

**Community college academic advisors  
and the challenge of access in the age of completion**

by

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### **Dedication**

To Randal Jelks,  
the first person who ever told me that I should think about graduate school and who was  
willing to give me a pep talk when I needed it the most.

To Michael Robinson,  
for supporting me every step of the way, for your love,  
and for keeping the children away from me when I was writing.

And to my children, who are so dear to me,  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study sought to examine the impact of the college completion movement on the historical commitment to open access that serves as an essential part of the community college mission. Using the experiences of academic advisors as a lens, this mixed methods study describes how academic advisors feel about issues related to access, enrollment, and completion. Use of both a survey and one-on-one interviews revealed that academic advisors strongly support open access in theory, but the very real pressures to meet both enrollment and completion goals has led to feelings of frustration and mistrust of their administration and a willingness to curtail access in practice.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

For over 75 years, the American community college has been the most democratic institution within higher education. One can argue that community colleges, defined by their mission to promote and increase access to higher education, have been enormously successful at what they were originally called upon to do: open the door to post-secondary education wider than it had ever been opened before. Today, the 1,100 community colleges in the United States serve over 7 million credit-seeking students, 50% of whom are students of color, 57% of whom are women, and 38% who would be considered low income (American Association of Community Colleges) [AACC], 2015c). These students, as well as the 4.5 million students who attend college part time, are all populations that were historically underserved by America's 4-year colleges and universities. Today, nearly half of the undergraduates in the United States attend a community college (AACC, 2015c), often drawn by the lower cost of attendance and the possibility of preparing for a technical or vocational career or starting the process of transferring to a baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

Although the commitment to providing access has remained strong, today's community colleges are facing a new challenge: how to increase the number of students who not only enroll but also leave with a credential (be it a certificate, diploma, or degree). By most estimates, as few as 40% of community college students complete a degree (Shapiro, Dundar, Harrell, & Walhungu, 2014) and only 22% will earn their credential within 150% of their expected timeframe (generally four semesters for a full-time student or the equivalent for a part-time student; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Sadly, these numbers are even lower for

students of color and for those who begin in developmental education courses (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

The failure to earn a credential has significant negative consequences for a student, the community college that enrolled him or her, and the national economy as a whole (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015). When a student drops out, not only may the college lose future revenue (a concern that is especially critical for career and technical programs with “lockstep” programs in which seats left empty by students who drop out cannot be filled in subsequent semesters due to course sequencing) but individual students may experience negative financial impacts and other undesirable outcomes associated with delaying or derailing their life’s aspirations (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001). Students who fail to complete a college degree “are the big losers in the higher education lottery because the college wage premium<sup>1</sup> does not benefit them” (Shaffer, 2014), and yet they may still have student loan debt from the time of their attendance. On a national level, students who do not complete college contribute to current and predicted deficits in the skilled labor force (The White House, n.d.)

For these reasons, student retention is the most often-cited concern according to one study of community college chief academic officers (Cejda & Leist, 2006). It is becoming clear that, although “access” may have been the rallying cry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, today’s community college preoccupation is “completion” (Dassance, 2011). This preoccupation with completion, based in part on the growing national call for improving the retention and completion rates, is led by powerful voices including current President Barack Obama, who has called education the “economic issue of our time” and noted that

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<sup>1</sup>The college wage premium, which currently is estimated to be just over \$17,000 per year (Dewan 2014), refers to the fact that, historically, those who have earned a college degree are likely to earn more money over the course of their lifetime than are those who have earned only a high school diploma or less.

over a third of America's college students and over half of our minority students don't earn a degree. So we don't just need to open the doors of college to more Americans; we need to make sure they stick with it through graduation. This is critical. (Dunham, 2010, para. 36)

Community college associations, such as the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees, and the League for Innovation in the Community College (AACC, 2015a), also have indicated completion as one of their top research, policy, and practice concerns. Many state legislatures are also grappling with how to improve retention at public institutions of higher education, with some looking to tie future funding into graduation rates (D'Amico, Friedel, Katsines, & Thorten, 2014). Many of the major philanthropic foundations that support higher education—including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, all of which offer high-dollar grants to schools deemed to be demonstrating innovative and scalable solutions to the completion problem—also have focused their attention (and dollars) on the completion problem. As one Midwestern community college president wryly noted, “good luck getting any money these days for anything other than completion, completion, completion” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 14, 2015).

Colleges themselves are being driven by both financial anxiety, especially those in states with performance-based funding models or that have shifting demographics that are reducing the number of new high school graduates, and by genuine concern for the success of the students they enroll. Many appear to be attempting to confront the issue by developing their own completion plans and working with internal and external stakeholders to improve their graduation rates. The Charting the Future plan (Minnesota State Colleges and

Universities, n.d.) and the Complete College Ohio task force (Ohio Higher Ed, n.d.) are two examples of such completion plans.

What is not yet clear is if community colleges can maintain their historical commitment to access in the age of the completion movement or if, faced with mounting political and financial pressures, community colleges will begin to enact policies that will, intentionally or not, begin to “weed out” students perceived to have a lower likelihood of success. This is a profound question for this sector of higher education. Doing so would represent a significant shift from the traditional mission of the community college and would perhaps mark the beginning of a new era for the institutions that serve America’s most diverse student population. Facing the possibility of this new era, this study was initiated to seek to add to a line of research that questions whether community colleges can (and should) retain the historical commitment to open access policies and procedures while also trying to improve student success, retention and completion rates. Although there are those who may argue that the access mission is essential and must be protected (Shannon & Smith, 2006; Smith & Vellani, 1999), there are also some, including this study’s researcher, who see an inherent unresolved tension between access and completion. The eventual resolution to this tension will have important implications for both community college students and for the current staff members at these colleges, most notably those who are most frequently tasked with serving as the student’s guide into and through the world of higher education: the academic advisor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of this study, the term “academic advisor” is used to refer to professional student services staff members at community and technical colleges whose *primary* job duties include the advising of prospective and current students. This general term includes counselors who also have advising responsibilities. With the exception of counselors, who may have a faculty designation, the term “academic advisor” is not used to refer to faculty members whose primary responsibilities are teaching but who may also do some academic advising, as faculty advising is not a common model at the community college level.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Given that community colleges matriculate such a large, and often socially or economically vulnerable, population of students, there is growing demand for improved retention and completion rates, a demand that may be difficult to balance with these institutions' historical commitment to access. The national pressure for community colleges to focus on both access and completion puts schools in a "regrettable catch 22: By offering the primary pathway to higher education for historically underserved students, including learners who are underprepared for college-level coursework and who struggle to finish, community colleges diminish their chances for demonstrating success" (Bragg & Durham, 2012, p. 107). This drive for improved completion rates comes at a time when traditional funding models for community colleges are shifting and community colleges also have to consider the financial impact of declining enrollments if they implement more rigorous standards for admissions or enrollment (Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

Within the limited pool of research that has examined the impact of open access policies and practices on students and success rates, there is a significant gap in the literature as it relates to examining the impact of and beliefs about open access policies on community college staff, particularly those who are tasked with explaining and upholding institutional policy. For many community colleges, the staff who are involved the most within the tension existing between access and completion are academic advisors.

Academic advisors are expected to be both guides into the institution (through leading new student orientations, explaining degree requirements, and assisting with registration and enrollment tasks) and retention agents (meeting with students who fail to be in good academic standing, managing enrollment into career and technical programs, and providing

ongoing assistance with registration and transfer preparation tasks). For many community college students, it is the academic advisor who first welcomes them to college, who helps them interpret assessment test scores and guides them into the appropriate level of coursework, who discloses and explains institutional policies and procedures, and who will, ideally, work collaboratively with the student to create an academic plan that is congruent with the student's goals and abilities. Academic advisors are also the staff most likely to have the first substantive institutional contact with the students who benefit most from open access policies, including students who delay enrollment and registration until at or near the start of the term and those who may lack the cognitive skills or educational background necessary to succeed at the college level.

One of the foundations of professional advising is that advisors should give students “realistic advisement” (Hollis, 2009, p. 34), but some academic advisors have reported that, due to time constraints—particularly during the “August rush” period—and institutional demands for increasing enrollment, they cannot properly advise students who delay enrollment until the start of the term or who appear to be academically or personally underprepared to succeed in college (Robinson, 2015). For many academic advising centers, retention is the key objective of academic advising (Tuttle, 2000), which may create an ethical dilemma for academic advisors when the hope of retention collides with the reality that community colleges regularly admit students who advisors consider unlikely to succeed, either because of personal circumstances or because of academic preparation and ability (Robinson, 2015). Academic advisors must daily balance their professional and ethical commitments to appropriately advising students with their awareness of their role as part of the enrollment management and retention/completion efforts of their institution.



Given the tension among the professional ideals of academic advising, the realities of institutional demands, and the fact that academic advising has long been considered a foundation of student retention models (Crockett, 1978; Habley, 1981), there is clearly a need for more research to explore the phenomenon of open access from the academic advisor point of view. Failing to understand academic advisors' experiences leaves an important voice and perspective out of the national completion conversation.

Academic advisors serve as essential members of the student services division for the modern community college, and high quality academic advising has long been considered a key to student success. Even poor quality advising has been shown to be better than no advising, so it isn't surprising that many colleges looking to improve their retention and graduation rates include academic advising as part of their efforts. As one vice president of student affairs at a large urban community college in the southeastern United States ruefully noted:

Yes, we are working on a strategic plan to improve graduation rates and, yes, we are including academic advisors as part of that plan. Sometimes I feel like that is the answer for everything: You need help with classes? See an advisor! You are thinking about transferring? See an advisor! You don't know what to study? See an advisor? An instructor thinks a student is thinking about dropping out? Send them to an advisor! The truth is, we have three less advising positions than we did 10 years ago but we keep thinking the solution to everything is to make the students see an advisor (Anonymous, personal communication, August 12, 2015)

Given the importance of academic advising, there is a startling lack of research related to the experience of being an academic advisor. Although research exists that

answers the question “Does advising work?” (e.g., do students find it beneficial, does the amount of advising a student gets and when they get it predict a student’s likelihood for success or satisfaction, and do various models of advising achieve their goals?), there is a noticeable gap in the literature to help in understanding how advisors experience their roles, how they view their students, how they feel about institutional policies and administrators, and how they feel about the moral and professional obligations of their task. This gap is even more pronounced for community college advisors, as much of the existing research on academic advising has focused on advising in the 4-year setting, which is a markedly different experience

This study sought to address some of these underexplored questions about the experience of being a community college academic advisor at a time when community colleges stand at major crossroads between the era of access and the era of completion. Exploring issues of access and completion from an advisor’s perspective adds a previously unheard voice to the newly invigorated debate about the long-term sustainability and appropriateness of open access policies. Further, this study sought to explore if there is an inherent tension between open access and increased completion as seen from the academic advisors’ point of view. Failing to understand the experience of the academic advisor leaves an important voice and perspective out of the completion conversation as well, especially given that advisors are often expected to be the face and voice of the institution when it comes to retaining students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Using an explanatory, mixed method sequential design (Creswell, 2015), this study explored the experiences of academic advisors working in community and 2-year technical

colleges to examine the impact of open access policies on their advising work as well as how the emerging completion movement has shaped their experiences as advisors. Given that advisors have historically been tasked with ensuring both student access and student retention, a better understanding of their professional experiences adds more depth to the existing literature in the form of a critical look at the relationship between access and completion. This research also begins to fill in the gaps in the literature related to the experience of being an academic advisor.

### **Research Questions**

Central to this study was the desire to explore the relationship between access and completion from the point of view of community college academic advisor. Essential to this study was to first substantively establish how advisors' beliefs about the nature of the work they do, the students they serve, and their institutions, especially in terms of policy and practice, related to access. To explore this topic, the following research questions were used to guide the study.

#### **Quantitative**

**Research question 1.** Do academic advisors agree that providing open access is an essential part of the community college mission?

A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

- B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

**Research question 2.** What do academic advisors perceive as the impact of open access policies on their work and ability to provide high quality advising?

- A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising? Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

- B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

**Research question 3.** To what extent are community college academic advisors comfortable with current graduation rates at their institutions? Do they believe current policies and procedures are designed to ensure student success?

### **Qualitative**

**Research question 4.** To what extent do academic advisors support policies or procedures that would limit student access?

**Research question 5.** How do academic advisors perceive the completion movement in terms of the work they do, their role as advisors, and their institutions?

### **Significance of the Study**

Academic advising is the only structured service on a community college campus in which all students have the chance to have ongoing, one-on-one contact with a concerned representative of the institution (Habley, 1994), and thus academic advising services are often included as a cornerstone for completion and retention planning. Although there is evidence of a link between quality advising and student retention (Forrest, 1982; Kuh, 1997; McGillin, 2000; Tinto, 1987), there is precious little research that looks at the experience of academic advising from the academic advisor's perspective. If it is true that it is "hard to imagine any academic support function that is more important to student success and institutional productivity than advising" (Kuh, 1997, p. 11), then knowing more about the perceptions, concerns, and values of those performing that function is a worthy endeavor.

This study also adds to the understanding about the relationship between access and completion. If there is to be a shift from an ethos of access to a commitment to completion, that shift must happen first in the office of the academic advisor. Advisors, who are in charge of so many of the key first interactions that a student has with an institution, are

uniquely positioned to speak to the relationship between access and completion as they work daily both with students who benefit from open access policies and those who struggle to persist until graduation.

Finally, this study not only addressed the research questions, which do not appear to have been studied previously, but also illuminates other areas for future research related to community college access, completion initiatives, and the academic advising experience. Given the millions of dollars, both publically and privately funded, being earmarked to improve the completion rates of community colleges on a national level, a significant need exists for additional research on how open access policies shape the work of the thousands of community college advisors whose work is often counted on to be a critical piece of the retention and completion plans.

### **Method of Procedure**

This study sought to include the experiences of academic advisors from various types of community and technical colleges. The first part of the study consisted of an electronic survey that was sent to academic advisors who were recruited from an online forum for members of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (National Academic Advising Association), as well as through a listserv of academic advisors who were working within the Minnesota State College and University system at community or technical colleges. Surveys were also provided to advisors who volunteered to participate following a description of the research at the October 2014 NACADA National Conference. Survey participants were encouraged to share the survey with their advising colleagues in order to insure a robust sample size. Efforts were made to ensure that responses were received from a diverse sample of advisors that was representative of the demographics of the field and also

representative of rural, urban, and suburban campuses as well as both smaller and larger schools.

This study used a pragmatic explanatory sequential design. This mixed methods approach allowed for the creation of a richer picture of the problem. The electronic survey included both qualitative and quantitative items in order to help gain better understanding of the problem on a national level. The findings from the first survey were used to create a semi-structured interview guide to delve further into emergent themes (Creswell, 2015).

The second part of the study included seven one-on-one interviews with academic advisors, all of who came from different institutions. These interviews were used to determine whether the themes from the larger survey were confirmed and whether any new themes emerged. Participants in the second part of the study had the opportunity to review the themes and findings that emerged in order to provide additional feedback and/or clarification as needed. The second phase of research allowed for further exploration of the research questions and also allowed individual advisors the opportunity to describe how they make sense of their professional and ethical obligations in relation to open access policies. Once both phases of the research were completed, the theoretical framework of liminality was used as a way to help describe the findings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Liminality, which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapters 2 and 3, is a useful framework to help understand how people, in this case academic advisors, experience times of change or being a part of institutions undergoing change. Liminality comes out of the work of Victor Turner and the field of anthropology but is now regularly applied to describe circumstances in which people are experiencing the “imprecise and unsettled situation of

transitoriness” (Horvath & O’Brien, 2013, p. 10). The argument for this study was that community colleges are currently in a liminal state and that, to understand the experiences, frustrations, and beliefs of academic advisors, one must understand the current context in which they work, something that could be described as “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967, p. 93) the open access era and the completion era.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a mixed methods researcher, I was aware that I brought to this study beliefs and assumptions that shape not only what questions I asked but also how I interpreted the responses of my participants. My identity, shaped by my personal and professional experiences, had the potential to influence the research process (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2014) and, therefore, I had to be aware of the bias that I brought to the study.

My interest in this topic was shaped by my prior experiences as an academic advisor for a large community college system and as a former director of student development for Des Moines Area Community College and also by my current position as director of student development within the Minnesota State College and University System. These experiences, both positive and negative, have led to an abiding sense of concern about the tension I see between open access policies and the emerging completion movement. That tension, combined with my experiences as an advisor and advisor supervisor, lay at the heart of this project.

### **Assumptions**

Based on my background as an academic advisor and as an academic administrator, I began this study with four primary assumptions. First, I believed that community college academic advisors feel that their ability to meet their own standards, as well as national



standards defined by NACADA, for quality advising are compromised during certain times of the year due to a heavy volume of students seeking assistance with registration and enrollment tasks. Based on my own research that was submitted as part of my capstone project for the Educational Leadership program for Iowa State University (Robinson, 2015), the 2-week window prior to the start of the new semester is marked by a sharp increase in the number of students seen by advisors and a sharp decrease in the amount of time each student gets to spend with his or her academic advisor. Further, I believed that many advisors would place the blame for this spike in traffic on admissions practices (such as not having an application deadline and allowing new students to enroll up to and beyond the first day of classes) that are shaped in part by the philosophy of open access.

Second, I believed that academic advisors feel personally and professionally fulfilled when they feel that they have “made a difference” in a student’s life by providing appropriate and helpful advice. Further, academic advisors want to see students succeed and meet their own personal goals.

My third assumption, again based on both my background and my prior research, was that academic advisors believe that there are students who are admitted to their institution who are unlikely, for either personal, educational, or cognitive reasons, to be able to succeed in earning a certificate, diploma, or degree. These students are considered by advisors to be more difficult to advise and are seen as more likely to be seeking advising services at the time of year when advisors have the least amount of time to work with them. The experience of working with these students, combined with a lack of institutional inclusion in policymaking, has led to a sense of cynicism and mistrust toward institutional administration for some advisors.

An additional assumption was that not all academic advising is high quality and that even high quality advising, though positively associated in the literature with student success, may not be enough to help students overcome individual barriers to success.

### **Definitions of Terms**

Several concepts and terms are used frequently in this dissertation. This section provides an explanation of those terms and concepts in order to provide a greater context in which to understand the study.

*Academic advisor:* a professional staff member whose primary job functions include advising on general education topics, maintaining and updating academic records, helping those student who have not made satisfactory progress (i.e., defined by a standard used by the U.S. Department of Education for continued financial aid eligibility; that students who maintain both a GPA of 2.00 or higher and a completion rate of 67%, are considered to be in good academic standing and as making satisfactory progress), interpreting academic policies, referring to other campus services, and assisting with transfer and career planning. Included in this definition are counselors who perform advising functions during all or part of the year as well as student services staff members who may have titles such as “retention specialist,” “student services specialist,” or “enrollment advisor” but whose primary work includes the functions listed above.

