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**NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF
SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL ACADEMIC ADVISING**

by

Ashley Elmes

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Educational Services and Leadership Department
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
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Dedications

This thesis is dedicated to all those that have supported me throughout my journey in this graduate program. This is dedicated to my mom, dad, Nick, and of course my fur babies (Reptar, Reggie, Eliza and Layne). Thank you all.

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Thank you to the phenomenal professors I have had the privilege to know and learn from: Dr. Wright-Mair, Dr, Saadeddine, Dr. Lezotte, Dr. Ieva and Dr. Damminger. Thank you to my classmates and cohort for supporting and pushing one another to be are very best.

Abstract

Ashley Wood Elmes
NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF
SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL ACADEMIC ADVISING
2021-2022

Stephanie Lezotte, Ph.D.
Masters of Arts in Higher Education

Enrollment trends over the past few years have shown an increase in nontraditional students attending universities and colleges. While enrollment numbers have been on an incline, degree attainment rates have not been for this population. Academic Advising has been shown to improve the success rates of students. In this study researchers looked to see how synchronous virtual advising appointments have been perceived by nontraditional women. Additionally, this study illuminates the specific needs nontraditional women need from their advisors.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Nontraditional students are a unique population in higher education institutions- varying significantly from the traditional student in a varying of ways. A defining factor of this population is their age: students 25 years of age and above. Nontraditional students can also be those that have delayed enrollment, work full time, attend school part-time, are parents, or are financially independent (Choy, 2002). In the broadest stroke of a definition, a nontraditional student is a student whose primary role is not a student. Throughout this research study, nontraditional students will be defined solely by their age: 25 years of age or above.

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics National Center for Education Statistics (2019a) *Digest of Education Statistics* report revealed that during the 2018 academic school year, 19,646,000 students were enrolled in postsecondary education; approximately 40% of those students were above the age of 25 years old. A large percentage of nontraditional students are already attending postsecondary schools, and the enrollment rates are projected to rise. Although enrollment rates are climbing for this specific population of students, studies have shown that retention and attainment rates have been limited compared to traditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). It seems that getting students through the proverbial door is not the issue; however, keeping them enrolled remains a challenge.

Statement of the Problem

A specific subpopulation of nontraditional students particularly at risk is women. Nontraditional women have higher enrollment rates than men. However, they are more likely to drop out of postsecondary education (Bohl et al., 2017; Kamer & Ishitani, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). This can be attributed to institutional barriers and waning support services that threaten nontraditional women's persistence and attainment in higher education settings (Auguste et al., 2018; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). Therefore, it is critical that academic advising offices understand the distinct needs of this population in order to most effectively assist them in their academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to use qualitative research to understand nontraditional women undergraduate students' perceptions and their experiences of synchronous virtual academic advising. A phenomenological qualitative research method was used to (a) explore nontraditional women undergraduate students perceptions of synchronous virtual academic advising; (b) evaluate the perceived impact of synchronous virtual academic advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students; (c) provide recommendations to Rowan University academic advisors to improve synchronous virtual advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students. This research study focused on nontraditional women undergraduates enrolled during the 2021 fall semester at Rowan University.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate nontraditional women and of synchronous academic advising at Rowan University?
2. How do nontraditional women undergraduate students perceive the impact of synchronous virtual academic advising at Rowan University?
3. What are nontraditional women undergraduate students' recommendations to improve the synchronous virtual delivery method of academic advising?

Operational Definitions of Terms

Nontraditional Student

A college student that is 25 years of age and above and/or a student that has delayed enrollment, works full time, attends school part-time, is a parent, or is financially independent (Choy, 2002). In this study, nontraditional students are only defined by their age.

Academic Advising

A partnership between a student and an advisor that focuses on developing educational goals that meet students' "personal interests, values and abilities" (Rowan University, n.d.-a).

Synchronous Virtual Advising

Advising that occurs online, in which student and advisor are able to communicate in real-time. This method of advising can occur through the use of telephone, videoconference platforms, or similar technologies.

Significance of the Study

The findings in this study provide a deeper understanding of best practices when providing support services to nontraditional undergraduate women in postsecondary education. Academic advising has contributed to student retention rates, success, and degree attainment (Chiteng Kot, 2014; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Swecker, 2013; Tippets et al., 2020). However, research has demonstrated that nontraditional women become less likely to seek academic advising appointments as they age (Roessger et al., 2019). This can be due to a number of reasons including juggling multiple responsibilities, barriers to support services or feeling marginalized by their advisor (Auguste et al., 2018; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). The flexibility of synchronous virtual advising could help minimize some of the access barriers that nontraditional undergraduate women face.

Previous research specifically on virtual academic advising delivery methods has focused on asynchronous virtual interactions, such as email or text (Gaines, 2014; Steele and Gordon, 2001; Taylor et al., 2011). There is currently limited research on synchronous virtual advising through modern videoconference technologies. The findings of this research will add to the body of literature on virtual academic advising delivery

and provide further insight for advisors on ways to deliver advising to students who do not have the same availability, flexibility, or needs as traditional students.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. The first being that this study took place at only one northeastern four-year university. The students who participated in the study only represent a small population of all nontraditional undergraduate students. Another limitation was that only undergraduate students who were women and above the age of 25 were included in the study. Students who may be considered nontraditional based on their financial independence, parental and work responsibilities, or part-time school status but were below the age of 25 were not included in this study. Lastly, this study only focused on nontraditional women. Therefore, nontraditional men's perceptions of virtual synchronous advising were not addressed in this research.

