. [https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-30.2.9](https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-30.2.9)


# Appendices

## A Interview Schedule (Original)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural navigator (Theory of academic advising)</th>
<th>Research focus (Corresponding objectives)</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Participant narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The role of the advisor on campus</td>
<td>How do you define an advisor’s role for the students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How would you describe the goal of academic advising?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How do you accomplish your advising goal(s)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural competency (Theory of culture shock)</td>
<td>Student difficulties with social interactions on campus</td>
<td>What is unique about being on a university campus as opposed to other situational environments (office building, high school, grocery store)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do students learn to negotiate the campus?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different advising strategies (Theory of social support)</th>
<th>Are different strategies necessary, in the advisor’s view</th>
<th>Describe a meeting with each of four fictional students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training (Professionalization)</td>
<td>Training should address the different student populations</td>
<td>How did you develop your advising strategies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>Student 2</th>
<th>Student 3</th>
<th>Student 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From California</td>
<td>From New Mexico</td>
<td>From Nepal</td>
<td>From Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved for university</td>
<td>Lives with parents</td>
<td>Moved for university</td>
<td>Moved for university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third year at university</td>
<td>Commutes 45 minutes</td>
<td>On a student visa</td>
<td>On a student visa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>First year at university</td>
<td>Family still lives abroad</td>
<td>Family still lives abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>18 years old</td>
<td>Third year at university</td>
<td>First year at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed major second semester</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Plans to finish in four 21 years old</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently undecided major</td>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>Committed to current major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prospective addition to department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## B Interview Schedule (Modified)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research focus (Corresponding objectives)</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Participant narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural navigator</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Theory of academic advising)</td>
<td>The role of the advisor on campus</td>
<td>How do you define an advisor’s role for the students? How would you describe the goal of academic advising? How do you accomplish your advising goal(s)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intercultural competency</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Theory of culture shock)</td>
<td>Student difficulties with social interactions on campus</td>
<td>What is unique about being on a university campus as opposed to other situational environments (office building, high school, grocery store)? How do students learn to negotiate the campus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different advising strategies (Theory of social support)</td>
<td>Are different strategies necessary, in the advisor’s view</td>
<td>Describe a meeting with each of four fictional students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training (Professionalization)</td>
<td>Training should address the different student populations</td>
<td>How did you develop your advising strategies?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This consent form concerns a degree-related research project at University of Oslo. The research will be used in a thesis for the Master’s of Philosophy in Comparative and International Education program.

The research topic relates to academic advising in higher education institutions in the United States. For purposes of this project, the study concerns only advisors for undergraduate students at the University of New Mexico. Although the study could be replicated at any number of institutions in the United States, University of New Mexico publishes remarkably detailed student demographic statistics. As the researcher, this allows me to consider the impact of the student population on advising strategies.

The sample population was determined by visiting departmental websites. The websites identified staff members who advise undergraduate students. In addition, some participants recommended speaking to particular advisors due to the number and demographic of the students they advise.

Participants will be interviewed about their experiences in academic advising. The audio will be recorded, and the information will be transcribed for further analysis. There is no need for a video recording. The interviews will last approximately one hour.
All specifics related to the university and the department will be removed from the final thesis. The participants’ names will be omitted. If necessary for understanding the participants’ comments, some characteristics may be included. These include length of time in the current workplace, length of time in an advising position, geographic references to previous or current workplaces, and educational or career background related to advising. Any such details will be anonymized in order to limit the ability to identify the participants. That said, some readers may be able to identify participants using these details.

It is voluntary to participate in the project. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. It will not have any negative consequences for you if you choose to withdraw. You can also choose to listen to the audio recording or read the transcript of the interview prior to submission.

The gathered data will be treated confidentially and in accordance with privacy policies. I will have access to the information, as well as my thesis supervisor. Your name and contact information will be stored in a list separate from the other data.

The project is scheduled to end in June 2019, with the thesis presentation in August. The interview recordings and contact data will be deleted at that point.

On behalf of the University of Oslo, the NSD - Norwegian Research Data Center AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with the privacy policy.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Terfot Ngwana, at terfot.ngwana@gsmlondon.ac.uk. You may also contact NSD - Norwegian Center for Research Data AS at personvernombudet@nsd.no.
With best regards

Stephanie Palmer
(Researcher)

Consent Statement

I have received and understood information about the project and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I agree to participate in an interview. That interview will be transcribed and the information used in a thesis to be completed in June 2019. The data will be anonymized as much as possible to avoid participant identification. I reserve the right to withdraw from the research project at any time prior to project completion.

I agree that my information will be processed until the project is completed.

(Signed by project participant, date)