*Academically underprepared:* status describing students who meet any one of the following criteria: they lack a high school diploma or equivalency; they have placed, based on college placement testing, into developmental education level coursework in reading, writing, or math; they have demonstrated prior failure to succeed at the college level;

or they completed high school by completing a significantly modified program of study due to cognitive impairment or disability.

*Administrator:* a professional in a position with supervisory, budgetary, and decision-making responsibilities at a community college.

*At-risk student:* using King's (2005) definition, a student belonging to one of the following subgroups:

- **academically underprepared** as a result of prior educational experiences;
- having **individual risk factors** including neurological, cognitive, health, or psychological factors that contribute to academic failure; these might include learning disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, chronic illness, psychological conditions, low expectations, or negative student attitude toward learning;
- having experienced **familial risk factors** including dependent care issues, lack of financial resources, and disturbed family functioning;
- struggling with **social risk factors** including conflicting ethic or cultural values or stressful peer and social interactions.

*Certificate:* a community college credential, usually in a technical or vocational field, that requires fewer credits than an associate's degree and isn't generally designed to prepare a student to transfer to complete a bachelor's degree.

*Cognitive disability:* a disability that may cause students to have difficulty with mental tasks and/or processing (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011) and to struggle with gaining meaning from print materials, memory, attention, and comprehension; clinical diagnosis of cognitive disability can include Down syndrome, traumatic brain injury, autism, or dementia.

*Community college:* an educational institution that offers both credit and noncredit

coursework. Students attending a community college generally have the opportunity to earn a certificate, diploma, or associate's degree, though some community colleges may offer limited bachelor's degree options. Community colleges usually offer both general education coursework, designed to help a student eventually transfer to a 4-year college or university, and technical or vocational degree options, designed to prepare students for employment in a given field. For the purposes of this study the term community college also includes public technical colleges.

*Completion movement:* A national political and social movement calling for an increase in the graduation rates at American community colleges. Efforts to improve retention and persistence would fall under the umbrella of the completion movement. The process of individual community colleges designing plans or changing policy and practice in the hopes of improving graduation rates is viewed as part of the completion movement.

*Completion rate:* a completion statistic generally based, at the community college level, on a standard used at both the federal and state level of the number of first-time, full-time students who complete their associate's degree within a 3-year timeframe. Although this way of measuring is criticized as not reflecting the reality that the majority of community college students are part-time students and/or students who may transfer prior to degree completion, there is not yet an accepted standard alternative measure.

*Counselor:* a professional staff person at a community or technical college who has at least a master's-level degree and is equipped to assist students with career exploration, academic success issues, transfer planning and, in many cases, personal or social

problems. During some parts of the year, specifically during the pre-semester enrollment rush periods, counselors will frequently shift to doing primarily advising functions. Information from counselors was collected in phase one of the research.

*Developmental education:* Courses that are designed to build skills primarily in reading, writing, and mathematics. These courses, sometimes also called “remedial,” are meant to prepare students for success in college-level, credit-bearing classes and generally do not count toward a degree, though students may be able to use federal financial aid to cover the cost of a limited number of developmental credits.

*First-generation college student:* a student whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a 4-year college degree.

*Four-year college or university:* an institution whose primary mission, in contrast to a community college, is to offer baccalaureate degrees or beyond. This term includes both public and private institutions unless otherwise noted.

*Late registration:* enrollment in the first credit of the upcoming term near, at the start, or after the beginning of said term. For the purposes of this study, the late registration window includes the 2 weeks prior to the start of the term and the 2 weeks following the start of the term.

*Low-income student:* a student whose personal or familial income makes him or her eligible for a full or partial Pell Grant; often these students will have an income, adjusted for family size, within 150% of the federal poverty line.

*Open access:* defined by the U.S. Department of Education to mean that students “neither need to compete for admission at a set time of year nor demonstrate a level of

academic proficiency to enroll” (Provasnik & Planty, 2008, p. 10); 95% of community colleges have open access policies.

*Retention:* the number of students who persist from one semester to the next at the same institution; some institutions track both semester-to-semester and year-to-year retention rates.

### **Limitations**

Every researcher must make choices in terms of methodological approach and research methods used. With these choices, certain limitations of the study are expected and inevitable. The first phase of research for this study was an electronic survey. Although the hope was that there would be responses from a representative sample of academic advisors, there were some areas of the country that were underrepresented in the responses and there was a slight overrepresentation of female participants. Using an electronic survey also meant relying on the survey participants to read and interpret the questions according to the expectations of the researcher, who was not physically present to provide explanations if there was ambiguity. The survey was also voluntary, and there is the possibility that those who chose to respond were those advisors who were the most interested and engaged in the topic and may have had stronger opinions about the subject than did other academic advisors; thus, the themes that emerged may have differed from those that may have emerged in face-to-face interviews. Finally, only one survey question (Question 1, related to informed consent) was mandatory to answer. This means that not all participants chose to respond to every question, though close to 70% did answer every question.

The second phase of the research was face-to-face interviews. Within this phase of the research, it was hoped that the research conducted would lead to thick, rich descriptions

of the phenomenon of being a community college academic advisor. The semi-structured format used meant that not every participant was asked exactly the same questions in the same order, as the conversation was allowed to flow organically from topic to topic. Due to constraints of time and geography, some of the interviews were conducted over Skype, which meant that nonverbal responses, including body language, were not able to be seen.

### **Delimitations**

Although there are 4-year colleges and universities that meet the definition of open access, this study focused specifically on community and technical colleges. This decision reflects that the open-access philosophy is more integral to the history and mission of community colleges as a whole and its nature as a distinctive characteristic shared by nearly every community college. Further, there is a significant gap in the literature on academic advising in community colleges compared to the volume of research on advising in the university setting (which includes both literature on faculty advising and professional advising).

Another research choice was to focus on academic advisors (and those, such as counselors, who perform academic advising work) rather than other student services staff members who may also have direct contact with students, such as financial aid, registration, testing center, and student accounts/business office staff. Although the work that these staff members do is critical to the effective function of student services, their work is designed to be transactional and one-time in nature. Both the student and the staff member would expect their encounter to be brief and centered on accomplishing a single task or small set of related tasks. Academic advising, on the other hand, is meant to be a developmental process, akin to teaching, that focuses on treating students and their concerns holistically. Both participants

in the process expect that an advisor/student relationship would have greater depth than that of, for example, the student/financial aid officer, which makes for a more powerful lens through which to view the questions at the heart of this study.

Although community colleges enroll millions of students in noncredit programs (which may include English as a Second Language or career readiness options), advisors in this study were asked to reflect only on their work, perceptions, and interactions as they related to students pursuing credit-earning programs of study. This choice was made because both the national and institutional plans related to improving graduation rates are focused primarily on this population.

Finally, this study sought to learn about how academic advisors perceive certain aspects of their work and their institutions. Given that there is very little research that has dealt with how academic advisors view their roles, there are other interesting questions that could and should be asked in future studies. Due to the current national focus on student retention and completion, the research questions that were chosen for this study focused on questions that related to the intersection of access, advising, and completion.

### **Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. This first chapter provides an overview of the proposed study, including an introduction to the problem, a statement of researcher positionality, and a clear accounting of the assumptions that led to the formation of the research questions. The significance of the study and the boundaries of the survey and its findings were also addressed.

Chapter 2, the literature review, provides the reader with a broader context in which to understand the findings of the study. It examines literature related to: the history, mission,



and function of the community college; the role and functions of academic advisors; and the debate on the necessity and consequences of community college open access policies and procedures. Also included is an overview of the literature relation to the concept and history of liminality.

Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology, presents the research design, the applicability of liminality as a theoretical framework, and the role of the researcher. Chapter 4, Findings, presents the themes and outcomes from the surveys and interviews described in Chapter 3. Particular attention is paid to providing a rich description of the experience of providing academic advising services in the open access community college and how advisors make sense of their work and the students they advise.

The final chapter is devoted to discussions, conclusions, and suggestions for future research based on the emergent themes of this study. Unexpected findings and any limitations that materially affected the picture painted by the survey and interviews are noted. This chapter summarizes the purpose of the study, the procedures and methods used, the significance of the study, and the results and conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Engaging in research allows an exciting leap to be made from the known to the unknown. Although there is excitement in gathering and trying to make sense of data, one must first begin with a review of the existing literature that provides the context needed to truly understand the problem. For this study, the literature review begins with a brief history of the American community college with a special focus on its historical commitment to carrying out its access mission and the current rise of the completion movement. Because this study looked specifically at academic advisors, it was also grounded in the literature related to academic advising, particularly as it relates to student retention.

### **The American Community College**

#### **Brief History**

Community colleges are an essential part of the American higher education system. Whether students begin as high achieving high school students pursuing college credit through dual enrollment options or as displaced workers seeking to be reskilled to return to the workforce, community colleges offer a depth and breadth of curricular offerings that have long attracted a diverse student population.

The history of the community college usually begins with Joliet Junior College in 1901, though the community college as it is known today is really an invention of post-World War II America. The community college movement began at the turn of the century with a focus on general liberal arts studies, a focus that lasted until the Great Depression when job-training programs were seen as a way to ease unemployment (AACC, 2015c). The 1940s served to be a pivotal decade as the G.I. Bill of 1944 and the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education both marked a "substantial shift in the nation's expectations about who

should attend college” (Hutcheson, 2001, p. 107). The Truman Commission identified several challenges to equal opportunity to higher education: economic barriers; regional variations; restricted curriculum; racial barriers, especially for “Negro” students; and religious barriers, especially for Jewish students (Zook, 1947). These barriers were seen to be problematic as the commission argued that education was critical to developing the “informed, thoughtful, tolerant people” needed to “develop and maintain a free society” (Zook, 1947, p. 3). The commission also argued that approximately half the U.S. population was capable of completing at least the first 2 years of college, thus pointing to the need for expanded community college availability and giving credence to the argument that providing access has long been an essential function of the community college.

Although the number of community colleges grew steadily after the Truman Commission report, growth became explosive in the 1960s and early 1970s when it is estimated that a new community college opened every week (Vaughan, 2006). Community college enrollments grew from roughly 600,000 students in 1959–1960 to more than 2.5 million by 1970 (Dassance, 2011). This growth was fueled not only by a booming population of Americans in the 14- to 20-years-of-age range but also by the movement to an egalitarian conception of higher education, a movement that reflected the growing social consciousness of the times.

By the mid-1970s to the 1990s, enrollment rose to over five million students, a sign that the commitment to access continued even as the zeitgeist of the 1960s faded (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Dassance, 2011). According to Dassance (2011), increasing access to higher education for millions of Americans has been viewed as the “monumental accomplishment” of community colleges (p. 34). However, the concern that access alone should not be the

only mark of community college success has also long been expressed, such as by Arthur Cohen, who noted in 1971 that equality of opportunity “does little to ensure quality of education effects” (p. 3), an argument that foreshadowed the access versus completion debate of the current community college.

### **Today’s Demographics and Trends**

Enrollment trends have remained generally strong for community colleges, even accounting for an impressive spike in enrollments during the Great Recession of 2007–2009 (Chen, n.d.) and a subsequent leveling off as the economy recovered (Juszkiewicz, 2015). Today, community colleges enroll nearly half of the undergraduate students in the United States (Roman, 2007; Scherer & Anson, 2014). In addition to preparing students to transfer to baccalaureate-awarding or “4-year” institutions, many community colleges play vital roles within their communities as centers for concurrent high school enrollment, workforce training, and English language learning as well as economic change agents who collaborate with local businesses to prevent or respond to skills gaps in the workforce. Nationally, community colleges play a central role in workforce education, with over half of the nation’s registered nurses and over 80% of the so-called “first responders,” such as police officers, paramedics, EMTs, and firefighters, having attended community colleges (Boggs, 2010). Community colleges exist in a variety of locations, and 90% of the U.S. population is within a short commute to a 2-year college, making these institutions a vibrant part of hundreds of rural and urban areas (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008).

Community colleges represent the first institutions of higher education for a growing percentage of the American population, especially those who are first-generation students, have a low-income background, or are students of color (AACC, 2015c; Roman, 2007; Shaw

& London, 2001). Community colleges also attract a sizable population of nontraditional-age students (students over the 18–24 age range, who are generally considered “traditional-age” students), as the average age for a student at a 2-year college is 28 years (Boggs, 2010). Over 60% of community college students attend part time (Bryant, 2001), and approximately 30% of community college students are raising children while in college (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2014).

Students enter community colleges with a wide range of academic backgrounds. According to recent data, 1% of enrollees seeking associate’s degree and 6% of those seeking certificates do not have a high school diploma or high school equivalency degree. Further, 10% of those seeking an associate’s degree and 19% seeking a certificate have high school equivalency degrees rather than a high school diploma (Scott-Clayton, 2016). On the other end of the spectrum, one out of every 14 students at a community college has already earned a bachelor’s degree at the time of enrollment (The Hechinger Report, 2015).

Community colleges have sometimes struggled with identity as second-tier colleges that serve primarily students who aren’t qualified or affluent enough to attend a more selective institution, although social factors, including the rising cost of tuition and economic instability in the United States, have led to an increase in students and families planning on community college for their high school graduates. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, community colleges are becoming the expected first stop on the higher education journey for an increasing number of high school seniors; in 1992, only 9.4% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders indicated that they expected to attend a community college. By 2004, that percentage had risen to 20.9% (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). By 2007–2008, some states, including Wyoming, California, and Arizona, saw the percentage of college-attending

students who attended a community college instead of a 4-year institution exceed 60% (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education [NCPPE], 2011).

Many prospective community college students are attracted by the relatively low cost of tuition and fees; 68% say they chose their college because of cost (NCPPE, 2011). The average cost of attendance (not including housing and living expenses) for the 2012–2013 academic year nationally was \$3,130, which means that the maximum Pell Grant of \$5550 would cover tuition plus books and supplies for low-income students (Scherer & Anson, 2014). These costs are less than half of what a student would expect to spend at a public 4-year university (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The majority (72%) of community college students apply for and receive some form of financial aid, but the majority (63% of those attending full time and 72% of those attending part time) of community college students also work in addition to attending school (AACC, 2015c).

Student engagement is factor often positively associated with student retention. Community colleges, the majority of which do not offer campus housing, often struggle with promoting student engagement for a primarily commuter student population. At one college, campus leadership would jokingly refer to students as “PCP” or “parking lot–class–parking lot” students (Anonymous personal communication, various dates), reflecting the challenges of trying get students to stay on campus to take advantage of services like tutoring or social events. Given that community college students are more likely than their 4-year peers to work in addition to attending school (Bryant, 2001) and are less likely to participate in study groups, to interact with their faculty members outside of the classroom, or to participate in student clubs (Coley, 2000), it is all too easy for student to exit the institution before the student services staff or faculty have the opportunity to engage in retention work.

The community college of today is diverse by any measure: economically, socially, and educationally. Most of America's college students will be community college students at some point in their college career, a fact that represents a staggering achievement in expanding educational options for students. However, expanded access is only one measure of success, and some would argue that it is not as important as the measure of student outcomes. Put simply, many students will come to a community college, but how many will leave having met their educational goals?

### **Community College Outcomes**

The majority of community college students enroll with the intent to transfer to a 4-year institution (Bryant, 2001; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011) or to earn at least an associate's degree, but the reality is that most students will not meet that goal. According to recent data, the median and mean first-year to second-year retention rates for community colleges was 56% (ACT, 2010), which indicates that the average community college loses nearly half of its students before they hit the halfway mark to a degree or completion of general education credits. Only 25% of students will successfully transfer to a 4-year institution within five years (Shapiro et al., 2013).

Nationally, estimates for community college completion rates range from just over 20% by the U.S. Department of Education's count (Ginder & Mann, 2014) to as high as 39% according to research from the American Association of Community Colleges (Juszkiewicz, 2015). Although there are factors that appear to influence community college graduation rates—including high numbers of students requiring remedial or developmental course work (over 65% of students according to some estimates; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), the fact that community college students are employed more hours than are their 4-year college peers

(Bryant, 2001), and evidence that suggests that two-year college students have lower levels of participation in study groups, campus events, and interactions with faculty members (Coley, 2000)—the fact that so many students fail to graduate stands as one of the most vexing challenges for the modern community college. For some, the low rates of student persistence and graduation call into question one of the hallmarks of the community college tradition: the commitment to open access.

### **Open Access**

As previously noted, providing access to all who seek an education has been a part of the community college mission since the days of the Truman Commission, which called for these schools to be “the means by which every citizen, youth, and adult is enabled and encouraged” to pursue higher learning (Zook, 1947). Open access has been viewed as a form of democracy in action, a “manifestation of the belief that a democracy can thrive, indeed survive, only if people are educated to their fullest potential” (Vaughan, 2006, p. 5). Proponents of open access describe it as both “justice in action” (Bissett, 1995, p. 35) and the “foundation on which all other community college operations rest” (Shannon & Smith, 2006, p. 16).

Open access practices are often given credit for the increased amount of diversity at the post-secondary level, but those who support the continuation of open access practices note that, although diversity rates have steadily improved, there are still populations of students that are underrepresented in higher education. To sustain and increase postsecondary diversity, access must continue to be given as freely as possible (Smith & Vellani, 1999).



Open access is not just a question of social justice, however; it is also essential to the financial health and well-being of most community colleges. Given that community college funding models are based on student enrollment numbers, access means money. Because community colleges receive fewer dollars per student than do public 4-year higher education institutions (Kahlenberg, 2015), community colleges have had to embrace growth, via access, as the dominant paradigm in terms of enrollment and fiscal management. Cejda and Leist's (2006) survey of chief academic officers vividly illustrated that academic administrators are often fearful of limiting access and lowering enrollment in light of ongoing uncertainty about state budget appropriations.

Since as early the 1970s, there have been critics of open access, criticisms specifically related to the academic success of students admitted as a result of liberal admissions policies (Scherer & Anson, 2014). There are those who have argued that, as it has been practiced in the past, "open access is a failure. Community colleges cannot serve all of the students who want to attend" (Vaughan, 2006, p. 106). Open access has also been seen to be a threat to educational quality, as colleges designed to "maximize *course enrollment*" are not well designed to *maximize completion of high-quality programs of study*" (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 2).

Those who have argued for more limited access to community college have also argued that universal access is harmful to students, especially when students are given the opportunity to enroll but not given the support necessary to succeed (Wood, 2012). For students who don't succeed, access can come at a hefty price. They may face the daunting prospect of having to pay back student loans without having gained the extra earning potential that comes with a college degree (Scherer & Anson, 2014). It has also been argued

that open access also hurts well-prepared students who may be forced to share classrooms with less-prepared students, taught by faculty who may teach down to the lowest level of student in the course (Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013; Scherer & Anson, 2014).

The voices that overtly call for limiting access to community colleges appear to be in the minority as, whether for philosophical, moral, or political reasons, many are disinclined to call for making a community college education harder to attain, especially when limiting access could be perceived as closing the door to the nation's poor, communities of color, and non-traditional students (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Thus, access continues to be the dominant model for community colleges; but what does access look like in practice?