Organization of the Study

This study will begin with a literature review in Chapter II. Relevant studies on nontraditional women, academic advising, and virtual advising delivery methods will be introduced. The next chapter, Chapter III, will be the Methodology. In that chapter, detailed explanations of the research methods utilized in the study will be discussed. Chapter IV will detail the critical findings in the research. Finally, Chapter V will provide a conclusion and further recommendations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Higher education represents something different to everyone, such as the next step to financial security or a passionate occupation (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). Each year more and more students begin their academic journey, but the path is not easy for everyone. Nontraditional students face many barriers when they attempt to return to school after a long hiatus. Though the percentage of nontraditional students attending college each year is rising, institutions struggle to create adaptive and supportive environments for these students, and many nontraditional students struggle to remain enrolled (Auguste et al., 2018; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). One group of nontraditional students particularly at risk are women, who are more likely to drop out of school than men (Bohl et al., 2017; Kamer & Ishitani, 2019).

This literature review will bring forth a fundamental understanding of the barriers that nontraditional students face in higher education. This literature review's focal point will be on the experiences nontraditional women have faced while attending colleges and universities. Attention will be drawn to the multiple responsibilities that nontraditional women often hold and the institutional barriers they face, which is complicated by competing primary roles. Another purpose of the review is to focus on academic advising. This review will look at the profession and role of an advisor, as well as current literature on virtual academic advising. At the end of this literature review, the reader

should recognize the challenges nontraditional women face in higher education and the potential impact specialized services could have on mitigating the barriers.

Academic Advising

Academic Advisors: What Do They Do?

Since the 17th century, various staff and faculty members in colleges and universities have held positions similar to today's academic advisor. Students would receive mentorship and guidance during their time in academia from either staff or faculty (Shaffer et al., 2010). Over the centuries, the advisor's roles and duties have evolved as the emergence of Student Development Theory has incited much focus on students' developmental needs. In the late 1970s, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was chartered and more focused turned towards the practice and approaches of advising (Shaffer et al., 2010). Advising continues to establish itself as a profession backed by theory by creating graduate degree programs focused on the practice of advising (Shaffer et al., 2010).

In many ways, Academic Advising as a profession is still maneuvering through its growing pains as NACADA and practitioners attempt to define the role better. To better understand perceptions of the profession, Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015) collected data from practicing advisors to understand how they viewed their occupation and career through semi-structured interviews. A theme of indistinction between the job title of an academic advisor and job responsibilities emerged. Some of the job duties that participants described were secretary, party-planner, counselor, and curriculum checker. Although many roles varied between participants, they all agreed upon one responsibility

– student support (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Participants in the study corresponded with the idea that the academic advisor's primary duty was to meet with students; however, the way advisors supported students varied between each participant. Responsibilities included: going through checklists to ensure students were on track, assisting students with career planning, and evaluating their transcripts (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015).

In a more recent study conducted by He et al. (2020), 136 advisors working in different institutions across the country responded to a self-evaluation survey. Participants named their top individual responsibility was building relationships with students. At the institutional level, advisors found their top priority was to help students pick courses aligned with their degree. Those surveyed also identified that they believed their role as an advisor was to motivate students to develop academically, help them align their career and degree goals, and provide students with additional resources (He et al., 2020). As Academic Advising continues to establish itself as a profession and define advisors' roles, one theme has never wavered: advisors' central focus is on helping students.

Empirical Impacts of Advising

The core of Academic Advising is to provide a support system in higher education, which has been thought to impact students' success directly; however, there has been limited research to empirically investigate the effect that Academic Advising has on students (McGill, 2019). Tippets et al. (2020) found that students who had met at least once with an Academic Advisor had a higher enrollment rate from the Spring 2018

semester to Fall 2018 than students who did not see an Academic Advisor (Tippets et al., 2020). Mu and Fosnacht (2019) used data from the 2014 National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) to analyze the relationship between meeting with advising and student outcomes. The researchers used student survey responses from 156 institutions to evaluate the impact advisors had on grades. Researchers found a positive correlation between the frequency of advisor meetings and the increase in grades; for every meeting with an advisor, students' grades would increase by one percent (Mu & Fosnacht, 2019).

A positive correlation was also found in a study investigating the relationship between first-generation students' frequency in meeting with an academic advisor and their retention rate. Researchers found that each meeting with an advisor, the retention rate increased by 13% (Swecker, 2013). Chiteng Kot (2014) studied the impact of centralized Advising on first-year undergraduate students during their first and second semesters. Researchers found that students who did seek Advising during their first semester and second semesters had a higher gain in their semester GPA and cumulative GPAs than students who did not receive academic Advising. Additionally, First-year first-generation students who did seek Advising during their second semester had a higher likelihood of returning the following school year (Chiteng Kot, 2014).

Virtual Academic Advising

One of the earliest studies contributing to the body of literature on virtual academic advising was studying the perceptions of using email for advising. Steele and Gordon (2001) found that advisors felt they could address students' needs quicker through email. However, advisors also indicated that email should never completely

nullify face-to-face advising. Another study focused on the student's perceptions of using emails for advising found that students did not prefer communicating through email when discussing interpersonal goals—indicating that students do not think that email can replace face-to-face advising sessions (Taylor et al., 2011). In a similar study on undergraduate students in face-to-face and online courses communication preferences, Gaines (2014) found that students preferred meeting with their advisors face-to-face followed by meeting by phone. The student selected email as their third choice for communication and chose Skype to communicate with their advisor. In a study focusing on the perceptions of online Academic Advising for Graduate Students, participants found that their Academic Advisor did not reach out to them as much as they would have wanted (Cross, 2018).