The open access commitment has manifested itself in several ways. First, the plentiful numbers of community colleges and the surge in online degree options at many schools mean that geographic barriers have largely been removed. Second, the relative low cost of attending these institutions and the availability of federal student aid monies have made overcoming financial barriers to higher education more achievable for many students. Third, adherence to federal and state antidiscrimination statutes means that formal barriers to admission based on race, gender, religion, and other protected class characteristics have been eliminated.

The three forms of access mentioned above are largely accepted and noncontroversial when compared to the final form of access: access regardless of academic background and level of preparation through open admissions policies and practices. Over 95% of 2-year public institutions describe themselves as being open admission (Provasnik & Planty, 2008),

with over 1,110 colleges having no admission requirements beyond submission of a simple application form (Scherer & Anson, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

After the application itself is submitted, many community colleges have in place practices, procedures, and supports that indicate a strong desire to say to students “Yes, come.” These practices include allowing for late registration (Belcher, 1990; O’Banion & Wilson, 2013), requiring assessment tests but not using scores as a tool to limit access, and allowing students to enroll in and begin classes before payment has been made or financial aid has been processed. Over 98% of community colleges offer developmental coursework to support students admitted via open access policies (Bragg & Durham, 2012), another sign that indicates the high value placed on access.

Allowing late registration is one of the more challenging open access policies for academic advisors and other student services staff members. Late registration is stressful, as it leads to incoming students who have delayed enrollment until the time of year academic advisors have the least amount of time and resources to assist them. Sadly, these students do not get adequate academic advising services (Freer-Weiss, 2004) and, due to time constraints, they may not have the option of attending a robust orientation program where they would benefit from learning about the expectations and skills necessary to succeed in college (Karp & Bork, 2012).

During the 2014 NACADA National Conference, a group of over 100 community college advisors attended a session (led by this researcher) entitled “The August Problem.” This session focused on the two weeks of August prior to the start of the fall term. During this session, advisors were asked the following questions:

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<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that, although a college may have an open admissions policy, there may still be specific programs, usually occupational, that may have program entrance requirements. The present study focused on general admission to the college, not admission to specific programs.

- Does allowing students to delay enrollment until just before the term begins negatively impact student success?
- Does allowing students to delay enrollment until just before the term begins negatively impact the quality of your interactions with these students and the amount of advising you are able to offer?
- Does allowing students to delay enrollment until just before the term begins reduce your level of job satisfaction?

Although the survey was informal, conducted via a request of a show of hands for affirmative answers, it was clear that almost every hand in the room was raised for each question. This session was identified by the conference organizers as a “hot topic” and generated significant interest and an ongoing discussion on Facebook and other forms of social media. This is a reflection of the importance of the topic to academic advisors.

The pool of literature regarding late registration is relatively small, and the definition of “late registration” can vary from just prior to the start of the term to after the established registration window but prior to the start of classes (Freer-Weiss, 2004) to into the second or even the third week of the semester (Angelo, 1990; Belcher, 1990). An emerging, but still incomplete, line of research has explored some of the characteristics and, in some cases, outcomes of students who register “late” for community college classes. Nationally, research suggests that an average of 8.3% of students (range 4–17%) registered late for all classes (Tompkins, 2013). These students tend to be older students more likely to stop out after high school and more likely to need financial aid and be part-timers. Late registrants are likely to

be Black, enrolled part time,<sup>4</sup> male, and slightly older than recent high school graduates (Belcher, 1990; Maalouf, 2012).

Consistent with other studies, these students fit the profile of an at-risk student. They are late not only with their program applications but also with financial aid applications, financial aid awards, and course registrations (Wang & Pilarzyk, 2007). Interestingly, students who registered late knew that they were late (Belcher, 1990). The reasons given for being late included that they had only recently decided to attend, that they tend to wait until the last minute, that they were waiting on financial aid, and that they just arrived in town (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Maalouf, 2012).

Since 2006, some community colleges have been eliminating late registration practices. As of 2012, 33% of institutions in the League for Innovation in the Community College had eliminated it. The main reason given by the presidents of the colleges that had eliminated or scaled back the practice was that they “knew from experience that it did not help students” (O’Banion & Wilson, 2013, p. 2). As O’Banion and Wilson (2013) further noted, “the most at-risk students tend to register late at a time when the system is most overloaded and least capable of meeting their needs” (p. 3).

Although the research thus far on late registration has yielded results that appear to be adding a significant variable to the retention literature, there remains a substantial need for additional inquiry. Much, if not all, of the research thus far has been quantitative in nature and devoted to answering the “what is happening” question; however, several authors noted that there needs to be additional research focusing on the student experience to help answer

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<sup>4</sup>It is unclear from the research if these students planned to be part time or if they were forced to be part time due to lack of class availability as late registrants. This is another area of possible research.

the “why is it happening” question when it comes to student enrollment behavior (Maalouf, 2012; Smith, Street, & Olivarez, 2010; Summers, 2003).

Smith et al. (2010) noted, “To help identify solutions to the problems caused by late registration, qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted to determine the reasons that students register late” (p. 271). Summers (2003) noted that “research on late registration in American colleges and universities is extremely limited and the published studies vary a great deal in terms of research quality” (p. 73), and further noted an area of future study is “in-depth profiles of students” to “provide a clearer understanding of the reasons, intentions and motivations” behind late registration behaviors (p. 78).

In terms of specific outcomes, there is research that indicates that students who applied within 3 weeks before or after the beginning of the term were more likely to have a lower GPA and complete fewer credits than were those who applied earlier. One quarter of students who register late will earn no credits for the term in which they enrolled (Summers, 2003). According to Freer-Weiss (2004), “44.6% of those [who] registered within the last three weeks had less than a 2.0 GPA by the end of the first quarter” (p. 148). Data drawn from the national SENSE survey revealed that students not enrolled in developmental courses who registered before the first day of classes were “4.44 times more likely to persist fall-to-spring and 11.29 times more likely to persist fall-to-fall” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014, p. 16). Simply put, late registrants are much less likely to persist and are more likely to withdraw from more course hours and to have lower GPAs (Smith et al., 2010; Summers, 2003), and the later they arrive, the worse they are likely to do (Ford, Stahl, Walker, & Ford, 2008). Part of the reason that late registration appears to be a hindrance to success is that it limits a student’s ability to engage in behaviors positively

correlated with success. These students have a decreased ability to take classes at times that are desirable to them (Ford et al., 2008), and they have fewer opportunities to participate in structured group learning experiences.

There seems to be consensus that late registration is a barrier to student success (O'Banion & Wilson, 2013). Terry O'Banion (2012), former president for the League for Innovation in the Community College, declared that late registration “wreaks havoc on the ability of colleges to achieve the goals of the emerging completion agenda” (p. 26). O'Banion is one of a growing movement of faculty, researchers, and others in higher education calling for community colleges to introduce strategic limitations to access.

Although access has clearly been at the heart of the American community college enterprise, the growing call for improved retention and graduation rates is putting the viability of the open access model into question. For many who work in and support community colleges, the viability of continuing to serve all students all the time seems unsustainable in the current higher education climate.

## **The Completion Movement**

### **Why Graduation Matters**

Although there have been calls to improve community college graduation rates for decades, the roots of the current completion movement likely began in the 1990s when the U.S. Department of Education began to track institutional graduation rates via financial aid data (Bragg & Durham, 2012). By 2006, noting that the United States had lost its position as first in the world in college degrees, the U.S. Department of Education (2006) released the Spellings Commission report, which argued that other nations are “passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever” (p. vii). In 2009,

President Barack Obama announced an ambitious plan to dramatically increase the number of Americans with a college degree by 2020, something that would require heavy participation from the community college sector (The White House, n.d.).

Due partially to national attention on the issue, there has been growing interest and research in promoting community college completion. The problem itself seems clear: There is a striking gap between the intentions of students when they enroll in a community college (to earn a credential or transfer to a 4-year college) and their eventual outcomes (most will exit without having met either goal). The extent of this problem, according to some, is not even fully known, as the majority of students, especially at community colleges, aren't being counted in graduate rate reports that look at a "first-time, full-time" cohort of students (Complete College America, 2011), that is students who are enrolled at a single postsecondary institution for at least 12 credit hours in a semester and have not previously attended a postsecondary institution. Given that most community college students attend part time and that many, especially adults with some prior college experience, may have attended other institutions, the actual graduation rates at many community colleges may actually be quite different than the rates reported by the U.S. Department of Education.

There appears to be a consensus that low completion rates are problematic for students, colleges, and the local and national economies. Students who don't meet their educational goals are likely to feel a personal sense of failure and to face a significant lifetime earnings gap when compared to peers who complete college (AACC, 2015b; Scherer & Anson, 2014).

At community colleges, student who don't persist through graduation represent empty seats, especially in lock-step occupational programs, and missing tuition revenues. It has



been estimated that cost of recruiting one new student is somewhere between three to five times the cost of retaining an already enrolled student, meaning that there is a heavy premium to pay to refill those empty chairs (Noel, Levitz, & Saluir, 1985). There is also emerging evidence that students who exit an institution without graduating are more likely to default on their student loans (Mitchell, 2015), which in addition to lowering the credit score of the borrower, can negatively impact the college. Colleges with high overall cohort default rates may face restrictions in terms of their ability to participate in future federal loan and grant programs, something that would have dire consequences for community colleges (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2015).

Economically, college graduates earn an estimated \$1 million more over the course of their lifetime and generate nearly \$6,000 more annually in state, federal, and local tax revenue than do their peers with only a high school education (AACC, 2015b; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Those with an earned college credential also face lower levels of unemployment compared to those with only a high school diploma (Center for Postsecondary Economic Success, 2013). In addition, more college graduates will be required to meet predicted labor market needs for a future economy that requires more highly skilled employees (Nodine, Venezia, & Bracco, 2011).

Thus, although it is clear why completion matters, it is less clear why current graduation rates are so low and how community colleges should best respond. However, robust amounts of research are being conducted in this area by nonprofit foundations, researchers, and community colleges themselves, though thus far a long-term, scalable set of solutions that substantially boost completion rates has proved to be elusive (Scrivener et al., 2015).

## **Why Don't Students Graduate?**

Although it is known that there are some groups of students—including first-generation students, students of color, low-income students, and students who require remediation—that are less likely to graduate (Aud et al., 2012; Choy, 2002; Provasnik & Planty, 2008), it is not surprising that there is not a singular explanation for why so many students fail to graduate given the diversity of the community student population (Lumina Foundation, 2015; NCPPHE, 2011; Scherer & Anson, 2014). The American Association of Community Colleges and other leaders, including the Association of Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, joined together to call for increasing the number of community college students earning a degree or other credential by 50%—to five million students—by 2020 by “eliminating barriers to success” (AACC, 2015a, p. 1). The identified barriers include: the increased costs of higher education, lack of familial role models for first-generation students, insufficient financial aid resources for lower and lower-middle class students, the failure of students to arrive at college adequately prepared to learn at the college level, and students having too many external obligations such as employment or needing to serve as a caregiver for a family member.

The barriers identified by the AACC group were also echoed and expanded upon by the NCPPHE, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Complete College America, among others. NCPPHE (2011) argued that affordability is the key to increasing completion rates, especially for underserved students, as the “most underserved populations are among the least able to afford the continuous escalation of tuition” (para. 4). Further, federal and state financial aid amounts have not increased enough to keep pace with rising tuition costs. The

cost of higher education leads to students taking fewer credit hours and working more hours in full- or part-time jobs, two additional factors that decrease the chances of a student completing a degree.

### **Advocates and Access**

On the national level, many of the politicians, foundations, and researchers standing behind the completion agenda have shied away from discussing overtly limiting access as a solution to the community college graduation problem. In fact, many of the leaders in the completion movement have spoken out to affirm their commitment to access, noting that their “mission is to educate the people—and to turn no student away” (AACC, 2015a, p. 4) and that the “imperative now is to maintain the historical level of access while ensuring that many more students succeed in completing their certificates or degrees” (Nodine et al., 2011, p. 5). There are also those who argue that, beyond not turning anyone away, improving completion rates begins with increasing enrollment, especially among students of color and those adults in the “some college, no degree” category (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009; Lumina Foundation, 2015).

Although completion movement proponents may not be calling explicitly for reductions in access, open access advocates argue that externally imposed benchmarks in the areas of student retention and graduation are a threat to the historical mission of community colleges. Further, they argue that these benchmarks represent a failure to accept that the current focus on completion is an inadequate and inappropriate measure of community college success. As Shannon and Smith (2006) noted, “community college, political and community leaders must accept the realities that come with operating an open access institution” (p. 19), realities that include the fact that community college students are likely to

stop out when life circumstances demand and that, due to the need for remediation, even those who persist are likely to have a path to graduation that can extend past the 150% timeframe often used for measurement.

### **Proposed Solutions**

From the work of foundations, state legislatures, the U.S. Department of Education, and community colleges themselves, there has emerged an extensive variety of proposed solutions to the completion problem. Many of these concepts are still in the research and pilot phase, and a definitive approach proven to produce long-lasting and scalable solutions has yet to emerge.

One area of solution focuses on improving the transfer process, so that students who begin at a community college will see a clear path to a 4-year institution and won't lose credits along the way. Suggestions for improving the transfer process include encouraging states to use common course numbering, requiring a standardized lower division curriculum, promoting articulation agreements, and allowing automatic admission with junior level standing at state institutions for students who have earned an associate's degree (Complete College America, 2011; NCPPE, 2011).

Several completion improvement programs, including those supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Complete College America, have called for community colleges to restructure themselves to be more student centered, noting that "most community colleges do not have the range and depth of supports that students need" (Nodine et al., 2011, p. 4). Although choice and flexibility have often been selling points for community colleges, an emerging school of thought argues that, when it comes to choices and flexibility, community colleges may be offering too much of a good thing. This line of thinking holds

that students are overwhelmed by all of the options available to them and that the flexibility and freedom to choose from a wide variety of course and programs can lead to students being confused as to how to best reach their graduation and transfer goals (Choy, 2002; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

The idea that limiting choice is actually beneficial to students is rooted in the idea that enrolling in a community college is an inherently complicated process. Jaggars and Fletcher (2014) noted that complexity with the reminder that, before they even take their first class, community college students must make an array of choices:

For example, they must choose whether to attend college full time, part time, or less. They must choose which type of degree or certificate to pursue—and at a large comprehensive college, they may choose from a menu of over one hundred programs or majors. Moreover, each of these program choices is not necessarily clearly defined in terms of its costs and benefits, because many programs provide only partial information about the content, difficulty, and sequencing of course, and about the program's long-term career and salary prospects. Students must also consider that . . . within any given subject area, courses may be transferrable or nontransferable, college-level or remedial, for-credit or non-credit; that some courses may count for financial aid purpose but not graduation or vice versa. (p. 1)

Thus, the Completion by Design effort from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation calls for institutions to become more student centered by reducing the number of program options available, offering more structured degree plans, improving and/or eliminating developmental education, and improving student services, especially for those students who are underprepared or lack clear career goals (Nodine et al., 2011).

Complete College America (2011), an initiative that has enjoyed widespread national political support, has also proposed that limiting or reducing the number of choices a student has to make, including arguing for block scheduling and full-program enrollment (by which students would be enrolled for their entire program of study at one time, instead of on a semester-by-semester basis), would improve graduation rates. Complete College America, along with the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for American Progress, and the Lumina Foundation, has also argued that state adoption of performance-based funding models can help increase student completion measures by holding community colleges fiscally responsible for student success. Currently, almost two-thirds of states are exploring or have already implemented a performance-based funding model (Bailey et al., 2015; Miao, 2012; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Some states are also exploring alternative credit conferral models such as E-portfolios, competency assessment, and more robust credit for prior learning programs (Center for American Progress/Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2011; Complete College America, 2011; Lumina Foundation, 2015). These alternative credit models, along with calls to encourage more students to enroll as full-time students (Richburg-Hayes, Sommo, & Welbeck, 2011) and changing the definition of full time from 12 credit hours to 15 credit hours (Complete College America, 2011), are a response to the theory that graduation rates can be improved the shorter the time students must remain in school.

Supporters of the completion agenda note that, while students are in school, they are more likely to succeed if they have appropriate supports, including increased access to academic advisors, expanded participation in federally funded TRiO programs such as

Student Support Services, and more student success and first-year experiences courses (Center for Postsecondary Economic Success, 2013; MDRC, 2010). Given that data suggest that over 30% of students rarely or never use academic advising services and that 70% have not discussed career plans with an advisor or faculty member (Educational Advisory Board, 2014; Waiwaiole, 2015), increasing student contact with an academic advisor seems like a logical proposal to increase student success.

Many of the proposals discussed require that someone at the community college serve as a guide to explain the process of becoming and continuing as a student. Academic advising has been described as “the key ingredient in the ultimate student outcome: retention” (Smith & Allen, 2014, p. 50), and it is clear that academic advisors are likely to play a significant role in addressing the completion challenge.

### **Academic Advising**

Academic advising, especially at the community college, is one of the most important first encounters students have with their college and can influence the extent to which students will go on to make other campus connection critical to their success. According to Smith and Allen (2014), contact with an advisor can be predictive of the likelihood of students creating other positive relationships on campus.

Advising, especially early in a student’s educational experience, is critical as an academic advisor can play an important role in affirming that a student belongs at the institution and that he or she were invited and are welcome (Rendón, Jaloma, & Nora, 2002). For all students, but especially for those who are unrepresented in higher education, an interaction with an advisor can either validate them belonging there (“yes, you should be here”) or tell them “you are a number, you are on your own.” As Habley (1994) stated,

“academic advising is the only structured activity on the college campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-on-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution” (p. 10). Over 90% of community college students reported that academic advising is important to them (Waiwaiole, 2015).

The job of a community college academic advisor is surprisingly broad in scope. According to a national NACADA (2011) survey, the majority of community college academic advisors indicated that they had the following responsibilities:

- 96% help students develop a plan of study,
- 96% help schedule classes,
- 94% serve on various college committees,
- 90% help students select their major,
- 87% participate in new student orientation,
- 79% help students explore career interests,
- 75% serve as liaison to academic departments
- 69% teach (including freshman seminar courses), and
- 53% participate in student recruitment.

Advisors participating in the survey also indicated other areas of responsibility including assistance with financial aid processing, providing mental health counseling, coordinating student internships, and even coordinating study abroad. The job of an academic advisor can be cyclical, with day-to-day tasks shifting depending on the time in the semester and the amount of student traffic. As an advisor at a large midwestern community college described it, “advising is predictably crazy. To be good at this, you have to be good



at about 17 different jobs, depending what time of year it is” (Megan Christianson, personal communication, October 23, 2015).

Although individual advisors may have their own vision of what makes them “good” advisors, there are also professional associations that promote standards of quality academic advising. These standards start with a conception of advising as primarily a developmental experience, designed to meet students where they are and work with them to develop academic and career goals. Academic advisors operate in a strategic position where they have the unique opportunity to engage students in thinking about their education in the context of their overall life and aspirations (White & Schulenberg, 2012). According to NACADA, good advising moves beyond the prescriptive (“take this class, not that one”) to an interaction that “synthesizes and contextualizes students’ educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities, and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes” (Drake, 2011, p. 10). Academic advising is viewed as a developmental process that is an integral part of the academic mission of the institution, and it should be student centered (White & Schulenberg, 2012).

When students, both those who had persisted and those who had dropped out, were asked as part of a large-scale study of community college students what they needed to be successful, five top themes emerged, including several items that fell under the umbrella of academic advising. These themes were that students wanted more assistance learning how to navigate institutional bureaucracy; assistance with academic, personal, and financial issues; and assistance in developing and sticking to an educational plan—all tasks one might expect an advisor to assist with (Booth et al., 2013).

It is been said that academic advising “properly delivered” (Crockett, 1978, p. 29) is a cornerstone of student retention (ACT, 2004; Anderson, 1997; Drake, 2011; Kuh, 1997; Noel, 1978; (Tinto, 1999). Metzner (1989) stated that “good advising was negatively associated with attrition, whereas no advising was positively related” (p. 434). Although Metzner also discovered that even poor advising is better than no advising, it is worthwhile to consider the current state of community college advising, especially given the increasing pressure for advisors to assist colleges in improving their completion rates.

The rise of academic advising and counseling (hereafter referred to as advising) as a foundation of students services correlates with the widespread expansion of the community college (Clark 1960). Although the roots of advising as a student service go back to the 1930s (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015), it was during the 1960s and 1970s that advising began to be understood as field worthy of research and study. It was during this time that the first advising models, based on student development theory, began to emerge. Most current advising models note that advising is a multidimensional process if ideally performed, although there is significant variation in what happens during an interaction between a student and an advisor and a number variables (including, but are not limited to, previous advising experiences, time of year, student needs and interest, academic program, and the perceptions and personality of both the advisor and advisee) that can impact the nature of an advising encounter.

Smith and Allen (2014) noted that advising encompasses

five domains: provision of accurate information about degree requirements and how the institution works within time lines, policies and procedures; referral to campus resources for academic and nonacademic problems; integration of the student’s

academic, career and life goals with each other and with aspects of the curriculum and co-curriculum; individuation or consideration of student's characteristics, interests and skills; and shared responsibility to develop and practice planning, problem-solving and decision making skills. (p. 51)

This type of advising is often described as “developmental advising” (King, 2005) and describes advising as a collaboration between student and advisor rather than a prescriptive or transactional encounter (Drake, 2011). The process begins with students exploring their skills and interests and the advisor assisting them in investigating educational pathways that match those interests (Lent, 2005; O'Banion, 1972). Once a student has identified goals, the advisor then works with the student to create a plan that will be regularly revisited during the student's time at the institution.

Unfortunately, community college advising may often not meet the ideals described by Smith and Allen (2014) or the core values for developmental advising as described by NACADA (2005), which state that “advisors seek to gain the trust of their students and strive to honor students' expectations” and that advising helps “students develop a realistic self-perception and successfully transition to the postsecondary institution” (para. 3). Community colleges also serve more at-risk students than do other higher education institutions, and at-risk students are more difficult to advise. At-risk students are more likely to choose to enroll in classes that they are advised *against* taking so as to appear that they are not threatened by classes that they already know are too difficult to complete (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 128). They are also more likely to be “failure identifiers who have a rather narrow view, if any of achievable goals. And they are motivated not by success but by failure, driven by stringent economic realities” (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 39). Advisors are tasked with

trying to change this mindset and to help them develop a new self-concept as a resilient learner.

Karp (2013) cautioned that, when discussing community college advising, one must remember that “these activities are almost always poorly funded and minimally staffed” (p. 8). Sadly, the dominant model for community college advising may have been best described by Jaggars and Fletcher (2014), who noted that community college advising is usually “short, rushed, and infrequent” (p. 3). Community college academic advisors sometimes use the word “triage” to describe the experience of assisting students, especially during peak times of year, that is August and January, when large volumes of students seek assistance with enrolling and registering for the coming semester (Robinson, 2015). Academic advising appointments in a busy community college advising center “often last only 10 to 15 minutes, given the long line of other students waiting for assistance” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 55).

Although mandatory advising is often suggested as a completion strategy (ACT, 2004; Smith & Allen, 2014), a survey of community college advisors found that less than 20% reported that advising was mandatory at their college (NACADA, 2011). Further, students who do make the effort to come in every semester for advising assistance may find that they see a different advisor each time, an idea that is antithetical to the developmental model (Karp, 2013). Although there is variation from college to college, advising and counseling services at community colleges seem to have several common traits: an emphasis on serving incoming students; a focus on providing information to the student rather than collaborating with the student; a lack of a common point of focus (e.g., an assigned advisor); and fragmented, quickly delivered services (Booth et al., 2013; Grubb, 2006; Karp, 2013).

The reasons for these troubling findings are largely resource driven. Academic advisors at a 4-year university may expect a student caseload of around 150 students (Tuttle, 2000), whereas community colleges frequently have student–advisor ratios that can exceed 1000:1 (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014) and can vary wildly, even within the same colleges or systems (for example, within the Minnesota State College and University system, the ratio for community college students to advisors ranges from as low as 1:170 and as large as 1:1,100).

A national survey of academic advisors revealed that community college advisors have the largest median number of advisees of any institutional type (NACADA, 2011). It has been estimated that, to provide the type of developmental advising most positively associated with improved student outcomes, many community colleges would have to quintuple their number of academic advisors (Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014), something that seems unlikely due to the “intense and growing demand to increase student access, retention, outcomes, and completion rates while serving more students at reduced costs” (Phelan, 2014, p. 14). Although many sectors of a community college will likely feel that pressure, academic advisors may be the most effected, as they are regularly tasked with both helping institutions meet their enrollment goals and supporting students as they progress through their educational experience. However, despite the importance of advising, there are still significant gaps in the literature about both the experience of being an advisor (Waiwaiiole, 2015) and how advisors see their role in light of the tensions between access and completion that are at the heart of current debates about the best ways to increase graduation rates.

### **Liminality as a Theoretical Framework**

One of the primary, if not ideally *the* primary, reasons one engages in research is gain better understanding. Whether one is seeking to understand phenomena, a cultural practice, or a way of being, qualitative research provides space to discover how people understand their lived experiences and how cultural and economic forces shape individuals and societies. Qualitative research can also be overwhelming and filled with possibilities for directions in which research could go. Theoretical frameworks are a way that a researcher can apply a particular lens to gain understanding and to bring order and structure to data, interviews, and observations (Given, 2008). For a qualitative researcher, determining the appropriate theoretical framework to use is one of the most critical decisions in the research process.

One framework with deep roots in the field of anthropology that enjoys widespread use in the social sciences is liminality. The concept of liminality, often described as the state of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967, p. 93), offers the researcher a way of attempting to understand the lived experiences of individuals, groups, cultures, economies, or systems that are in states of transition. This study employed a liminality framework to help shed light on the experiences of community college academic advisors in what the researcher believed is a liminal time.

Current understandings of the liminal state emerged out of the work of French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and were brought into wider consciousness through the work of Victor Turner, one of the leading figures in the field of symbolic anthropology. Since Turner’s work, many researchers have continued to explore and expand the concept. Van Gennep may have been quite surprised to see the modern uses of liminality as frameworks for topics including media studies (Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005), alternative lifestyle

events (Gilmore & Van Proyen, 2005; St. John, 2001), electronic dance music culture (St. John, 2006), Himalayan ethnomusicology (Fiol, 2010), gay bathhouse culture (Prior & Cusak, 2008), and international relations (Neumann 2012).

### **Roots of Liminality**

The concept of liminality as it is used today began with the work of van Gennep (1908/1960) and his three part model of understanding rites of passage. Under this model, ritual participants undergo a separation from everyday life, enter a threshold (or *limen*) state during the ritual process, and then re-enter or are reincorporated into the everyday world. Victor Turner (1969), who would go on to expand the understanding of liminality, described van Gennep's basic model as follows:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation) the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (pp. 94–95)

Van Gennep (1908/1960) was interested primarily in birth, coming of age rites, marriage, and other tightly scripted rituals (Lewis, 2013) and his conception saw these rituals

as a stabilizing element within the societies that enacted them. Liminal moments were rather predictable, something for which a tribal group could plan, such as coming of age rituals, given that “boys came of age physically all the time, which meant that the ritual which would make them come of age socially had to be performed at regular intervals” (Neumann, 2012, p. 478). There was also predictability for the liminal person in van Gennep’s model. Ritual participants would understand their role and the expectations of the ritual process as well as what the end point and outcomes would be. The ritual itself might not be pleasurable, but the participants would, at least on some level, understand what was happening and why it was happening.

Van Gennep (1908/1960) did not appear to consider the possibility of liminality as something that would affect an entire group, system, or culture. Neumann (2012) described van Gennep as seeing that

the society from which the boys were separated and the society they returned to was the same, stable society. The situation of liminality pertained only to that little group of people who were taken out of it and returned to it. (p. 478)

The idea of permanent liminality, which is a powerful current understanding of the concept, had not yet emerged from the work of van Gennep.

However, van Gennep’s understanding of liminal states, as described in his seminal work *Rites of Passage* (van Gennep, 1908/1960), were profoundly influential to the work of British anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner, who had a deep interest in group life, especially as expressed through the lived experiences of its members, developed and expanded the concept of liminality throughout the course of his career. Turner had an interest in how sociocultural systems (or “structures” as he described them in his 1969



volume *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*) were produced and reproduced. He saw that moments of cultural disarray or breaks from normal social rules were critical for the continuation of societal (re)production. Turner is considered by many to be one of the most significant thinkers on the concept of liminality and one whose influence spread beyond the field of anthropology. As noted by Lewis (2013), “Turner’s influence has been widespread in many disciplines because his ideas were innovative, clearly presented and generally applicable to many areas of humanistic study” (p. 29).

In his earlier works, Turner shared van Gennep’s (1908/1960) narrower conception of liminality as a defined state, one in which the “neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status” (Turner, 1969, p. 103). At first, Turner seemed to share van Gennep’s dualistic perspective of everyday life versus ritual or special events, even stating that “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner, 1969, p. 105). Liminality, under this definition, was still a dichotomous and distinct condition, unlike the postmodern conceptions of liminality that emerged after Turner’s death in 1983.

An important aspect to Turner’s concept of liminality was the idea of *communitas*, which Turner (1969) described as a state that arises during the liminal period. This state is a “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (p. 96). In this period of *communitas*, the neophyte often develops strong and lifelong relationships with fellow ritual participants. Within the

communitas there is equality, as all participants are stripped of their usual social statuses and are expected to go through the same process prior to re-entering society.

As Turner's work evolved, he came to see that "transition has here become a permanent condition" (Turner, 1969, p. 107) and that liminality could be a feature of Western societies and religions as well as other aspects of everyday life. With regard to modern cultures, Turner used the term "liminoid" to describe such things as carnivals, festivals, theater, and the arts as aspects of liminal cultural phenomena. He continued to expand his understanding of liminality throughout his career (Turner, 1974) and helped pave the way for the expansion of the application of the liminality framework to other fields. As noted by Neumann (2012), "with everything in flux, van Gennep's scheme of pre-liminal, luminal, and post-liminal phase collapses and the possibility of perpetual liminality opens up before us" (p. 478).

### **Critics of Turner**

Although Turner is praised for having contributed a "rich, evocative lexicon of compelling words and phrases" including "social drama," "rite of passage," "liminality," "communitas," and "anti-structure" that "caught the collective interdisciplinary imagination of scholars working in a variety of areas of American cultural studies" (Weber, 1995, p. 526) his conceptions of liminality are not without criticism. The responses to these criticisms have helped expand the understanding of liminality for current researchers.

One of the criticisms of Turner is that he tended to oversimplify or be interested in "straightening out" or "getting to the bottom" (Foster, 1990, p. 133) of complex social interactions in a way that postmodern scholars argued lead to "unwarranted overgeneralization" (Lewis, 2005, p. 67. ). Gilmore and Van Proyen (2005) argued that

“Turner’s theories can be criticized for their tendency to universally ascribe qualities such as liminality or *communitas* to rites of passage or pilgrimages and for giving insufficient attention to the ways in which these frameworks may . . . be inapplicable” (p. 224).

Other scholars believed that Turner was too much a product of his own time and culture of origin and thus was “trapped in the fantasies of his own Anglo-American culture, with its modernist emphasis, its faith in the novel and the new, its celebration of inventiveness” (Crapanzano, 1984, p. 473) and therefore failed to recognize “culture as a political contestation” (Weber, 1995, p. 532) or to adequately address the difficulties or challenges associated with liminality as a permanent state. Modern conceptions of liminality recognize that “the liminal experience offers the possibility of change but does not promise [it]” (Flannery, 2008, p. 4), and so liminality may not have the sort of satisfying gains of wisdom and clearly defined social status that Turner and van Gennep may have expected. Flannery (2008) explained, “Physical estrangement and emotional dislocation are inherent to the liminal experience, through which the individual is exposed to ambivalent social and physical spheres” (p. 4). Positive outcomes, or even resolution of the liminal state, are no longer guaranteed. There may be significant unease for the liminal person who may not know when or if the liminal state will end.

The concept of *communitas* has also been disconnected from many post-Turner considerations of liminality. Instead, liminality is seen as connected to marginalization or isolation (Janicker, 2010). Unlike the ritual participants of van Gennep (1908/1960) and Turner (1969), who were part of a group safely ensconced in a community, current understandings of liminality recognize that there may well be people in liminal zones who

are not aware of their liminal status and are isolated or unable to connect to other liminal members due to social stratification or pressures.

Both van Gennep (1908/1960) and Turner (1969) noted the role of leaders, wise elders, or others within the ritual process who would impart wisdom and guidance to the liminal person or group. Given that there is now general acceptance of the idea that liminality can be a permanent state, the idea of the wise guides has fallen out of favor to some extent, as there may not be a way to exit the liminal phase or a clear pathway walked by those who have gone before. Liminal spaces have been described as having an “ambiguous, inconsistent quality . . . liminal places can feel dangerous” (Sunstein, 1998, p. 14), all the more so without a guide. Liminality can be a more isolating and disorientating experience than van Gennep especially would have described.

Despite these criticisms and the shift from liminality as a major theme to the concept of borderlands within the field American cultural studies (Weber, 1995), liminality continues to be a framework that scholars in a wide variety of fields explore, use, and expand in their quest to understand how people, cultures, politics, space, and economic systems experience transition. Liminality has emerged as a flexible lens that seemingly can be used in any cultural or social setting in which transition and uncertainty exist. As noted by Neumann (2012),

liminality is a function of categories. It would by definition be impossible for a social world to exist without shared categories. If we grant that no scheme of categorism can be all-inclusive—a post-structural credo that it has been hard for opponents to shoot down—then it follows that liminality will exist within any social order. (p. 477)

### **Liminality after Turner**

Current research using the liminality framework has demonstrated that “the meaning of the liminality concept has broadened significantly since van Gennep’s and Turner’s formulation of the concept as a distinct phase of ritual” (Fiol, 2010, p. 139). Though there are still some applications of liminality that describe it as a “temporary breach of structure” (St. John, 2006, p. 5), whereby the norms and conventions of everyday life are stripped away, liminality is now regularly applied to any object, person, social group, or subject in either a temporary or permanent state of transition. Given that many social groups are defined both by who is included and who is left out, every society therefore has marginalized members (Noussia & Lyons, 2009). As a category, liminality can be a powerful tool to help “focus our gaze on these groups” (Neumann, 2012, p. 477) and thus is a framework that can be used in critical as well as constructivism and postmodern forms of scholarship.

One of the critical new post-Turner directions for the concept of liminality is the application of the idea to economics and urban spaces. Current liminal understandings of capitalism and the postindustrial age come in part out of the economic theories of Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter (1942/1994) is well known for his ideas related to a process he described of creative destruction wherein the “process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating the new one” (p. 83).

In Schumpeter’s (1942/1994) view, capitalism is an economic system in which the only constant is change—a sort of perpetual liminal state. Although some have argued that “the current economy is perceived to be betwixt and between the old and the new economic and social orders” (Bettis, 1996, p. 106), there are others who see liminality as a permanent

economic, social, and political condition (Schumpeter, 1942/1994); Szakolczai, 2009; Zukin, 1991) and who frequently describe the current economic epoch as the postindustrial era.

Zukin (1991) described a complex new urban environment, marked by the deindustrialism of cities, loss of communities, changes in employment, and an increase in focus on consumption of consumer goods. In this era, public space is contested (Noussia & Lyons, 2009), as marginalized groups (such as minorities, illegal migrants, and the poor) take over spaces that have been abandoned as the winds of economic change have blown and economic activities that used to take place in physical locations have moved onto cyberspace or abroad. In the postindustrial era, there are those who argue that humans are increasingly disconnected from their environment and distrustful of spaces beyond their own domains. Berger (2006) described the concepts of “horizontal cities” as places where landscape surfaces exist “between occupancies and uses, successional phases and (dis)investment cycles,” becoming liminal because they remain “at the margins . . . awaiting a societal desire to inscribe them with values and status” (p. 29).

Sharon Zukin is an influential scholar who has contributed to the discourse about the liminality of space in the postindustrial era and who has argued that liminality best explains current economic and social changes that manifest themselves in the “simultaneous advance and decline of the economic forms” and the sense that “as the ground shifts under our feet, taller buildings continue to grow” (p. 5). She saw liminal spaces as a growing characteristic of contemporary cities with neighborhoods transformed into postmodern transitional spaces.

The liminality of the postindustrial society is not limited to just physical space. Systems such as higher education are also thrust into a transitional phase (Bettis, Mills, Williams, & Nolan, 2005). Higher education institutions are, in many ways, in a critical

moment of transition as they balance demands for both increased access and increased student success while facing lower levels of public funding support and the potential coming backlash about tuition rates that have increased ever higher. Bosetti, Kawalilak, and Patterson (2008) noted that “university culture is increasingly being influenced by globalization, competition, the commercialization of research, and external demands for accountability” (p. 95). In light of all of these pressures, “faculty members are left on their own to make sense of the shifting political, economic and social landscape of higher education and to understand the implications for their professional identity within their Faculty” (Bosetti et al., 2008, p. 95).

It is interesting to consider how, in contexts like higher education, one can see the intersection of multiple layers of liminality, which offers a wealth of research possibilities for the qualitative researcher. There are the aforementioned feelings of uncertainty for members of the faculty, there is uncertainty within specific departments [such as university writing centers, as discussed by Sunstein (1998)] and disciplines, and there is uncertainty within what the meaning and purpose of higher education is generally. One could easily imagine someone who is a liminal staff member in a liminal department in a liminal field in a liminal system!

A final, but important, consideration of the concept of liminality as a framework is the connection between the researcher and liminality, especially for those who may be new to research, participating in fieldwork, or doing collaborative research with a colleague. As noted by Tracy (2013), qualitative researchers must be willing to embrace their own feelings of liminality. They may feel uncertainty that stems from being aware of their status as betwixt and between while doing fieldwork (as they are, for example, when they are with a

group while conducting an observation but are not really a member of the group), about how best to approach building rapport with participants, or for new researchers, about their level of skill and experience. As part of considering their own reflexivity and positionality, researchers who are employing a liminal framework should ideally be aware of their own liminal moments in research.