Little research has been done on online academic advising effectiveness; however, one study presented some promising results. In a research study by Miller et al. (2019), online students on academic probation received similar advising interventions to on-campus students. Researchers compared students on academic probation from 2014-2015 that did not receive online advising intervention to students during the 2015-2016 school year when the online advising initiative was implemented. Comparatively, during 2014-2015 16.6% of students were removed from academic probation, whereas 23.9% were removed during the 2015-2016 school year. There were also fewer students suspended during 2015-2016 (37.4%) than the 2014-2015 school year (46.7%). Online students were not required to respond to the advisor's outreach; however, students who did respond to the academic advisors were more likely to be off probation or continue probation and were less likely to be suspended or withdraw from school.

Nontraditional Students

Who Are They?

Nontraditional students have been a growing population in higher education since the 1970s. They differ from their traditional student counterparts in several ways, including being older than 24 years of age, having financial independence, working a full-time job, being a parent, and delaying enrollment into a higher education program. Although enrollment has been on the rise for nontraditional students and is projected to continue to rise, making sure this population remains enrolled has been challenging (Bohl et al., 2017). Much research has been done on nontraditional students' experiences in higher education, and a common theme often emerges: lack of support services available to this population of students.

Retention Risk Factors for Nontraditional Students

To better understand nontraditional students' risk factors on persistence, Kamer and Ishitani (2019) used event history modeling to conduct a longitudinal study. The study focused on nontraditional students' persistence between 2004 and 2009. During the first year of enrollment, the study found that first-generation nontraditional students were at the highest risk of dropping out. Statistically, the study found that first-generation nontraditional students were 13 times more likely to drop out of school. A positive correlation was identified between increasing Grade Point Average (GPA) and the likelihood of nontraditional students remaining enrolled during the second year. In the third year, women were 85% more likely to drop out of school than men. Significant data supporting nontraditional student's GPA and retention rate emerged again during the

fourth year. For every one percent increase in GPA, nontraditional students' likelihood of remaining enrolled increased by 44% (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). These findings highlight attrition vulnerabilities for nontraditional students who are also first-generation, underachieving, or women, and suggest the need to focus on student support services for the nontraditional population.

Perceptions of Undergraduate Experiences for Nontraditional Students

In a study done by Bohl et al. (2017), nontraditional students were asked what support services and resources they received at their university. Participants resounded that there were not any available to them at their university. Without specialized support services for nontraditional students, participants felt they were not a priority for the university. Similar themes emerged in Goncalves and Trunk (2014), in which participants found the Bursar's and Financial Aid Office challenging to contact or receive answers. More concerning, participants recounted experiences with Academic Advisors where they felt inferior, unintelligent, and left questioning whether they should continue with their degrees. Like the results in Bohl et al. (2017), participants felt that having an advisor specifically for nontraditional students that knew how to work with that population would be beneficial (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Another study by Jepson and Tobolowsky (2020) focused on nontraditional men's experiences returning to school after completing missionary services. They also found that their advisors either were not helpful or tried to coddle them, indicating the advisor's lack of theoretical perspective on adult learners (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020). The need for sensitivity training and institutional support for adult learners was also echoed by participants in Markel (2015) and Auguste et al. (2018).

Karmelita (2020) investigated a program specifically designed to provide transitional support for nontraditional students entering college for the first time. Even in a program focused on supporting adult learners, ensuring students met with an Academic Advisor was overlooked in the program. The Transition program was designed to bridge gaps for adult learners who had earned a GED or a high school diploma but had paused their education. Students developed their written and verbal communication skills, reviewed essential reading and language skills, and learned important technology necessary for their academic journey. Although not part of the data collection, the author did mention a common theme while interviewing students about their experiences in the college prep program. Since the author was an academic advisor, the students would often discuss their degree and course plans, goals, and career paths during the interviews. One participant had chosen a major without any guidance. It was not until they were in the interview that the author explained their major choice was heavily rooted in math, which the student did not want. This finding indicates that advisors need to reach out to nontraditional students and discuss their academic plans before beginning their first semester. Without that guidance, nontraditional students may struggle unnecessarily in courses (Karmelita, 2020).

Nontraditional Women

Nontraditional Women and Seeking Support

The lack of advisor support for nontraditional students proves problematic, especially for nontraditional women. Tippets et al.'s (2020) study on the relationship between advising visits and student retention revealed that undergraduate women were

40% more likely to meet with an academic advisor than men. Similarly, Chiteng Kot (2014) found similar results, and Roessger et al. (2019) found that women aged 22 and younger were more likely to seek academic advising than men. However, from 23 years of age and onward, women became less likely to seek advising than men. As these women students aged, their likelihood to seek support services from academic advisors continued to decrease significantly (Roessger et al., 2019). These findings show that women who were once eager to seek academic advising faced access barriers as they aged. A possible explanation for women students to seek fewer supports as they age is the demand to balance multiple roles (Markel, 2015; Zart, 2019).

Many Roles of the Woman

In Zart (2019), women stated that conflicting roles as mother, wife, employee, and student created additional challenges for them when pursuing their degree because they had to juggle their multiple roles constantly. In Markel's (2015) study, conflicting roles were also barriers to women's persistence. The women in Markel's (2015) study found that devoting time to school was difficult, especially when their other roles also demanded their time. In both Zart (2019) and Markle (2015), women expressed feeling out of place due to their age, pressure from society to fulfill the high expectations of being women, and mothers and professor's lack of understanding and compassion for the women's multiple roles. Zart (2019) also found that the class schedules hindered the women's abilities to complete degrees as the course schedules often conflicted with work schedules, while the participants in Markel (2015) called for more course offerings. Additionally, the women suggested advising improvements, exemptions to attendance policies, and affordable childcare (Markel, 2015; Zart, 2019).

Experiences of Nontraditional Women and Academic Advising

In much of the research on nontraditional students' experiences, Academic Advising has been either a negative experience or named as an area in need of improvement (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson and Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). Auguste et al. (2018) conducted a study on nontraditional women's experiences with Academic Advising. Several negative experience themes emerged from the study, including advisor indifference, identity marginalization, and gatekeeping. Positive themes in their experiences with advisors included guidance, identity recognition, and advocacy. In positive experiences, advisors recognized their students' varying identities as assets. In contrast, other students had experiences in which their advisor marginalized them or did not believe they could succeed because of their status as adult learners, parents, or socioeconomic status. Those who had advisors who helped them navigate institutional roadblocks felt more trusting of their advisors and would likely go back to them for help (Auguste et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Nontraditional student enrollment rates are on the rise (Bohl et al., 2017); however, this population struggles to remain in school until completion. Kamer and Ishitani (2019) found multiple circumstances that threatened nontraditional student's retention rates, including their gender, generation status, and achievement level. Academic Advising has been proven to increase grades and GPA for undergraduate students and improve retention rates for traditional first-generation undergraduate students (Chiteng Kot, 2014; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019; Swecker, 2013; Tippets et al., 2020).

The issue is that Academic Advising specifically for nontraditional students has been either nonexistent or a source of contempt (Auguste et al., 2018; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Zart, 2019). A need for Academic Advising services specifically designed and delivered with nontraditional students could close the retention gap for these students.

One population of nontraditional students at a greater risk of noncompletion is women (Bohl et al., 2017; Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). Due to the lack of understanding and compassion from faculty and staff on campus, women have faced many institutional barriers. Along with their schools' challenges, they are also constrained by the many competing roles they have (Markel, 2015; Zart, 2019). Although women are less likely to seek advising as they age, studies from Chiteng Kot (2014), Roessger et al. (2019), and Tippets et al.'s (2020) have shown that typically traditional women students are more likely to seek advising compared to men. As women have aged, marginalization and time constraints have held nontraditional women back from reaching their full potential in higher education.

Although there is no current research on the impact of synchronous virtual academic advising for nontraditional undergraduate women, this delivery method's potential is promising. Miller et al. (2019) has proven that online advising can have an impact on student success. Much of the body of literature on online academic advising currently focuses on asynchronous practices or is dated and does not include present-day videoconference technologies. It would be of interest to investigate if virtual synchronous advising that mimics face-to-face advising would be more accessible to nontraditional women, in turn closing the retention gap in their undergraduate studies

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand Rowan University's nontraditional women undergraduate students' perceptions and their experiences of synchronous virtual academic advising. A phenomenological qualitative research method was used to (a) explore nontraditional women undergraduate students' perceptions of synchronous virtual academic advising; (b) evaluate the perceived impact of synchronous virtual academic advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students; (c) provide recommendations to Rowan University academic advisors to improve synchronous virtual advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students. This research study focused on nontraditional women undergraduates enrolled during the fall semester at Rowan University.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate nontraditional women and of synchronous academic advising at Rowan University?
2. How do nontraditional women undergraduate students perceive the impact of synchronous virtual academic advising at Rowan University?
3. What are nontraditional women undergraduate students' recommendations to improve the synchronous virtual delivery method of academic advising?

Context of the Study

This study takes place at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. The university was established as a teacher training school in 1923. During that year, the Glassboro Normal

School opened to 236 students, all of whom were women. The institution continued its legacy of training teachers, but it also expanded to offer additional majors in the 1950s. In 1958 the institution was renamed Glassboro State College to signify the school's expansion of academic concentrations. After a 100-million-dollar donation from Henry Rowan in 1992, the school changed its name again to Rowan College. The institution received university status in 1997, thus becoming Rowan University (Rowan University, n.d.-b).

The school has evolved tremendously since 1923. Today Rowan University spreads across three campuses, all located in Southern New Jersey; Glassboro, Camden, and Stratford. It houses six colleges: the College of Business, the College of Communication & Creative Arts, College of Education, the College of Engineering, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Performing Arts, and College of Science & Math. Rowan University also has five schools, including the School of Earth & Environment, School of Health Professions, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, and Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine. In the 2020-2021 academic school year, Rowan offered 90 bachelor's degrees, 48 master's degrees, two professional degrees, and eight doctoral degrees. The total student body was 19,678, composed of 15,963 undergraduate students, 2,466 graduate students, and 1,249 professional or medical students (Rowan University, n.d.-b).

The University Advising Services (UAS) utilizes a Split Model for their advising delivery method. A Split Model means that some advising takes place at an advising center while another advising will occur outside the center (King, 2008). At Rowan

University, advisors working in the University Advising Center (UAC) advise students in Exploratory Studies or students considering changing their major. All other advising takes place within each college or school. Students are assigned an advisor based on their degree program and more extensive programs based on their degree program and the alphabetical order of last names. Additionally, some of the schools and colleges use a Dual Advising Model. A distinct feature of the Dual Model is that students have two advisors, one professional advisor and one faculty advisor (King, 2008). Students in the College of Engineering and the Computer Science and Computing and Informatics degree programs all receive dual advising.