## **Conclusion**

Liminality offers a theoretical framework that is ideal for understanding topics related to identity development, uncertainty, change, and transition. This tradition, dating back to the early 1900s, has evolved in response to changing understandings of economic, cultural, and social trends and experiences. Liminality also offers a lens for researchers to consider themselves, their relationship to their participants, and their own fears and uncertainties. There is a rich and robust pool of research from a liminal perspective available to help ground research questions, especially in the social sciences, and the liminal framework can be used in constructivist, critical, and postmodern approaches. Anyone wishing to use a liminal framework has several options available in terms of methods, including ethnography, autoethnography, case study, interviews, and more.

## **Summary**

The literature review presented above helps explain the current moment of internal and external pressure for improved student retention and graduation rates at America's community colleges. This demand for more students to earn a credential has led some researchers and professionals to question if the long-standing commitment to open access is compatible with the desire to see more students succeed. Academic advisors stand as agents of both access and retention, but there has been a dearth of research to make sure their voices



are included in the completion versus access debate. Chapter 3 presents a research plan to change this.

## **CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This study explored the relationship between the traditional open access mission of community colleges and the emerging completion movement, using the experiences, values, and beliefs of professional academic advisors as a lens. In this chapter, the research questions and associated hypotheses are reviewed, the decision to use a mixed methods approach and details of the research process are explained, and the researcher's role, including considerations related to validity and trustworthiness, is described. Also included is a discussion of how the concept of liminality can help provide a theoretical lens through which to understand the findings of this study.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to explore the following research questions:

#### **Quantitative**

**Research question 1.** Do academic advisors agree that providing open access is an essential part of the community college mission?

A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

- B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

**Research question 2.** What do academic advisors perceive as the impact of open access policies on their work and ability to provide high quality advising?

- A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising? Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

- B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

**Research question 3.** To what extent are community college academic advisors comfortable with current graduation rates at their institutions? Do they believe current policies and procedures are designed to ensure student success?

### **Qualitative**

**Research question 4.** To what extent do academic advisors support policies or procedures that would limit student access?

**Research question 5.** How do academic advisors perceive the completion movement in terms of the work they do, their role as advisors, and their institutions?

### **Methodological Approach**

Part of the work of research is determining, for a given subject, what is knowable and how best to describe it. According to Crotty (1998), there is a relationship between a researcher's epistemology and the methodology, methods, and theoretical framework used to approach the research subject. This study was conducted from a pragmatist standpoint, using liminality as a theoretical framework, with a phenomenological methodology.

Pragmatism is a paradigm that provides a useful framework for mixed methods research given that a pragmatic epistemology holds that the researcher can identify a topic of interest and the most appropriate ways to study that topic (Mertens, 2015). Pragmatism rejects traditional dualistic approaches to knowing, e.g. subjectivism versus objectivism, and instead asserts that knowledge can both be constructed and based on observations and measurements of the natural world and human behavior (Johnson & Onwuebbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism can be seen as something akin to a philosophical middle ground that values action and judges theory and research methods by how effectively they explain the topics under examination. Given that the mixed method approach draws from the strengths of both

quantitative and qualitative research while attempting to minimize their respective weaknesses, there is a natural congruence with a pragmatic approach that holds that “the bottom line is that research approaches should be mixed in ways that offer the best opportunities for answering important research questions” (Johnson & Onwuebbuzie, 2004, p. 16).

Phenomenology is an inductive approach, grounded in the idea that a way to understand something, in this case how the experience of being an academic advisor impacts perceptions on access and completion, is begin by exploring how specific actors makes sense of their own experiences. Phenomenology “holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people’s experience of that social reality” (Gray, 2004, p. 24).

Phenomenology starts first with description of the experiences of the participants but in studies like this with multiple participants, it becomes possible to draw inferences as themes emerge with more than one participant (Lester, 1999). These inferences can be robust and consistent but are not understood to be predictive or used to find correlations as in quantitative research. As such, the goal of the study was to understand the meaning that advisors make out of their particular experiences working in the modern community college setting. Insight into advisors’ experiences was gained through conversation and via their responses to open-ended questions on a survey.

### **Mixed Methods Approach**

This study was approached with the recognition that a series of questions that I wished to ask could not be answered by quantitative or qualitative methods alone. Although some of these questions were intended to examine causal relationships (i.e., how does length of time in an advising role influence advisor perceptions) or would allow for the numerical

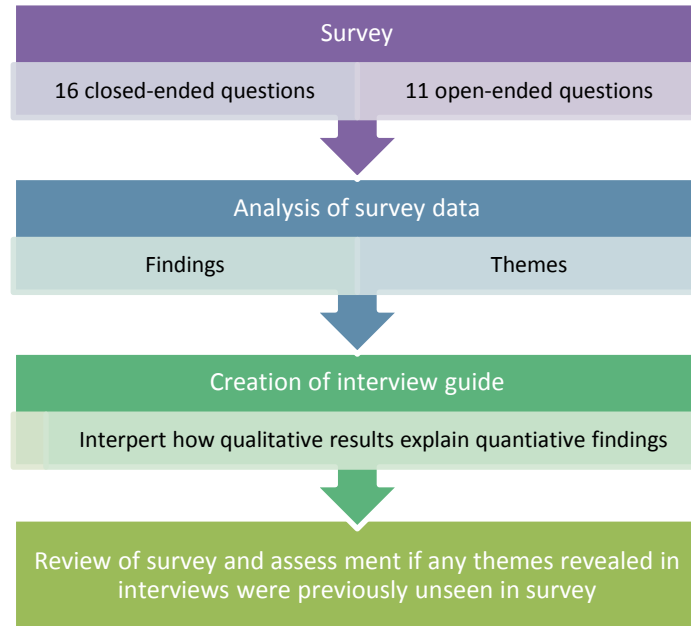
expression of the extent to which advisors agree on particular policies and procedures—both quantitative questions—there was also the desire to better understand how advisors make sense of their experiences, one of the hallmarks of the qualitative tradition (Golashani, 2003).

Using a mixed methods approach not only allowed both questions of measurement and questions of experience to be asked but also allowed for a richer understanding of the findings (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2003). One goal of this study was to gain understanding of the experiences of advisors on both the national and individual level. A mixed methods approach allows for those working in the social, behavioral, and health sciences to gather two kinds of data (quantitative and qualitative) and then integrate the two to draw interpretations from both sets of data (Creswell, 2015); thus, it was the logical choice for this project.

A modified explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015) was used for this study. Research using this design model has data collected in two distinct phases. For this study, the first phase was an electronic survey sent to a national sample of academic advisors and the second phase comprised one-on-one interviews. This approach is described as a modified explanatory design because, rather than having a survey that was wholly quantitative followed by a qualitative form of inquiry, responses to both quantitative and qualitative questions were sought in the first research phase; the second phase of research was strictly qualitative, as was to be expected in this design.

The survey was designed to be cross-sectional and to allow inferences to be made about the thoughts, values, and experiences of academic advisors as a group. The data obtained from the survey were then used to draft a semi-structured interview guide to be used in the one-on-one interviews with seven community college advisors (see Figure 1). The results of the interviews were then used to start a third level of analysis (Creswell, 2014),

which was to explore how the qualitative findings helped make sense of the quantitative results. This third level of analysis provided additional depth to the research findings.



*Figure 1.* Flow of research procedure.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a qualitative researcher, albeit one conducting a mixed methods project, I brought to this study an awareness of the fact that my own experiences and perceptions not only inspired my interest in the questions considered by this study but also shaped the specific questions I asked and influenced the ways in which I made sense of the answers (Creswell, 2014). My interest in academic advising stems from my past professional experiences as both an academic advisor and, later, an administrator in charge of the advising/counseling center for a large community college system. I have also served as a member of a multiple committees and task forces in both my current and past positions related to trying to improve student retention and completion rates. These experiences, both positive and negative, have

led to an abiding sense of concern about the tension I see between open access policies and the completion movement. That tension lies at the heart of this project.

I currently serve as the Director of Student Services for the Minnesota State College and University (MnSCU) system. The MnSCU system is home to 21 community colleges and, in my position, I frequently have had the opportunity to work with both academic advisors and administrators. Although I did not have supervisory power over any of my interview participants, I must acknowledge that two MnSCU employees interviewed for this project may have perceived me as someone in an authority role due to my position at the system office.

### **Research Process**

As noted earlier, the research for this study was conducted in two distinct phases: an electronic survey and one-on-one interviews conducted both in-person and via Skype. Prior to the start of data collection, permission was granted by Iowa State University's Office of Responsible Research's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). All participants in the study were given informed consent information (Appendix B), and participation was voluntary.

### **Survey Creation and Distribution**

For the first phase of research, I created an electronic survey using Qualtrics software (see Appendix C). The survey comprised 27 questions: 16 closed-ended and 11 open-ended questions. Responding to any of the questions was voluntary with the exception of the informed consent statement.

The survey included a variety of item types, including those that asked participants to choose an answer from a provided list of choices, questions that asked participants to indicate



their response on a Likert-type scale to specify their level of agreement with a provided statement, and questions that asked for the respondent to rank a list of statements in order of level of agreement.

Nine of the 28 questions were designed primarily to obtain demographic information about either the participant or the school at which they worked. Of the 270 participants who started the survey, 185 (68.5%) answered every question. Incomplete surveys were retained, and answers from those surveys were used in the data analysis described in Chapter 4.

The survey was activated in May 2015 and distributed in several ways. First, an e-mail was sent to an academic advising listserv for academic advisors within the Minnesota State College and University system. The e-mail included a description of the research, a link to a survey, and a request that participants forward the survey link to other community college academic advisors that they knew, a technique known as chain referral sampling or snowball sampling (Berg, 2006). This technique allowed for advisors beyond the researcher's own circle of coworkers, contacts, and acquaintances to be reached, thus allowing for a large and more diverse pool of respondents.

The second approach to distributing the survey was via a Facebook group for academic advisors who are members of NACADA. Through this group, links to the survey were distributed and the snowball sampling method was also used as members were asked to share the survey link with their advising colleagues.

A final approach to survey distribution was to research other state community college systems and request permission to post information about this project to their listservs. This method was used to recruit participants from Indiana and California. Responses were received from advisors in 32 states, with Minnesota ( $n = 88$  participants) and Ohio ( $n = 55$

participants) having the greatest representation and West Virginia, Oregon, Maine, and Kansas having the least representation ( $n = 1$  response per state).

### **Data Analysis**

Responses to the survey were collected from the beginning of May 2015 through the end of June 2015. Once the survey closed, the quantitative data collected were reviewed and the process of coding responses to the open-ended questions began. A conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used for the first examination of the qualitative questions and responses, by which all responses were read through several times in order that the researcher could feel immersed in the response and to begin to identify word, phrases, and ideas that seemed to best capture the “summative, salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute” (Saldana, 2012, p. 3) of the responses. These ideas became codes that were then organized into broad categories that served as the starting point for creating the interview guide for the one-on-one interviews. The broad categories that emerged from the survey and that served as the basis for semi-structured interview guide were: definitions of access in the context of enrollment numbers, the perceptions of what drives institutional decision making, the current status of enrollment, retention, and completion policies and procedures at their college, and how advisors perceive students including those who are believed to most benefit from open access admissions practices.

Given that coding is a cyclical act (Saldana, 2012), after the interviews were completed, the open-ended question responses were reviewed again to see if the perspectives gained from not only conducting interviews but also from coding interview transcripts caused previously unseen codes or themes to emerge from the survey data. Finally, the data were interpreted, using the understanding gained from both phases of research, to identify what

had been learned and what questions still remained (Creswell, 2014). Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to reporting the description, interpretation, and analysis of the data.

### **Overview of Survey Respondents**

The goal of the survey was to receive responses from a national sample of advisors representing a diverse—in terms of size, student enrollment, and location—selection of community colleges. As shown in Table 1, although the majority (59%) of those responding identified that “academic advisor” was the title that best described them, there was also a significant response rate from those identifying as “counselors” (14%), those in combined positions<sup>5</sup> (6%) and, unexpectedly, those in administrative positions in which supervision of advising services or advisors was a component of their job.

It was difficult to find an accurate statistic about the ratio of males versus females employed as advisors. However, there were indications that advising is considered a field dominated by women (“Topic for January 2007,” 2007), which was reflected in those responding to the survey, as the majority (78%) of those responding identified as female.

Over 90% of those who responded had education beyond a bachelor’s-level degree: 8% had completed some graduate coursework, 74% had completed a master’s degree, and 10% had completed a Ph.D. or Ed.D. The student affairs professionals completing this survey were generally experienced in their role, as 67% of them indicated that they had been in their current position for more than three years. Just 10% were in their first year at their current position, and female advisors were more likely than were males to be in their first year of employment in their current position.

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<sup>5</sup>Combined positions include those at “one-stop” locations where individuals may assist students with everything from completing applications to advising to financial aid. Those who work for grant-funded programs, such as Student Support Services, are also considered to be in a combined position. Because individuals in these positions have advising as a core responsibility, their responses were retained and used in the data analysis.

Table 1

*Distribution of Participants Among Position Types*

Position type	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Academic advisor	153	59
Counselor	37	14
Administrator	28	11
Other	27	10
Combined	15	6
Total	260	100

1

In terms of campus location, 39% of those responding indicated that they were working in a suburban setting, 27% were in a rural setting, and 34% described their campus location as urban. Nationally, it is estimated that 32% of community college students attend suburban colleges, 34% attend rural locations, and 34% attend in an urban environment (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007), which indicates that suburban community college perspectives may have been slightly overrepresented in this study's sample and rural colleges were underrepresented. Nearly all, 95% ( $n = 234$ ) of those responding indicated that advising services at their campus were available as both a walk-in service and by appointment.

Regarding the racial makeup of the institutions, 39% of those responding were working for institutions that had predominantly White enrollees, with student of color enrollment at less than 25% of the student population; 32% were working at colleges where students of color made up 26–50% of the enrollment; and 19% were serving at colleges where students of color made up more than 51% of the head count. Interestingly, 11% of respondents were unsure of the percentage of students of color served at their college. When

asked about the percentage of their students who apply for financial aid, the majority of participants (86%) indicated that at least 51% or more of the students at their college pursued federal financial aid options.

In terms of campus size, 47% of those responding were working for large community colleges (those with total enrollment at all locations of over 10,000 students), 31% were working for colleges servicing 4,001 to 9,999 students, 14% were working for schools with enrollment between 2,001 and 4,000, and the final 8% were working for schools with fewer than 2,000 students.

### **One-on-one Interviews**

The second phase of this study was to conduct interviews with academic advisors. This phase of research was guided by a social construction approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) in that the goal was to understand how advisors experience and interpret their work lives in the context of the current community college setting.

A semi-structured interview format (Appendix D) was chosen. First, an interview guide of topics and questions that were important to cover with the participants was created. As the interviews were conducted, however, there was freedom to depart from the guide when the interviewee said something that seemed worthy of further conversation. The semi-structured format was also appropriate because each participant, with the exception of “Kate”, was interviewed only once and so that conversation needed to be as comprehensive as possible (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were scheduled in advance, after an explanation of the research project, and participants were asked to plan on spending up to 1 hour without outside distractions so that the discussion could “delve deeply” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315) into the topic. Kate was briefly interviewed a second time

in order to clarify some of her responses and to ask her a question which had been inadvertently skipped in the first interview.

When choosing the interview participants, a number of factors were considered. First, each participant needed to understand the nature of the project and was provided with appropriate informed consent documents. Second, it was important that all of the participants be purposefully selected to help in gaining understanding of the advisor experience (Creswell, 2014). Thus, all of the participants chosen worked at different institutions, and in addition, suburban, rural, and urban campuses were represented, as were both larger and smaller colleges, so that there was as much diversity in institutional type as possible.

Potential interviewees were identified through the NACADA group on Facebook and through professional contacts. Two of the seven interviewees were working for the same college system (MnSCU) but on different campuses. These same participants also indicated that they had completed the electronic survey prior to the interview.

Although the preference was for the researcher to conduct one-on-one interviews in the same physical location as the participants to best pick up on social cues and most naturally build rapport (Opdenakker, 2006), some participants were available only via Skype. All interviews were recorded with the participant's knowledge, transcribed, and hand coded at a later date. Interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2015.

### **Profiles of Interview Participants**

Each interview participant was given a pseudonym, though gender and ethnicity information has not been concealed or changed.

**Angela**

Angela, who identified as White, was an experienced community college advisor, having served in that role for 7 years at her current institution and 3 years at her previous community college. At the time of the interview, she was serving as the lead advisor for a small, rural campus that was part of a larger community college system. Her campus was largely homogenous, with White students making up more than 95% of the student population. Angela had deep roots in her community and noted that she knew many of her students before they enrolled. Angela was one of two advisors at her campus and had several responsibilities in addition to advising, including supervising the largest student group on campus and leading orientation programming. This combination of responsibilities and the fact that she believed that advisors are held responsible for the institution meeting its enrollment goals led her to describe herself as “stressed” and to describe herself as feeling a tension between her sense of ethics as an advisor and her responsibilities as an employee that “sucks.” Despite these challenges, Angela anticipated continuing in her advisor role at her current campus for the foreseeable future.

**Lindsay**

Lindsay was a relatively new advisor who, at the time of her interview, had been in her dual role of enrollment advisor/financial aid specialist for 23 months. Lindsay was working at a technical college in the upper Midwest that serves approximately 5,000 students. In addition to her financial aid responsibilities, she was serving as an academic advisor for a cohort of students in specific programs of study. As a newer advisor, Lindsay saw a tension between herself and more experienced advisors, something she described as a “conflict with the old way of thinking that the more students we get in the door regardless of

how, it rolls out that's more money for us, more FYE." Lindsay perceived that she was more supportive of her institution's recent moves to limit access via enrollment deadlines than her coworkers might be. She noted that she still thought that "August is hell" and that she's skeptical of her institution sticking to the enrollment deadline in the event that enrollment numbers go down. Lindsay described herself as being heavily guided by her own sense of ethics and the research on student development she encountered as a master's student.

### **Tasha**

Tasha was an African American advisor at a southern community college that serves a population that is over 75% students of color. She had a master's degree in student affairs and 15 years of advising experience. She noted that, in her time as an advisor, she had seen the shift to an increased focus on retention and graduation and that, although she believed improving graduation rates is a worthy goal, she also believed that there are aspects of the national completion movement that are "unrealistic," especially for schools committed to providing access and serving a diverse population of students.

### **Jake**

Jake was a White advisor at a Hispanic-serving community and technical college in the Southwest. At the time of his interview, he was the lead advisor in an advising center with 10 advisors and, having recently completed his doctoral degree, was hoping to move into an administration position in the next 1 to 2 years. As the lead advisor, Jake had the benefit of having an assigned caseload of advisees that, at 400 students, was smaller than the caseload of other advisors in his department. His caseload was primarily from technical programs and was 80% male (overall campus enrollment was closer to 70% female/30% male). Jake described himself as "pragmatic" about enrollment and argued that students



“have a right to fail” and that the job of the college is to admit all comers and support the ones most likely to succeed.