Research Design

This study is grounded in a qualitative phenomenological research design. Qualitative research can be defined as "a broad approach to the study of social phenomena" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p.6). A phenomenological study focuses on participants' lived experiences and their perceived meanings and perceptions of those experiences. In a qualitative research study, data can be collected through interviews, observation, artifacts, and examination of the culture (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Researchers conducting a phenomenological study utilize interviews to collect data. A benefit of interviewing is that it allows participants to express what they had experienced through feelings and thoughts (Miller & Salkind, 2002). An essential aspect of this research design is that there are interactions between the researcher and the participant (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Although there are many strengths of qualitative research design, this method does also have some weaknesses. Since data collection is participatory, if an interviewee

gives limited information or detail, the data is then left to the interpretation of the researcher. Qualitative research also is open to potential researcher bias, possibly resulting in research results that may not completely reflect the participants' lived experiences (McMillan, 2016).

Population and Sample Selection

During the 2020-2021 academic year, 19,678 students enrolled at Rowan University, 15,963 undergraduate students. Among the undergraduate students, 10.6% of students were considered nontraditional students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a nontraditional student is most often defined as being older than 24 years of age (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Of the 10.6% enrollment rate for nontraditional students, 825 students were nontraditional women. Data on enrollment for nontraditional undergraduate women at Rowan University was provided upon request by Rowan University's Information Resources and Technology (IRT) Department's Analytics, Systems & Applications (ASA) group.

The target population for this study was nontraditional undergraduate women who attend Rowan University and have received virtual synchronous advising from an academic advisor during the 2021 fall semester. Rowan Success Network (RSN), a platform powered by Starfish, is a retention software used at Rowan for students to schedule appointments and communicate with their advisor. The platform stores appointment data which was utilized create a target population list. Criterion sampling was employed to strategically identify the target population. This particular sampling method was chosen to ensure the specific population was being targeted for this research

(McMillan, 2016). The criteria for the research included students that were undergraduate students, nontraditional aged, women and had received virtual academic advising during the 2021 fall semester. The Director of Office of Advising & Student Information Services (OASIS) was provided with the specific criteria researchers were looking for. The Director was able to create filters that narrowed the list to students matching my target population. Through the sampling, a target population of 148 students were identified. The entire target population was contacted through email, where students were invited to participate in an interview. Since participation in the interview was voluntary, volunteer sampling was applied in which the sample consists of only those who responded to the recruitment email (McMillan, 2016). Of the 148 students contacted, eight students responded and agreed to participate in the research study making the sample size eight participants.

Data Collection

In order to collect data in this qualitative study, individual interviews were held. Interviews were used to collect data because they gave the researcher the ability to ask questions specific to the research study's foci (McMillan, 2016). Interviews also allowed participants to be more candid with their experiences, which inherently provided a more meaningful understanding of their experiences. Each interview focused on better understanding the participants' perceptions of synchronous virtual academic advising. Before beginning the research process, the study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Emails were sent to all students who met the criteria. In the email, students were given background information on the study, its purpose, what they would be expected to do, and how the data would be used. The students were also

provided with the IRB number for reference. If students wanted to participate in the study, they would complete a participation consent form and provide their contact information so that an interview could be scheduled. To ensure that as many voices were heard, two follow-up emails were sent to the population.

To embrace the phenomenological aspects of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview questions started with a broader thematic question, proceeded by an additional follow-up question. Questions focused on the participants' experiences with synchronous virtual academic advising, how the delivery method impacted them, and recommendations to improve the virtual advising. The semi-structured interview allowed further prompting and clarifying to ensure that the participants' experiences were fully understood (Given, 2008). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place over Zoom. Zoom was used to provide flexibility in scheduling with nontraditional women.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded using Zoom. An automatic transcriber built into the Zoom software was used to create transcription for each of the interviews. To ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, the researcher relistened to all interviews to correct any transcription mistakes. Once the transcripts were finalized, the researcher went through each transcript and began the data analysis process. According to McMillan (2016), there are three main steps when analyzing data that has been collected through interviews, "organization of the data, using codes to summarize the data, and then interpreting the coded data to search for themes, patterns, and relationships" (p. 350). The organization

was first done by utilizing a flexible coding approach. Key ideas and provoking comments were highlighted. In the margins, codes were formulated based on the researcher's interpretations of the participants' comments. The flexible coding allowed the participants' voices to insight the category creations (Allen, 2017; McMillan, 2016). Once the initial coding organization was completed, the researcher compiled all the codes into one document. Data was then summarized by using an axial coding approach, which identified emerging themes from the data. Similar codes were grouped; once all of the codes had been reviewed and grouped, the researcher was then able to identify the main themes that had emerged from the data (Allen, 2017). In the final step of the data analysis, the researcher dissected the themes that had to emerge from the data and interpreted the findings (McMillan, 2016).

Chapter 4

Findings

Profile of the Population and Sample

During the 2020-2021 academic year, 825 nontraditional women were enrolled at Rowan University in an undergraduate program. The target population of this study was nontraditional undergraduate women who attend(ed) Rowan University and had received virtual synchronous advising during the 2021 fall semester. Criterion sampling was employed to identify the target population. This sampling method was chosen to ensure that the target population was identified and reached for this research (McMillan, 2016). The research criteria included undergraduate students, nontraditional aged women, and had received virtual academic advising during the 2021 fall semester. The Director of the Office of Advising & Student Information Services (OASIS) was provided with the specific criteria researchers needed. The Director created filters that narrowed the list to students matching the target population. After the list was filtered, the researchers were sent a spreadsheet that included the names and email addresses for recruitment. There were a total of 148 students identified. The entire target population was contacted through email, where students were invited to participate in an interview. Since participation in the interview was voluntary, volunteer sampling was applied in which the sample consisted of only those who responded to the recruitment email (McMillan, 2016). Of the 148 students contacted, eight responded and agreed to participate in the research study, thus making the sample size eight.

Table 1

Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Anticipated Graduation
Lucy	25	December 2022
Amy	26	May 2022
Lisa	27	May 2022
Jackie	32	December 2022
Talbot	35	May 2023
Marilyn	43	January 2022
Tiffany	44	December 2023
Mary	45	May 2022

Findings

One-on-one interviews were held over Zoom with each of the eight participants. Interviews were scheduled for an hour in length to ensure that ample time was available for the participants to reflect on their virtual advising experiences. Transcriptions were retrieved from Zoom and coded by the researcher. Through the process of coding three themes arose including (a) a (re)defining of advising, (b) virtual advising experiences, and (c) the needs of nontraditional women.

(Re)defining of Advising Through the Nontraditional Lens

Findings from the study showed that nontraditional women viewed advisors as advocates, helpers, and guides. To nontraditional women the role of advisors as

advocates means that students expect their advisors to go to bat for them, especially when it comes to course issues and concerns. Talbot explained the advocacy she desired in her advisor:

I need an advisor that's working with me, and to say "hey [to the university]...we're one class away from letting this person graduate... We need to make sure that these classes are being offered in the fall and an online format, so that she can take them." That's what I want from my advisor is just to kind of be my representative.

To Mary and Lisa, an advisor was a helper. Mary and Lisa both found the primary role of the advisor was to help with selecting courses and planning their semesters. While focusing on course selection, they also expect the advisor to be looking ahead for them. Making sure the students are on their way towards graduation and meeting all the milestones along way, such as tests required in the program.

Another common theme amongst study participants were advisors as guides.

Amy, Jackie, and Lucy all explain:

Amy:

[Advising is] really to guide you through what steps you want to take to get to where you are and what might be best for you. And just really to guide you in the right direction, because not all classes are for all classes offered in degree program are for that student. If that makes sense not everybody is good at one thing.

Jackie:

An academic advisor [is] someone who is there to simply do that advise you into what steps you should be taking to make sure you're prepared and you're doing everything correctly along your journey.

Lucy:

Someone that's supposed to guide you as you're in the school with questions that you have of what the next step is the classes you're supposed to take so you're not in the school for too much time.

Experiences of Virtual Advising

As the participants reflected on their advising experiences they noticed many advantages to having virtual advising, but also illuminated some of the disadvantages. Two areas identified within the advantages of virtual advising included (a) convenience and flexibility, and (b) time and money savings. Whereas areas falling under disadvantages included (a) lack of personal connection, and (b) advisor avoidance.

Convenience and Flexibility

The participants found that virtual advising provided convenience and flexibility to their daily lives. For Lucy and Jackie their multiple roles including working several jobs, made the virtual advising easier to meet. Talbot liked the flexibility virtual advising provided to her and her family:

I mean it's really hard for me to block that time... We send our son to a half-day pre-K program so that I can take my classes. Than he's got to be picked up in the

middle of the afternoon. I have him all afternoon. We have speech therapy appointments a couple of days a week. So you know it's just difficult we're in fertility treatments, as I mentioned, so that takes a lot of appointments so squeezing that time in is not as easy for me.

For participants that do not need to be on campus virtual advising was also more convenient. Lucy shares a vehicle with her sister and stated that attempting to coordinate around work, school and her sister's schedule would make it difficult to attend an in-person advising appointment. Likewise, Amy found that virtual was beneficial for students that do not live on campus:

I would like them to continue [virtual advising], I think it would help a lot of people and probably people in my situation where you don't directly live on campus. And it's kind of unless you're going [to campus] for the day it's kind of inconvenient.

Tiffany agreed that her schedule, does not lend itself to in-person advising hours:

[The advisor's] office hours sometimes don't jive with my time that I'm down at Rowan because I'm only down there for my classes. So, it's just more convenient for me to jump on a zoom call, regardless of where I am opposed to having to go to campus.

Time and Money

Participants also revealed that making the trip to campus would take a toll on both their time and money. Amy, Lisa, and Tiffany found that paying for gas, commuting to

the school, and needing to require a parking pass were barriers to in-person advising. For Tiffany, every bit of time is of utmost importance:

I have a full, full day and I have to get home, I have kids so you know... I like to maximize on my time and you know I'm still learning the campus. Where everything is and how long it takes to get from here to there and where to park.

Personal Connection

While there were several advantages to virtual advising there were also some disadvantages. Namely, the lack for personal connection with the advisor and the advisor avoidance. Participants felt a lack of connection with their advisor due to the fact they were not sharing space with their advisor. Lucy felt that meeting with her advisor in person would lead to longer conversations and possibly get into more in depth conversations. Tiffany also found that an in person advising would give time for a more humanistic relationship:

When you're on a zoom call you're really like married to that timeslot... they may have other things to do, you have other things to do and it's really easy to just be like okay that's enough, you know sign off. But In the past... I've had some casual conversation with my advisor... I'm a big believer in sharing and trying to relate to other people I don't know if everyone is like that. You know, like when I would say, I had kids... I would expect if somebody did they would be like oh how old are your kids, my kids are this age... You know just some kind of relatable information.