### **Heather**

Heather had been an academic advisor for 6 years at a community and technical college in the upper Midwest. Enrollment at her college was just over 4000 students, housed at three locations. The age of students at Heather’s college averaged over 30 years of age, so she noted that many students were juggling families, jobs, and other responsibilities in addition to school. She noted that she was able to “very quickly get a sense of the very obvious obstacles that a particular student . . . is going to have to overcome in order to be successful” and that the longer she was in her position the more comfortable she had come to feel about being “very honest” with students about their chances for success. One of Heather’s primary concerns was, late registration being a “huge disservice” to students.

### **Michael**

Michael had served as a “student services specialist” with the primary responsibility for advising at his large northeastern community college for 11 years. Michael described his school, which is a part of a multicampus system, as having “unofficial deadlines” designed to dissuade new students from registering late, even though the system didn’t have formal enrollment deadlines. He was highly supportive of moves to limit access, noting that he was interested in access but I also want them to complete because it doesn’t matter if they can get into this institution if they can’t complete their degree. At the end too many of them are having to borrow money to do that and, without a degree at the end, their potential to pay back those debts are less.

## **Kate**

Kate was academic advisor at the main campus of a large community college system in the Midwest. She had been an advisor for just over 5 years and prided herself on her social justice approach to advising. Kate saw herself first and foremost as an advocate for students and, under ideal circumstances, a practitioner of a holistic and developmental advising approach. She was frequently cynical in her impressions of the administration at her institution, noting that they were “completely reactive rather than proactive” and that she believed that she had “received professional criticism for being too student focused.” Although Kate emphatically argued that everyone has a right to a college education, she also described students who enroll early (in April or May for the fall semester) as being substantively different in personality, preparation, and likelihood for success than were students who delay enrollment until at or near the start of the term.

All seven of the interview participants were interviewed once but were contacted in the months that followed the interview in order to revisit the interview and to confirm the main themes that had been identified. All participants were reached as part of the member check process, which is described in more depth in the next section.

### **Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness**

Although identifying a problem and having a healthy sense of curiosity about its answer(s) is an important step in beginning a large research project, even more critical is making sure that the study is being conducted in a way that ensures that standards for reliability and trustworthiness are being met. There are different standards for measuring research validity for quantitative versus qualitative studies. Given that this was a mixed

methods project, the steps taken to ensure that both the quantitative and qualitative sections met appropriate standards for data integrity are detailed.

### **Quantitative**

Quantitative research must begin with a thoughtful research design and an eye toward validity and reliability. Validity speaks to the question of how truthful the research results will be (Joppe, 2000). In order to have a valid study, first a determination had to be made if the questions needing to be asked could be answered. Considering this question confirmed that a mixed methods approach was required, as it was desired that both quantifiable questions and experiential questions be asked.

As the survey was created and tested, reliability was ensured by including questions that could be tested for internal consistency. One way to test for internal consistency is to run a Cronbach's alpha test, which is often run when multiple Likert questions are included in a survey and it must be determined if the scale is reliable (Laerd Statistics, n.d.). Using this form of analysis, which was conducted using IBM SPSS software, results above 0.7 generally indicate acceptable reliability (Zaiontz, 2016).

When determining which questions to use for a Cronbach's alpha test, I chose to group statements according to three overarching themes: perceptions of advisor workload, perceptions of institutional policy and decision making, and openness to the idea of limiting access. These three themes were chosen because they aligned with the research questions that guide this study and provided the basis for several of the areas further examined in the one-on-one interviews. Thus it was necessary to ensure that there was internal consistency in these responses. The first Cronbach's alpha test conducted looked at responses to the

following statements: “My workload is manageable” and “My workload is conducive to quality advising.” The alpha score on this test was .855, indicating reliability (Table 2).

The next test run concerned statements related to advisor perceptions of institutional decision making as related to enrollment policy, using responses on a Likert-type scale that reflected levels of agreement with the following statements: “The administration at my school is more concerned with enrollment numbers than student success,” “We knowingly admit students who are unlikely to succeed,” “I feel pressure to make sure we meet enrollment numbers,” and “Financial concerns drive the decision making at my institution.” The result for this measure was also in the acceptable range with an alpha score of .723 (Table 2).

The final Cronbach’s alpha test used was to look for consistency among the responses to the following two statements: “I would support an application or enrollment deadline” and “I would support limiting admission to students who have demonstrated (via assessment, academic record or other method) an ability to benefit academically.” The alpha score for Table 2

*Reliability Statistics*

Reliability test	No. of items	Cronbach’s alpha	Cronbach’s alpha based on standardized items
Test 1	2	.855	.855
Test 2	4	.723	.730
Test 3	2	.795	.797

this pair of questions was 0.795 (Table 2). Confirmation that the three sets of questions met the standard for acceptable reliability established the internal validity of the survey.

Another measure used to ensure validity was to seek as large and diverse a sample population as possible. Although there was access to a large network of advisors in the upper Midwest, it was desirable for the survey to represent as many different community colleges and community college systems as possible. Although responses were not received from every state, participation was broad enough to perceive that the sample could be considered representative.

Finally, Joppe (2000) defined reliability as the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under the study. . . . If the results of the study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. (para. 1)

Although this study has not yet been replicated, the survey was first tested on a small group (11 advisors) to determine if the questions asked made sense and if there were any portions that needed to be clarified. When the responses from the test group were compared to the actual survey participants, they were generally consistent across the quantitative sections. The survey is also such that if future researchers wanted to duplicate the study, they would be able to do so.

### **Qualitative**

For the qualitative sections of this study, a different set of criteria were used to determine trustworthiness of the data, as opposed to reliability. The word “trustworthy” instead of reliability is purposefully used, as the concept of reliability, as defined above, is “irrelevant in qualitative research” (Golashani, 2003, p. 601). One would not expect the interviews to be replicated with different participants or make an argument that seven people

are a representative sample, because the purpose of qualitative research is to generate understanding of how the chosen participants have made meaning of the subject under investigation (Creswell, 2014).

With regard to the qualitative sections of this study, a constructivist approach was chosen as it was most important to determine how advisors understand their experiences. Crotty (1998) described constructivism as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted with an essentially social context” (p. 42). Constructivism “values multiple realities that people have in their minds” (Golashani, 2003, p. 604).

Though the constructivist approach isn’t tested for reliability in the same way a quantitative approach would be, one still needs to consider how trustworthy the findings are. Trustworthiness was ensured throughout the research and analysis phase in several ways.

First, in the process of creating both the survey and semistructured interview guide for this study, they were first tested with a small group of academic advisors in order to ensure that the questions being asked were clear and understandable. There were two items that testers pointed out as being ambiguously worded, so those items were changed to be more easily understood. Second, the strategy of triangulation, defined by Creswell (2014) as using “different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes” (p. 201), was used to examine findings from both the surveys and the interviews.

As a third strategy, a peer debriefer (an anthropologist with a strong background in qualitative research) was used to “expose [the researcher] to a disinterested peer in a manner

paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit” within the researcher’s own mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This process leads researchers to be aware of their own biases and assumptions that they bring into the coding and analysis process. In addition, peer debriefing and member checks were conducted with the interview participants to share what was perceived to be the major findings and ideas and to ask for their feedback on those findings. Particular passages that were going to be quoted directly were shared to ensure that the interviewees still felt that their words accurately conveyed their feelings.

Finally, throughout the study, thick, rich descriptions were used as much as possible so that the reader could feel immersed in the study.

### **Liminality**

Throughout the course of this research, the concept of liminality provided a theoretical framework that allowed the researcher to connect the findings with existing research and to move from simply describing observations to being able to draw larger conclusions (USC Libraries, 2016). Liminality provided a way to understand the role of academic advisors as they seek to both enroll and retain students as part of a larger picture of community colleges as institutions that are in transition.

Liminality is an effective lens to understand how people, in this case academic advisors, experience or react to being in times of change or being part of an institution undergoing change. Community colleges are in a liminal moment, betwixt and between a historical identity as institutions with an unwavering commitment to access and the modern drive toward institutions devoted to producing credentialed graduates. Currently, academic advisors must struggle to understand their role and where to seek guidance and direction (i.e.,

national standards for “good” advising, personal sense of advising ethics, the professional obligation to meet institutional goals?) as they are work, at the behest of their institutions, to meet conflicting goals.

The use of liminality as a framework does not allow the future to be predicted. It can’t be used to determine if the completion movement will “win” over the access mission. However, liminality can be used as a way of understanding the experience of academic advisors tasked with being agents of both access and completion.

### **Research Limitations and Delimitations**

Prior to moving on to a discussion of the findings (Chapter 4) and conclusions (Chapter 5) of this study, it is important to acknowledge that all research has limitations, either by choice or by circumstance. This project had several delimitations. For example, in order to have a clearer scope for the project, the study was focused only on public 2-year colleges and not private 2-year colleges or 4-year institutions with similar open access admissions policies.

Another delimitation was that a survey was used to gather some of the data, even though it is recognized that people who take a survey are more likely to be interested in the topic (Bissell, Damian, & Reitz, 2010); thus, the findings may not account for advisors who are more neutral or unconcerned about the topic. The electronic survey was an appropriate choice in terms of meeting the study’s sampling goals, but it is unknown how many people received the survey link and opted not to take it. People who do not respond to a survey link have the potential to feel differently than those who do respond. Although useful in terms of recruiting participants, the snowball method of surveying makes it impossible to know how many people decided not to take the survey. Another possible limitation to using an



anonymous, electronic survey is that there was no way to verify that everyone who took the survey was actually an academic advisor or even was working in higher education, though the internal consistency to the answers suggests that, for this study, this was not a significant concern for this survey.

There were also limitations in terms of the one-on-one interviews. For example, not everyone who was interviewed was as perceptive or articulate about the subjects at hand. Interviews ranged in length from as short as 15 minutes to as long as 55 minutes, and some participants appeared more engaged than did others. There also may have been a different comfort level between those who were interviewed on Skype and those interviewed in person, as it seemed easier for the interviewer to build rapport with those interviewed face to face.

Finally the survey was conducted in May and June and the interviews were conducted in the fall. The busiest time of year for community college academic advisors is generally mid-August to early September. Thus, the time of year (either anticipation of the busy season or relief at having made it through) may have shaped the responses of the participants in subconscious ways.

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to explore how community college academic advisors view both the historical institutional commitment to providing as much access as possible to higher education via open admissions policies and procedures and the relatively recent emergence of the completion movement. As noted previously, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address the research questions and to gain the fullest understanding of the responses.

This study sought to begin to fill in clear gaps in the literature related to community college advising, open access, and the completion movement. Although examinations of both the open access mission of community colleges and the completion movement exist, until now there has not been research conducted with academic advisors and their perceptions of the work that they do, the students that they serve, or their sense of what the completion agenda means for their institutions.

This chapter presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative portions of this study. The next chapter provides a discussion that explores what these findings mean, using the liminality framework, and outlines areas for future research.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question sought to establish if it is possible to say with any degree of certainty that academic advisors as a group support the idea that providing open access is an important part of the community college mission. Establishing if this was the case and to what extent, if any, there were differences in levels of support for the access mission by either institutional or advisor demographics, allowed for exploration to begin to determine if

there are, in fact, inherent tensions between the access mission and the completion movement.

Research question 2: Do academic advisors agree that providing open access is an essential part of the community college mission?

A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their level of support for open access policies?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their level of support for open access policies.

First, it should be noted that when survey participants were asked to describe what students must do to be enrolled in their institution and to identify if they believed that their college had open access policies in place, all but two of the 186 participants who responded to this open-ended question indicated that they believed that their college had open access. For 97% of the survey takers, open access meant that there was some formal application process in place, such as an application form required, to get admitted. Other common requirements included placement tests, submission of ACT or SAT scores, and proof of high

school completion or equivalency. Although placement tests or ACT/SAT scores were requested, no minimum scores required to gain entry were reported with the exception of for more competitive programs such as nursing. Less common requirements were an application fee, mandatory new student orientation, and immunization forms. Although there was consensus among the participants that their institutions were open access, there was a definite range in terms of how positively advisors viewed the admissions requirements for their college. Responses to the question “What must a student do to be admitted at your college?” included:

- Have a pulse . . . and we are willing to negotiate on that if the body is still warm.
- We are open access. And H.S. diploma or GED is sufficient. Placement tests are usually required but often waived.
- The school has a liberal open access policy: apply, pay the application fee of \$40, take an orientation class and math/English placement tests. Students who struggle with this are going to have a hard time in college.
- Even though it is very intimidating to walk through the college doors, we make sure their fears are calmed and that they’ll be supported throughout the higher education process. From applying to deciding what classes to take, career counseling, etc. . . . we try to make it as non-intimating as possible.
- My dean would enroll a goldfish if he thought it would count toward enrollment numbers.

Although there was a thread of cynicism among the open-ended responses, other survey questions revealed that most advisors were supportive of open access policies.

As part of this study, several different types of questions were asked, including open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, ranking questions, and questions using a Likert-type scale. A Likert-type scale offers a way to measure attitudes and opinions (McLeod, 2008) and offers participants a way to indicate the strength of their opinion about a topic. When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “providing access to all students who enroll is an important part of our mission” using a Likert-type scale, survey participants had the choice of selecting, on a scale of 1 to 5, “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” The mean for this item was 4.24, with 90% ( $n = 190$ ) of participants indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed that providing access to all who wish to enroll is an important part of the community college mission. The variance for this question was low at 0.54 with a standard deviation of 0.73, indicating that the answers for this question were generally clustered in the “agree” or “strongly agree” categories.

In contrast, when asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities should be directed to other services instead of enrolling in college,” a question designed to test the commitment to access for a student group especially underserved by more selective institutions (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000), only 16.5% ( $n = 175$ ) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed.

The support for open access as a cornerstone to the community college mission was also found in the qualitative questions. In both the one-on-one interviews and the open-ended questions on the survey, academic advisors spoke eloquently about the value they saw in working at an institution designed to serve all segments of society. Tasha, who was working at a large urban community college, stated

Serving all students is who we are. We are all things to all people, all of the time.

Sometimes it is overwhelming but I like knowing that we are a place where anyone can get started. If it wasn't for [college name], I don't think most of our students would be in college.

Another advisor, Michael, noted, "I work here on purpose, you know? Like, I could work at a four-year that was more restrictive with admissions but I chose to work here because I think serving who we serve is important."

Based on the quantitative data and support from the qualitative responses, academic advisors as a whole affirmed that providing open access is an essential part of the community college mission. The next step was to explore if there were any statistically significant differences in that level of support based on either institutional characteristics or advisor characteristics. In order to determine if there were statistically significant correlations, a series of one-way ANOVA tests or *t*-tests, depending on number of variables being compared, were conducted through SPSS on the variables in question. The confidence interval for tested variables was set at 95%.

To determine if there was a correlation between institutional factors and level of support for the idea of open access as an important part of the community college mission, the following four factors were examined: location of campus (rural, suburban, or urban setting, as identified by advisor), size of institution as measured by current enrollment numbers (under 2,000 students, 2,001–4,000 students, 4,001–9,999 students, or more than 10,000), percentage of students who apply for financial aid (25% or less, 26–50%, 51–75%, or more than 75%), and percentage of students identified as non-White (25% or less, 26–50%, 51–75%, and more than 75%). The null hypothesis was that there are no

statistically significant differences in support for open access policies based on these four factors.

Testing the variables revealed that the null hypothesis was partially supported. The size of the campus and the location type of the campus were not found to have any correlation with the advisor level of support for open access. In contrast, both the percentage of students of color and the percentage of students who apply for financial aid were shown to have statistically significant differences for advisors' level of support for the idea of open access as an important part of the community college mission. As shown in Table 3, advisors who were working at institutions with more students of color were more likely to affirm a stronger support for this perception of open access.

Table 3

*Advisor Support for Open Access by Percentage of Non-White Students Enrolled*

Percentage of non-White students enrolled	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
25% or less	80	4.11	0.729	0.082
26–50%	58	4.29	0.773	0.101
51–75%	25	4.40	0.764	0.153
More than 75%	12	4.50	0.798	0.230
Total/average	175	4.24	0.758	0.057

*Note.* Pearson correlation = .168;  $p = .026$ , two-tailed.

Advisors taking this survey were asked to estimate the percentage of students who apply for financial aid at their institution. When this variable was examined in the context of the questions regarding access, a statistically significant difference was also found. In this case it was found that advisors who were working at colleges where 26–50% of the students

apply for financial aid ( $n = 12$ ) more strongly supported the idea that access is an important part of the community college mission than did advisors at schools where more than 75% of the students apply for financial aid ( $n = 118$ ). The mean response for the advisors in the first group was 4.67 compared to 4.15 for the advisors in the second group, more than a half a point difference and significant within the 95% confidence interval (Table 4).

Table 4

*Advisor Support for Open Access by Percentage of Students Applying for Financial Aid*

Percentage of students applying for financial aid	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
26–50%	12	4.67	0.49	0.14
51–75%	50	4.28	0.61	0.09
More than 75%	118	4.15	0.80	0.07
Total/average	180	4.22	0.74	0.06

*Note.* Pearson correlation =  $-.166$ ;  $p = .026$ , two-tailed.

The null hypothesis for the second part of research question 1 (part B), stated that there would be no statistically significant differences in the level of support for the idea that open access is an important part of the community college mission based on advisors' personal characteristics. For this set of data, correlations based on sex (male, female, or other/wish not to identify), length of time in current advising position (1 year or less, 1 to 3 years, or 3 years or more), and highest level of education completed (associate's degree, bachelor's degree, some graduate work, master's degree, or Ph.D. or equivalent) were examined. The null hypothesis held for all categories; there were no statically significant differences based on sex, years in current position, or level of education completed by the advisor.



## **Research Question 2**

The second research question and subquestions also looked at advisors as a whole and then as grouped together by institutional characteristics and personal characteristics to examine the relationship between open access policies and advisor work and ability to provide high quality advising.

Research question 2: What do academic advisors perceive as the impact of open access policies on their work and ability to provide high quality advising?

- A. Do the institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising? Institutional factors include location type, size, percentage of student who apply for financial aid, and percentage of students identified as students of color.

Hypothesis: The institutional demographics of the community college where the academic advisor is employed will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

- B. Do personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education earned, correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising?

Hypothesis: The personal characteristics of academic advisors, such as sex, years of experience, and level of education, will not correlate with their perceptions about the work of advising and their ability to provide high quality advising.

Several items in the survey were included to examine how community college academic advisors perceived that open access policies shape their work and their ability to

provide high quality advising. Advisors were asked to indicate their level of agreement (using a Likert-type scale) with the following statements:

- My workload is manageable;
- My workload is conducive to quality advising;
- Academic advising should be mandatory and advisor caseloads should reflect this;
- When it comes to peak time (August/January), I am still able to provide high quality advising; and
- I feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers.