Advisor Avoidance

Some participants found virtual advising made it easier for advisors to avoid answering or finding questions for them, especially, with how easy it is to end a videoconference call. Lisa further explained:

I feel like when you're in person, you can kind of like force them to answer more of your question... but on zoom they can really go and then, just like hang up versus if you still have more questions you can kind of like hang out in their office a bit more.

For students like Mary worse than an advisor avoiding is no response at all. Mary expands on her experience trying to receive a response email from her advisor :

You get you get answers immediately there's so much of a delay [with email], and I know he's busy I'm busy we both work full time jobs um, but there are some times when he was just does not respond at all.

Needs of Nontraditional Women

Something that women were very vocal were the needs they have as a special population. Both what they need from their advisor and what they need their advisors to understand about them. The women were especially conscious of the money they were spending on schooling. They feared paying for a class they did not need and wanted to get the degree as soon as possible. The traditional aspects of the college experience were not the same for this population of students.

Advisor Outreach

Nontraditional women stated that they needed specialized outreach from their advisor, with a focus on personalization and connection Tiffany explained:

I really think that the academic advisor could reach out a little bit more often. I would just say like maybe them being more of an outreach [asking] how is everything going do you need any help.

Tiffany also expanded, stating that she does not just want generic outreach from her advisor, but more personal and intentional correspondence. Jackie also desired more specific communication from her advisor:

I find [advisor communication] is more based on... reminders like tomorrow, you have to register for summer courses. I don't need someone reminding me to register for my summer courses. I think there's a big difference in advisement. [It] is based towards someone who's 18, 19, 20 years old and doesn't know to do some research.

Amongst the needs for advisor outreach was initial contact. Lucy, Mary, and Jackie all had to be the ones to find and reach out to their advisors.

Understanding the Needs of a Nontraditional Student

Something that the participants in this study were very conscientious of was the need to make sure they were on track. Jackie and Mary both expressed that they wanted to make sure that their semesters and academic years were fully planned out. This was especially important since some classes are not offered every semester, which could

delay graduation. Beyond not being able to take a class, came the fear of taking the wrong class, Jackie explained:

I'm supporting, as far as, like making sure dinner's on the table, making sure everyone's at their appointments, [I'm supporting] a whole household. And going to work and managing my classes, I don't have time to waste three credits when I don't need it.

Talbot also shared her concerns with taking courses that she did not feel were necessary:

I think it's easier to tell 18-year-old kids what they're going to do, or what they have available. I don't want to do that. I'm not here to find myself. I don't want to take extra classes. Like I'm not here for that university experience that a lot of people, maybe want or are there for. That's not me and I feel like it's something Rowan really struggles with. Recognizing what someone like me needs from the program which is honestly just a path to the end quickly.

Chapter 5

Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and, Recommendations

Summary of the Study

This study aimed to use qualitative research to understand nontraditional women undergraduate students' perceptions and their experiences of synchronous virtual academic advising. A phenomenological qualitative research method was used to (a) explore nontraditional women undergraduate students' perceptions of synchronous virtual academic advising; (b) evaluate the perceived impact of synchronous virtual academic advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students; (c) provide recommendations to Rowan University academic advisors to improve synchronous virtual advising for nontraditional women undergraduate students. This research study focused on nontraditional women undergraduates enrolled during the 2021 fall semester at Rowan University.

Discussion of the Findings

This study investigated nontraditional women and synchronous virtual academic advising at one northeastern university. With limited literature investigating virtual synchronous academic advising, this research looks to add more to this concentrated area of interest. Virtual Academic advising in itself provides immense benefits to this population of women. Just as Markel (2015) and Zart (2019) had found in their studies, the women in this study carried multiple roles, including parent, wife, employee, and family member. While multiple roles can be barriers to nontraditional women's success in higher education (Markel, 2015; Zart, 2019), virtual advising provided the flexibility that

worked around the women's many competing roles, making it easier for them to access academic support.

While virtual availability provided some advantages, there were also disadvantages. The constraints of virtual meetings hindered relationship building. A virtual appointment made it easier for advisors to dismiss questions and not follow up on responses. Whereas in person made it easier for the women to self-advocate or push their advisor to get the answers they need. Without being in the same space, it made it more difficult for the women to connect with their advisors more personally.

The women also vehemently expressed what they needed from their advisors. The biggest concern is the fear of taking the wrong class and prolonging graduation. Any mistake or miss-advisement in their curriculum can have devastating effects on themselves and their family (e.g., extending time out of work, paying for an unnecessary course). A clear curriculum path for this population would eliminate additional anxieties and stress, namely that it would ensure that the classes they take are the correct courses and keeping them on track to graduate.

Conclusions Based Upon the Findings

Ultimately, the study shows that virtual academic advising is an asset to nontraditional women's experience in undergraduate study. With all that this population needs to manage in their daily live, virtual advising removes unnecessary stress. Though the service itself seems beneficial, how advisors implement virtual advising still has room to grow. More importantly, advisors need to seek more specific training and development when it comes to working with nontraditional students as these students need very specialized and intentional advising.

Recommendations for Practice

Virtual advising seems like not only a viable option for nontraditional women but also a necessity. In order to continue to better support these students, more intentional advising strategies will need to be implemented. The participants in this study shared their need for a personal connection. Moving forward, advisors should create space in the virtual advising sessions to create more meaningful communication. Perhaps providing students with longer appointment slots to allow for more opportunities to talk would be a way for advisors to create this space.

This study also brings to light the particular needs and desires nontraditional women have when attending college. These women are busy, with limited time and financial consideration. They prioritize getting their degree in the most efficient way possible. Many of the participants in this study expressed their fear of not finishing soon enough, taking a wrong class, or being delayed by the course offering schedule. To alleviate these worries, curriculum pathways should be built out so that the students can know exactly what their schedule would look like for the next few years while attending school.

Recommendations for Further Research

Given that this research was only done at one university there would be value in extending the research to other colleges and universities across the country. This study did not look at the multiple identities that these women had, while also being nontraditional students, more concentrated studies looking at the experiences of women of color, women as parents and women in more specific age ranges would give additional

insight to how virtual advising has impacted nontraditional women. Lastly, this study only focused on nontraditional women, however additional studies should be done on nontraditional men and their experiences with virtual advising.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

VERBAL SCRIPT FOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Agreement to participate:

Thank you in advance for taking the time to speak with me today. Before we begin, I want to provide you with information about this study and answer any questions you may have.

I am Ashley Elmes from Rowan University's Department of College of Education, Educational Services and Leadership Department. I am a Master's student in the Higher Education program and this study is for my theses. I am conducting a research study on nontraditional women and their experiences in Academic Advising. The research will help me understand women undergraduate students' perceptions and their experiences of synchronous virtual academic advising.

Today you will be asked to participate in an individual zoom interview, which should take approximately one hour. Your participation is voluntary. There are minimal risks associated with this interview, but I will do my best to limit them. Risks of this study may include some discomfort answering questions about your previous advising experiences. You can skip any question or ask to stop the interview at any time without any consequences.

Your responses will be collected during the interview and will be stored through Rowan University's Google Drive. Only the researchers will have access to the drive and they can only access it using their university credentials. Interview Transcripts will be stored in the drive. On the transcripts only your pseudonym name will be displayed to maintain anonymity.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. The audio files will be stored on Rowan University's Google Drive. Only the researchers will have access to the drive and they can only access it using their university credentials.

There are no costs or compensation to participate in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, now, during, or after study participation, please let me know or feel free to contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Stephanie Lezotte. If you'd like to speak to someone outside of the research team, you can contact the Rowan University's Office of Research Compliance.

Do you have any questions?

[IF YES: take time to answer all questions.]

[IF NO: proceed.]

Do you agree to participate in this interview?

[IF YES: proceed.]

[IF NO: thank them for their time.]

Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

[IF YES: proceed.]

[IF NO: ask if they would like to continue without being recorded, or thank them for their time.]

Interview:

- 1) Can you please describe your educational journey in higher education.
 - a. How long have you been a student at Rowan University?
 - b. What is your current major
 - c. When do you anticipate graduating?
 - d. Is Rowan University the only higher education institution you have attended?
- 2) How would you define the role of an academic advisor?
- 3) Please describe for me how you have interacted and/or met with your academic advisor at Rowan University?
 - a. Have you met with your academic advisor in-person?
 - b. Have you only met with your academic advisor virtually?
 - c. Did you have an option to meet with an advisor virtually or in-person? If so, why did you choose a virtual appointment?
- 4) Focusing now just on virtual advising during the Fall 2021 semester.
 - a. How many times did you meet with your academic advisor virtually during the Fall 2021 semester?
 - b. What did you discuss during your appointment?
 - c. Where there any challenges you experienced during the appointment?
 - d. How do you think your appointment outcome may have changed if it were in-person?
- 5) If tomorrow virtual advising appointments were no longer available how would this effect you?
- 6) What are ways that virtual synchronous academic advising could be improved?
- 7) Final thoughts?

Conclusion:

Is there anything else you would like to share before we conclude the interview?

Once again, thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Do you mind if I contact you again if I have any questions or need clarification about the things we have discussed today?

As a reminder, you can reach out to me or the Principal Investigator Dr. Stephanie Lezotte at any time if you have any additional questions. If you'd like to speak to someone outside of the research team, you can contact the Rowan University's Office of Research Compliance. If you'd like to take down contact information, I can give it to you now:

Dr. Stephanie Lezotte
College of Education, Educational Services and Leadership Department
Phone number: 856-256-4124
Email: Slezotte@rowan.edu

Ashley Elmes
Elmesa13@students.rowan.edu

Office of Research Compliance: (856) 256-4058

Appendix B

IRB Letter of Approval



DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00007111

IRB Chair Person: Dr. Ane Johnson

IRB Director: Eric Gregory

Effective Date: January 19, 2022

Notice of Approval - Initial

Study ID: PRO-2021-666

Title: NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL ACADEMIC ADVISING

Principal Investigator: Stephanie Lezotte

Study Coordinator: Ashley Elmes

Co-Investigator(s): Ashley Elmes

Sponsor: Department Funded

Submission Type: Initial

Submission Status: Approved

Approval Date: January 19, 2022

Expiration Date: January 18, 2023

Approval Cycle: 12 months

Continuation Review Required: Yes

Closure Required: Yes

Review Type: Expedited

Expedited Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Pregnant Women, Human Fetus, and Neonates Code: N/A

Pediatric/Children Code: N/A

Prisoner(s) – Biomedical or Behavioral: N/A

ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.
- 3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.
- 3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.
4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.
5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. Research protocol and study documentation and instruments is approved as of the Approval Date on this letter. All final approved versions of the study documentation, including but not limited to the protocol, advertisements and recruitment instruments, pre-screening instruments, surveys, interviews, scripts, data collection documents, all manner of consent forms, and all other documentation attached to this submission are approved for final use by the investigators up to the expiration date listed above (Expiration Date) in this letter.
11. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

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