One of the themes that clearly emerged from both the survey and the one-on-one interviews was that, when advisors thought of access, they thought of access not only impacting who they served but how many students they served. During the interviews, the advisors were asked who or what type of students they thought most benefitted from open admission policies. Their answers aligned with the types of students identified in the literature as likely to attend community colleges: students who have low income, those who are first-generation students, students of color, working adults, those who delay registration until at or near the start of the semester, and those who may be academically underprepared. As one participant, Lindsay, described it, open access means serving

unrepresented populations—we serve . . . age[s] from 19 to 24 all the way up to 70 or more, so I think the people who benefit most are people who haven't had those conversations at home or in high school to really put a plan in place, whether it is an academic or financial plan. At our institution we serve a lot of first-generation students who don't have a plan but know they have to do something.

When asked in the survey about the biggest work stressor face by advisors, the advisors gave as one of their top answers was stress about having to work in environments that emphasize quantity of student contact versus quality. One advisor noted that her biggest stressor was “not being able to take as much time with each individual student due to large numbers of students waiting for a small number of advisors.” Another advisor neatly summarized the dual concerns of the impact of open access on advising by bluntly stating:

We have the most challenging students and the biggest caseloads. We want to admit everyone, so we end up with huge numbers of people who need a lot of help and they tend to come when we have the least time to serve them. It isn’t surprising that we lose so many students in the first semester.

The dual challenges of being an academic advisor in an open access institution are reflected in the responses to the survey statements listed above, as seen in Table 5. The

Table 5

*Advisors’ Perceptions of How Open Access Policies Shape Their Work and Their Ability to Provide High Quality Advising*

Survey statement	Responses (%)			N	M	SD	Variance
	Agree	Strongly agree	Total in agreement				
My workload is manageable.	60	14	74	136	3.21	1.17	1.37
My workload is conducive to quality advising.	49	14	63	137	3.01	1.24	1.54
Academic advising should be mandatory and advisor caseloads should reflect this.	41	74	115	137	4.37	0.	0.
When it comes to peak time (August/January) I am still able to provide high quality advising.	43	13	56	136	2.78	1.38	1.91
I feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers.	42	27	69	143	3.51	1.13	1.27

*Note.* Responses given on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree.

responses indicated a high level of support for mandatory advising and what would presumably be reduced caseloads to go with it. In fact, there were no advisors who indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. Those that did not indicate that they agreed or strongly agreed with that statement instead fell into the “neutral” or “unsure” category. For the other measures, however, only a slim majority of advisors indicated that their workload was manageable, a number that dropped below 50% when asked about quality of the advising offered.

It is important to note that the term “high quality” advising was not defined regarding what it meant or looked like, so the responses to the questions regarding advising quality reflect individual advisors’ own perceptions of what quality advising looked like to them and their own sense of if they were providing it. A theme that emerged from both the open ended survey questions and the one-on-one interviews was that advisors frequently define high quality advising in relational terms and low quality advising in transactional terms. High quality advising seemed to be correlated with how much time an advisor could spend with a student, with phrases like “getting to know them” and “building a relationship” used frequently. In contrast, when advisors talk about advising during the peak times of the year, they use words and phrases like “triage”, “in and out”, and “give them a schedule” to describe the experience of advising.

The subsets of this question also addressed the impact of open access policies on advisors’ work and their ability to provide high quality advising but looked for correlations based on institution factors and advisor factors. For both of the subquestions, the null hypothesis was that there would be no statistically significant differences in responses based

on institution factors and advisor factors. When the institutional factors of campus location, institutional enrollment, percentage of students of color, and percentage of students applying for financial aid were examined, there were no statistically significant correlations between them and the responses to any of the above statements; thus, the null hypothesis was upheld.

Looking at correlations based on advisor personal characteristics (gender, years in current position, and highest education level completed), the only characteristic that showed a statistically significant correlation was that of sex, but only in relation to two of the five statements: “My workload feels manageable” and “I feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers.” These results indicate that the null hypothesis could not be upheld.

Responses to the statement “my workload feels manageable” were significant at the .010 level (two-tailed) with a mean difference of .506, as demonstrated by the *t*-test. Further analysis revealed that male advisors were significantly more likely to feel that their workload was manageable, with a mean of 3.69 for males and 3.19 for women. As one female advisor from Ohio who took the survey stated, “I feel like we are always being asked to do more with less. More intrusive advising, more following up on students on probation, more classroom visits. But we never get more staff to help.”

Regarding the statement, “I feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers,” female advisors were more likely than were male advisors to report feeling pressure to meet institutional enrollment numbers, with a mean difference of  $-.507$  and a significance level of .016. The mean response for female advisors was 3.51, whereas male advisors had a mean response of 3.05. The pressure to meet enrollment numbers also emerged as a theme in the open-ended question “What is your biggest work stressor?” A female advisor from Minnesota shared:

Advising should be retention-focused, not enrollment focused. That is why colleges should have admissions departments. I used to work at a 4-year institution as an advisor before this and felt that I was able to work with the students to meet their academic/professional needs without pressure to get in numbers or get students out of my office quickly because other students are waiting. Over 50% of our students are first-generation, low-income. They need support in many different ways, but every day I am having to make unethical decisions or not serve students' best interest because of college policy and the pressure to fill seats.

Angela, the advisor at a smaller campus, echoed a similar sentiment during her one-on-one interview:

I'm stressed. I think at my particular campus, there is a great deal of pressure on advisors to also be marketing, recruiting, beating the sidewalks, going in to the community doing anything and everything, making phone calls, posting letters to get numbers up.

However, not all advisors indicated that they felt pressure where numbers are concerned. For example, interview participant Lindsay flatly stated that she didn't "let the numbers pressure" her. A theme that emerged in Lindsay's interview, however, was an abiding sense of concern about the chances of success for students admitted as a result of open access admission policies. Lindsay was animated as she shared her frustration about advising during the busiest time of year:

August is hell. The quality of advising goes down. It goes down because you have lines out the door, you don't have—you're not accepting appointments so you're trying to get through it quickly. You're tired, you're frustrated, both the student and

advisor. That's where you have that clash of what I see playing out in my own office this August . . . is it the numbers or is it the success of the students? Because I know for sure: most of these students who come in at the last minute are going to fail. The matter of advisor perceptions of student success will be explored in research question #3.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question 3: What do community college academic advisors believe when it comes to student success and graduation rates?

The findings related to this question were clear that a sizable majority of academic advisors affirmed that providing open access is essential to the mission of the community college. However, agreeing that providing access is important is not the same as believing that all students can succeed. In this section advisor beliefs about student success and graduation are examined by first looking at responses to the following statements:

- All students can succeed.
- Students who really want to succeed can do so with the right help.
- Students who come to my school can get the help they need to succeed.
- We knowingly admit students who are unlikely to succeed.
- Students are held responsible for their own success.
- I am comfortable with the current graduation rates for my school.

When it came to student success and graduation, there were several interesting findings from both the survey and the one-on-one interviews. One major finding was that, although approximately 88% of the advisors indicated that they were not comfortable with their institution's current graduation rates, over 40% indicated that they didn't actually know

what the current graduation rate was for their college (see Table 6). Interview participant Michael was one of them; he stated:

I know the retention and grad rates for my cohort of voc students, but I don't know if I know for sure what our completion rate is overall. Does anyone know though? It all depends on who you are counting.

As shown in Table 6, when it came to student success, academic advisors were hopeful in the sense that the majority believed that success was possible for those students who really want to succeed and have the right help, but only a slight majority believed that all students can succeed and are held responsible for their own success.

Table 6

*Advisors' Perceptions Regarding Student Success and Graduation Rates*

Survey statement	Responses (%)			N	M	SD	Variance
	Agree	Strongly agree	Total in agreement				
All students can succeed.	37	16	53	190	3.26	1.25	1.56
Students who really want to succeed can do so with the right help.	39	52	91	181	4.49	1.26	1.58
Students who come to my school can get the help they need to succeed.	56	24	80	191	3.96	0.84	0.70
We knowingly admit students who are unlikely to succeed	39	28	67	191	3.81	1.03	1.06
Students are held responsible for their own success.	47	9	56	180	3.41	1.04	1.08
I am comfortable with the current graduation rates for my school.	11	0.5	11.5	190	2.14	0.97	0.93

*Note.* Responses given on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree.



Over 130 advisors responded to the open-ended question asking advisors to identify what types of students are least likely to succeed. The following categories emerged during the coding process as the most common categories of students deemed to be unlikely to succeed.

a. Low-income students

- “The students that have difficulty succeeding at our institution struggle with poverty and financial issues”
- “Students who lack specific resources: affordable childcare, transportation, a personal computer and internet access, access to healthcare; also, students who are academically under-prepared; students who are unemployed and/or fall into the low income range.”

b. First generation students

- “Lack of knowledge of college, first generation usually, have a lack of support and motivation”
- “First time students particularly first generation who don’t understand the rigor of college compared to high school and who’s families expect them to carry a family work load including missing classes to care for younger siblings or elderly family members”

c. Students who attend part time

- “Students who are working full time and have families”

d. Students who require developmental education

- “Developmental education assessment scores”
- “Tested in to developmental courses in reading, English and math”

e. Poor test scores/poor academic preparation

- “Poor academic preparation at high school”
- “Those with a 2.0–2.5 high school GPA”
- “Students from large urban high schools struggle as do those with a low high school GPA”
- “Students who are underprepared from their high school or who have bounced around from one college to another without success at any of them are unlikely to succeed anywhere”

f. Students who register late:

- “They walk in our doors the week before or the week of the beginning of term and want to start right away. They don’t score well on the Accuplacer, they don’t have financial aid in place, they don’t have transportation or child care arrangements”
- “Ones who start the process of becoming a student the week or two before classes start, they don’t have their life schedule figured out enough to know how much of a time commitment they are able to make to their education”

g. Students perceived to have low levels of intelligence or/cognitive ability:

- “Mentally challenged and lazy”
- “Not intelligent enough”
- “Students with very low abilities”
- “I would equate the majority of my students to middle school students on many of the executive skills domains. They lack the executive functioning skills to manage/cope with school”

h. Students of color:

- “Hispanic student are the least likely to succeed at my school”
- “Many of our students of color come in with remedial or ESL levels”
- “first generation and being a student of color is a kiss of death, it seems”

It is worth noting that, although academic advisors expressed reservations about the extent to which all students can succeed, nearly all of them reported that seeing students succeed was the most enjoyable part of their job. Of the 164 who responded to the open-ended question “What is the most enjoyable part of your job,” 153 of the responses included the word “student.” After coding, the following themes emerged as most enjoyable parts of the job: students at graduation, student success, helping students, and students changing their lives.

During the one-on-one interview with participant Jake, there was a discussion surrounding the question of student success in an especially candid and thoughtful portion of the interview. Jack was asked: “So, let’s talk about student success. In [the] survey, there were mixed feelings about the idea that all students can succeed. What do you think about that?” Jake responded with a heavy sigh, but didn’t answer right away. He shook his head briefly and seemed to be weighing his word choice carefully before he asked, “Off the record, right?” After he was told “no” and that his response was being recorded but it was off the record in that his real name wouldn’t be used, he replied, “Okay, I’m just kind of afraid of sounding like a dick [laughing] . . . can I say that?” He went on,

It is just that sometimes you have these students walk in and you just know in about 10 seconds they aren’t gonna make it. Like, it is two days before classes and a single mom rolls in with a stroller and a screaming toddler. And she hasn’t been in school

in 10 years and she has no money and she is dev ed for everything and she wants to do online classes because of the kids but doesn't have a computer.

After Jake was asked how he handled these situations, he replied, “The pragmatic part of me thinks that all students have a right to fail, right? Like, she is an adult and she can make choices, and my job is just to give her the best advice I can.” When he was asked if “that advice ever include[d] ‘don’t enroll,’” he responded, “No, not really. One part is that I know we need the number and one part is the hope that maybe this one is the unicorn—the one who’ll succeed even though everything is stacked against her.”

It is interesting to note that only 55% ( $n = 190$ ) of advisors agreed or strongly agreed that they felt empowered to be honest with a student if they thought the student was unlikely to succeed, even though 93% ( $n = 191$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that they believed that it was important to act ethically within their role as an academic advisor. The idea of “setting students up for failure” emerged as a concern when advisors were asked to describe their biggest work-related stressors, which is perhaps why, when looking at the responses to research question 4, some indications started to emerge that, despite their stated belief in the importance of access, many advisors were open to the idea of some limitations.

#### **Research Question 4**

Research question 4: To what extent do academic advisors support policies or procedures that would limit student access?

Over 65% of the advisors surveyed indicated that they believed that retention and completion rates are the number one problem facing community colleges as a whole, and there was clear concern expressed by advisors interviewed that institutional policies related to access were at least partially to blame for current graduation rates:

- We are doing a huge disservice when we continue, year after year, to allow these last minute students to start the week before, the week of, when the semester is getting underway. At the same time, every September, I should say, after fall rush has died down it's our staff turning around and vocalizing to the upper-level administration that we are doing no one a favor here. (Heather)
- If persistence and success are what we want to see, then we need to wait to get students in until they are ready to be students. (Lindsay)
- I'm absolutely interested in access but I also want them to complete because it doesn't matter if they can get into this institution if they can't complete their degree and without that degree at the end, their potential to pay back those debts is less. I actually would support limits to access, because I think that, from what I've seen of those student who in you know really late, in my opinion, what is really late, my experience is that they aren't successful. (Michael)
- I think by not having a true deadline for enrolling, that we hurt students more than we help them. (Tasha)

Although only 49% ( $n = 185$ ) of the advisors surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “limiting access would improve graduation rates,” over 85% ( $n = 186$ ) indicated that they would support the implementation of an application or enrollment deadline, including the survey respondent who argued that “if a student can't make a simple deadline, how on earth do we think they'll survive college?” Just over one third (37%,  $n = 185$ ) said that they would support limiting access to those students who have demonstrated an ability to succeed academically via test scores or other measure of assessment. One survey taker noted:

In my school, we have three levels of dev ed for reading and math. If you place into the bottom level for both reading and math, you shouldn't be allowed in. You should have to go to [Adult Basic Education] instead. I'm pretty sure we've never had anyone who starts that low graduate. Ever.

For advisor Kate, who described herself as having a strong orientation toward social justice and a desire to believe that all students can succeed, the current situation at her large midwestern community college was one of “a slave trying to serve two masters,” the two masters being her institution's twin desires to boost enrollment and improve completion rates, something that she said makes the suggestion of possible limits to access via application deadlines a “non-starter.” Kate's perception of access and completion as “two masters” began to paint the picture of how many advisors felt about the completion movement, as will be discussed for research question 5.

### **Research Question 5**

Research question 5: How do academic advisors perceive the completion movement in terms of the work they do, their role as advisors, and their institutions?

When I think about the completion agenda itself, I think parts of it are realistic [and] I think that some parts of it are unrealistic. In the idea itself, it's a good idea. I understand where it comes from. But I think there may need to be some tweaks to it eventually, that someone eventually is going to have to look at it and say, “Okay, let's re-evaluate, where are we at now and can we make sure that we're, that we have obtainable goals?” (Tasha)

In many ways, Tasha represented many of the advisors participating in both the survey and the interviews: professionals who understood why improving completion rates is important,

but who also had concerns about what the completion movement is calling for and how it may impact those students that community colleges are uniquely designed to serve.

Where the completion movement is concerned, the following topics emerged as primary concerns from the academic advisors' point of view: (a) the completion movement fails to account for characteristics of community college students, (b) those in administration are unwilling to do things that would decrease enrollment in order to improve completion, and (c) academic advisors are charged with improving graduation rates but must do this in the context of policies and procedures that don't support completion goals.

For Kate, the drive to improve completion at her institution was frustrating, not because she didn't want to see more students graduate, but because she saw her college as approaching the task in a short-sighted and incomplete way:

Enrollment is a goal. Period. And graduation is a goal. Period. And I don't see a lot of pressure or direction to connect the two, but it's what I think I should be doing. It's like, "Let's get the students in and enrolled and then we'll see how many come back the following term but we also know that we'll have a new batch of folks coming in."

The idea of institutional shortsightedness also came up in the survey, including this response: "My school is a Complete College America school, but I think the things that they suggest are shortsighted when you think of who our students are." As this survey respondent pointed out, community college students are a diverse population. For many advisors, improving graduation rates 'wasn't as simple of an idea as it may seem. One reason for this is how students are counted, as noted by Jake who commented,

When you talk about completion, are you just talking about our IPEDS cohort?

Because that just looks at a few hundred of our students since so many of our students are part-timers and have earned credits before they get here, either from other schools or PSEO.

Other advisors pointed out that determining who to count is tricky given that most current or purposed measures don't account for students who enroll without the intention of earning a degree, including students who plan to transfer prior to earning an associate's degree and those who may want to enroll in order to take some specific courses for skill development or career advancement. One survey respondent commented:

I actually think it is kind of classist of us to assume all students have the same goals and that those goals are the same as university students. I know students who just come to learn how to work a computer or to speak better English or to keep up their teaching credential. They have no intention of earning a degree with us, but they have to say that they do if they want financial aid money. I think the focus on graduation as the big huge deal negates that we are supposed to be a place where ANYONE can come to learn. And learning can happen with or without a degree being earned.

Even if there were accurate ways to count community college students, there was a deep sense of skepticism among advisors when it came to the administration at their schools and the administration's willingness to make any changes that would potentially negatively impact enrollment. Some of the quantitative measures of this skepticism are highlighted in Table 7. The data from the survey indicated that more advisors believed that institutional decision making at their college was driven by financial concerns rather than with the best



interests of students in mind. Nearly half of all the advisors indicated that the administration at their school was more concerned with enrollment numbers than student success.

Table 7

*Advisors' Perceptions Regarding Their Institutions*

Survey statement	Responses			N	M	SD	Variance
	Agree	Strongly agree	Total in agreement				
Our institutional practices are designed with the best interests of students in mind.	54	19	73	180	3.21	1.19	1.43
Most people at my institution are "student centered"	91	22	113	191	3.47	1.00	1.01
Financial concerns drive decision making at my institution.	79	54	133	191	3.87	0.96	0.91
The administration at my school is more concerned with enrollment than student success	57	32	89	190	3.25	1.19	1.45

*Note.* Responses given on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree.

Kate, echoing the concerns many of the survey participants expressed, noted that it seemed as though institutional concerns about retention and completion fell into a cyclical pattern:

Right now it feels like we are in the enrollment cycle. August is kind of a time where it starts out with the best of intentions. Where I'm at right now is with the current technical programs. We've been informed that if they're not full or below a certain level, that they're going to start reducing classes and perhaps lay off instructors.

That's a challenge for me in that I know that, in addition to doing my job, I also feel like there's this pressure by August 1st to make sure that these courses are filled. Folks [who] are in [during] the beginning of August might be doing little bits

of orientation and rallying to see where we're at doing everyday updates. As it moves further in . . . my institution starts classes about the 3rd week of August. The couple weeks before that are just nuts. It's completely reactive rather than proactive.

Whoever walks in and whatever situation they're in we help them out.

So, when I walk out of a day in August, I'm just drained because I might have seen 20, probably not 20, 10 different students, 15 different students coming from a variety of needs with a variety of concerns. There's really no two students [who] are going to be the same. But, at the same time, I'm also doing perhaps, some program orientations or assisting with some triage work at the front desk [to] make sure folks get to the right place.

I feel like it's a time [when] we throw our best practices out the window. We don't communicate effectively. We come from a place of reaction to whatever is in front of [us] rather than taking a step and thinking about what could be the best way to do things, even if it takes a little time. Again, I don't know that my institution's any different than any place else. . . . In August weeks, we are not student focused. I think we're more institutionally focused. We're losing out in that way. But then later we'll get pressure from the administration to retain, retain, retain. It is frustrating.

An advisor from Minnesota shared how the unwillingness to change policy to improve completion rates manifested itself at her institution:

Our college needs to mandate more. Advising is not mandatory, orientation is not mandatory, registering before classes start is not mandatory, even a "mandatory" first-year seminar course has loopholes students can get around. We have strong student support programming, but students don't do optional. Our administration

refuses to mandate these high impact practices so students do not attend and benefit from them. I can't help but think it is all about getting butts in seats.

One of the final concerns that academic advisors had about the completion movement was the fear that they were being held responsible for improving graduation rates without being given tools and guidance that would make that possible. Heather, who noted that she was supportive of the desire to have more students graduate, shared the following experience from her campus when asked if she had a sense of what those efforts to improve retention would look like:

I'm laughing because, actually, in the staff meeting, I asked basically the same question to our leadership. We had two of our VPs in the room and then, of course, our president who basically said just prior to that, "Retention is our main focus." That is exactly what I asked, is how, with our focus being retention, what initiatives can you share with us at this point that would impact our student services staff, which of course, I am a part of as an advisor. I am part of the student services office. I really didn't get a hard and firm response, unfortunately. I wish I could say I did.

A recurring theme was that, regardless of what completion measures may be put in place, there were simply not enough advisors to be able to do the work, and many advisors referred to the fact that advising isn't generally mandatory, but advisor-to-student ratios are much larger than best practices would recommend:

Theoretically, it is a concern. There is a monetary incentive for students to complete 30 credits within their first year here because our IR department has done research showing that students who have completed 30 or more credits within their first year are the most likely to graduate and transfer. Realistically, though, I don't believe we

focus our attentions correctly on retention and completion. The institution and administration focuses on numbers only: how long is “appropriate” to work with an advisee (no more than 30 minutes), how many students we enroll, how many programs we have, calling students who aren’t enrolled in future semesters, etc.

What the college fails to see is that academic advisors have over 1,000 students per person and do not make any real connections with the students. It’s a revolving door.

(Jake)

Advisors noted that there are serious questions and concerns about their institution’s willingness to adopt policies that may actually impact graduation rates but possibly at the expense of enrollment numbers. Kate described feeling that when “push comes to shove, enrollment numbers win” and described how she “rolls her eyes” on this subject because: “our budget is based on enrollment, but we’re looking a lot at retention and our upper administration is SHOCKED to see that we keep an abysmally low percentage of students.” Kate was noticeably sarcastic at this point, demonstrating her frustration with the fact that she sees the low graduation rates as something that is “for sure, no question” a result of the pursuit of enrollment goals. Further, there was a deep sense of wariness that advisors will bear the brunt of the work required to support students as these students move toward graduation while still being tasked with making sure the institution meets its enrollment goals.

### **Summary**

This chapter served to share the data and themes that emerged in response to the five research questions used to explore community college academic advisor attitudes and beliefs

regarding questions of access and completion. Chapter 5 presents what those answers mean for both advisors and institutions as well as recommendations and areas for future research.

## **CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, OTHER FINDINGS, AND SUMMARY**

This study explored the access mission of community colleges and the emerging completion movement from the perspective of community college academic advisors. The intent was to determine if there is inherent tension between the historical community college commitment to providing as much access as possible to higher education and the growing political, social, and financial pressure on 2-year colleges to improve their graduation rates. Academic advisors play a unique role within the community college serving both as agents of enrollment and as student services staff members tasked with trying to ensure that students are retained. If there is tension between the ideals of access and the goal of completion, academic advisors are the student services staff members most likely to acutely feel that pressure. This study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and the data collected using both types of methods were used in Chapter 4 to answer the research questions in as much depth as possible.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Through the findings of this study, a fuller understanding of the experience of community college academic advisors has emerged than has previously existed in the literature. Through both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, a picture has emerged that shows that academic advisors have complex feelings about their work, the students that they serve, and the institutions at which they are employed. In this section, this study's findings will be detailed and then interpreted using the concept of liminality to better understand them.

One of the first findings was that, in both the electronic survey and the individual interviews, academic advisors affirmed the idea that the community college mission is most

fully realized when the doors are open wide to all perspective students, regardless of socio-economic status and, to a certain extent, likelihood for academic success. It is important to note that advisors didn't assume that access is a guarantee of academic success. Further, although they were supportive of the theory that all students should have a chance to enroll, they also believed there are certain groups of students, most notably those who delay registration until at or near the start of the semester, who they consistently found challenging to work with and for who they were in favor of limiting access. Although there was resistance to the idea of imposing limits on access based on perceptions of cognitive ability or past demonstrations of academic success, there was a general willingness to consider limiting access on procedural basis (i.e., admissions and enrollment deadlines).

A second finding was that there was confirmation of the idea that the completion movement is a relatively recent development for community colleges. Interview participant Heather noted:

When I first started [6 years ago], we weren't talking about retention. We weren't talking about that; we were trying to recruit and increase our numbers. Closer to year 3 or 4 we started talking about retention efforts. We've been talking about it, but I haven't seen a lot of forward movement with initiatives.

Advisors also reported that, although new completion goals have been regularly announced at campuses across the country, there was a perception that administrators and other decision makers were unwilling or unable to give up old practices in pursuit of new goals. For example, Lindsay noted:

There is tension on our campus [between] trying to be an open access institution and trying to improve retention rates. As we move more into retention, persistence,

completion, it's pulling away from that. It's not pulling away that we are an open access institution, but it's stepping on some old beliefs that you should always be open, that there shouldn't be a deadline. It's in conflict with the old way of thinking that the more students we get in the door regardless of how it rolls out that's more money for us, that's more FYE. There's a clash on our campus.

A related theme that emerged from the one-on-one interviews was that, despite their explicit statements of support for the access mission, some advisors engaged in practices that served to unofficially limit access during the busiest times of year, perhaps because administrators don't support officially limiting access. For example Michael stated:

My institution does not have formal application deadlines but, on my particular campus, we have instituted somewhat unofficial deadlines. We don't enroll a brand new student once classes start, even though our institution allows addition of classes the whole first week of class.

Kate used a checklist of "to-do" items to sway students away from trying to get started by trying to point out how rushed they' would be if they attempted to get registered so close to the start of the semester. Jake noted that he, and other advisors at his institution, used methods similar to passive resistance in the face of his boss's pressure to enroll as many students as possible:

There definitely comes a time in the semester when my dean is like, "Get them in, get them in," but the advising staff stops trying to work miracles. If you wait until the day before to apply, I'm not going to go beg the admission person to expedite your paperwork. The class you want is full? Maybe I'm not going to suggest another option. It sounds bad, right? But I think of it as saving them from themselves.



Jake's perspective highlights two additional findings: the relationship between access and enrollment and the tension between advisors and administrators.

When asked about open access, the academic advisors studied in this research study consistently discussed the concept in terms of enrollment numbers rather than in terms of social justice or equity. Although their perceptions of who benefits most from open access policies correlated with the populations identified in the literature as most served by the expansion of higher education (low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, the academically underprepared, and nontraditional students), when advisors spoke about the way that open access manifested itself at their college, they talked about it in terms of enrollment and a sense of never-ending pressure to get more students in the front door. Advisors didn't seem to perceive access as being in jeopardy, but not due to a sense of institutional commitment to the ideal but, rather, due to institutional desires to have high enrollment for financial reasons.

Almost 75% of advisors indicated that they believed that financial concerns was the chief driver of decision making at their institution, and with that belief came a sense of skepticism about how sincere community college administrators are about creating policies that are designed to benefit students and improve graduation rates. Advisors perceived that not having admissions and application deadlines are for the institution's financial benefit, not for the benefit of students. Lindsay raised a question, which was echoed by other advisors, when she asked rhetorically, "We know that 53% of our students coming to us in the first week are not succeeding. So why do we keep admitting them?"

Although this study didn't originally seek to explore relationships between advisors and administrators at community colleges, a theme that emerged again and again was that,

when it comes to access and completion, academic advisors have a sense of fear and mistrust of the administration of their colleges. Angela shared her perspective in one of the more serious and emotional portions of our interview:

I think there is such pressure to have such high numbers, advisors are . . . advisors are kind of under the microscope to get students in here even if it isn't the best fit for them or it's not the right time for them, just so we can have those numbers.

Everyone's feeling pretty beaten up because we're told enrollment is down.

However, when [a coworker] actually got the numbers, we discover our enrollment is up but no one will tell us that. It's kind of one of those things where I think advisors feel like we are really being beaten up on enrollment numbers. It's just discouraging to walk in every day and bust your butt and never be told, "Oh, you're doing okay," or any sort of progress is being made. It's just, "It's not good enough, it's not good enough."

Lindsay shared a similar concern: "I know that upper level leadership look at those numbers and think about staffing issues. How many advisors do we need if we're not bringing in our numbers?"

Another theme related to the mistrust of administrators was that of the academic advisor as a scapegoat, a point of view shared by this survey participant:

"Advisement issues" has become a scapegoat for all student success-related issues.

While a better advisement system is desperately needed and would certainly address many student success concerns, it is by no means a panacea. As one of three professional staff in the Advisement Center, I frequently feel that the work we do with students is not understood by other members of the campus community.

The findings for research question 2 about advisor workload showed that many advisors feel overworked and unable to provide high quality advising, especially at the busiest times of year. Many also feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers, although there are varying levels at which advisors feel comfortable advising students not to enroll if it is not likely, in the advisor's view, that these students will succeed. One survey respondent noted that it felt like "no matter what happens, it is our fault: 'Enrollment is down? Blame advisors! Students are not graduating? It must be because they didn't get good advising!' Not like it could have anything to do with the fact that we have 2,600 students for every advisor, right?"

Beyond a mistrust of administrators, advisors also reported feeling that institutional concerns about completion rates are not consistent throughout the year and are, instead, cyclical based on the urgency of meeting enrollment targets. I interviewed Michael in July, and he stated that completion wasn't the current concern for his college:

Interestingly enough, at this time of year, right now, our focus is on enrollment numbers, but I don't think that the retention and completion conversation is ever far behind that. We focus on enrollment, and then we focus on retention until it is time to focus on enrollment again.

Lindsay was interviewed in early August and shared that her institution, guided by a recommendation from both outside consultants and an internal completion and retention committee was, for the first time, going to enforce an enrollment deadline in order to limit late registration. She was hopeful but unsure of the extent to which the college would follow its own policy if enrollment numbers began to look shaky:

I want it to stick, but I think if the numbers drop they will roll that back. I absolutely think that top leadership will roll that back or they will alter it in some way to leave a crack open.

At Heather's college, outside consultants and an internal workgroup were engaged to look at ways to improve retention and completion rates. She shared that her college's leadership was determined to focus on retention over enrollment this year: "Our president has told us that, this year, our primary focus is going to be retaining current students. The following year focus will be on recruiting additional students." This perspective was noteworthy because it was the only response that indicated that the advisor perceived the campus administration as having an awareness that it is hard to focus on both retention and increasing enrollment at the same time.

These conclusions strongly suggest that community colleges are in a state of transition. In the past, their success was measured by access, which was all too often measured in numbers of enrollment numbers. Their future appears to be one in which success is likely to be measured in terms of a different set of numbers: graduation rates. The discussion now turns to how the concept of liminality helps to explain how this tension between the access past and the completion future is being acted out in the work experiences of academic advisors.

### **Liminality**

As noted previously, liminality is a concept that can be used to describe periods of disequilibrium as people or institutions move from one set of expectations and structures to another. In the situation that was the focus of this study, the perspectives of the academic advisors revealed that institutions are still actively trying to fulfill their access mission while

giving new attention to the completion movement, even as their efforts in one area potentially sabotage their efforts in the other. Tasha observed and described this duality when she shared:

It's almost like you have . . . two different ideas, so if you're open access you're basically saying that anyone who wants to come to college can come to college. If they just want to take a class, they can take a class. If they want to take, you know, 7 years to finish an associate's degree, it's okay. But on the other hand, you have . . . time and a half, the 150% time you need to finish your degree. I think there would be a tension. It would be hard to try and balance that—to have a good graduation rate and have students finishing in time and a half, but then you have students [for] who[m] that's not their goal.

Jake described this feeling as “whiplash,” noting that he often wondered, “Is this the week I’m supposed to be worried about enrollment or is this the week we pretend to care about retention again?”

This sense of being held accountable for potentially conflicting goals was a cause of stress and frustration for advisors, including Angela who believed that there is a disconnection between the college’s stated desire to improve graduation rates and their willingness to change policies and procedures to achieve those goals:

Retention/completion [has] become a conversation [only] in the past few months. Surprisingly, retention has not been a focus [at] our institution. That has been very hard for me as an advisor who is very retention focused. However, policies and procedures are still very enrollment/numbers focused and not retention focused. It is

obvious that it is hard for administration and the enrollment/admissions team to let go of policies that help numbers but fail with retention efforts.

Using a liminality lens also helped make sense of the concern that some advisors feel about even having improved completion rates as a goal. For some advisors, this desire to measure success in terms of credentials feels like a betrayal of the community college mission. From this point of view, community colleges are supposed to be designed for students to gain easy entry and have easy exits as well. The idea that students could cycle in and out as their time, families, and finances dictate is something that sets community colleges apart from their 4-year counterparts. Thus, the idea of using the same measurements (i.e., graduation rates) to evaluate the success of both community colleges and universities is a concept that makes some advisors “question if we are trying to change our basic structure” (survey response).

Liminal times are inherently times of disequilibrium. Szakolczai (2009) provided a reminder that the concept of liminality has its roots in anthropology and the coming-of-age rituals of traditional society. With that understanding of liminality, an individual going into a liminal phase has a certain sense of predictability about the experience. Although the experience itself may not be pleasant, the initiates would have a clear sense that they were moving from a defined point A to a predictable point B. Guiding them through this experience would include clear expectations about behavior from those who had gone through it before them. Liminality was a short, discrete, and temporary situation.

In contrast, liminality as experienced by academic advisors, and for that matter the community college system as a whole, is different. Academic advisors perceive themselves as being asked to meet both old and new goals, even if those goals aren't congruent. There is

no sense of predictability (consider again Jake's feelings of "whiplash") and no sense that this period will be short lived or that those who are in charge of getting them from point A to point B know the way to get there. This understanding of liminality helps explain the tension, cynicism, and mistrust that persistently characterized the advisors' descriptions of administrators.

Although the focus of this research was on the academic advisors and not the administrators, it is easy to suspect that administrators are also in a liminal state as they seek to balance the need to have robust enrollment and improved completion rates. However, that is a subject for another researcher to explore.

### **Recommendations**

Although it is difficult to describe research in one sentence or less, the findings of this study can be summarized fairly quickly: The pursuit of improved graduation rates without a willingness to consider some limitations to traditional open access policies is a recipe for frustration and cynicism on the part of student services staff members. The completion movement is new, and it is not yet clear what progress will be made by 2020 or any of the other deadlines that have been set by various politicians and philanthropic organizations. That being said, the following ideas are recommended for practice and future research.

First, colleges attempting to create strategic goals around retention and completion should consider the following:

1. Ensure that the perspective of academic advisors is included in the planning process.
2. Create financial models that can identify the long-term fiscal effects of flattening enrollment in favor of improving retention. These models should be shared and

approved by relevant boards of trustees so that campus leadership has the ability to implement new policies and procedures without fear of losing the board's confidence if/when enrollment declines

3. Attempt to deal with the late registration problem first, prior to limiting access in other ways. Limiting the ability of students to register at or near the start of the semester is supported both by the literature and by student services staff members who may be tasked with explaining to prospective students why a late application might not be accepted.

Next, foundations involved in funding projects related to the completion agenda should consider the viability of funding programs designed to improve graduation rates but that don't address the access question.

Finally, there are several avenues for future research related to this study. These avenues include the following:

1. Explore in more depth the experiences of male versus female academic advisors.  
In the course of the study, it was discovered that female advisors are more likely than are their male counterparts to feel pressure to meet enrollment numbers, to feel that their work load is not manageable, and to feel more accountability for student success. In contrast, male advisors were found to be more likely to support limitations to access in the pursuit of improved graduation rates. This study wasn't designed to explore gender differences between student services staff members, but that may be a potential rich area of research.
2. Examine these same questions of access/completion from the point of view of administrators to determine to what extent they are aware of the disconnect



advisors feel. This study focused only on the access/completion tension from the advisor's perspective, and one of the themes that emerged was that there is significant mistrust of administrators.

3. Explore if there are differences in the experiences of advisors who work for colleges with homegrown completion plans versus those who work for colleges that are following a particular set of practices identified and supported by an external agency. Some of the study's participants identified themselves as working for "Complete College America" schools, although there was no specific question directed at that.
4. Examine the perspective of faculty members, who must also deal with the tension between access and completion as they seek to educate a diverse student body. Through their responses to this study's survey, advisors expressed doubts that retention is a faculty concern, whereas emerging research suggests that faculty members should play a more active role in the retention planning of community colleges. An examination of this issue from the faculty perspective would be a valuable addition to the literature.
5. Although it didn't emerge as a theme in this research, many states and community college systems are beginning to look more closely at the topic of reverse transfer as a potential means of improving completion rates. Currently, a student who transfers from a community college to a four year college prior to earning their associate's degree is currently counted as a non-completer for the community college. Under reverse transfer programs, a student's credits from the from the four year institution might be transferred back to the community college, allowing the

community college to confer a degree. How practices like this develop, are understood and perceived by advisors and students, and how they impact the completion movement is a rich vein for future research.

### **Additional Findings**

One of the pleasures of research is finding themes that one wasn't looking for that helps address research questions one didn't intend to ask. For this study, one of these findings relates to pride in the academic advisor role, specifically pride in working at a community college rather than at a 4-year institution. The idea that working at a community college instead of a 4-year institution was the result of an intentional choice emerged as a theme from the coding of the open-ended responses to the survey question "Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your feelings about or experiences working in a community college as an advisor." That choice was frequently explained using language that supports the idea that open access is valued by academic advisors:

- I think that a community college with open access is where democracy is grown at the street level. We are educating students [who] will support the next generation. I believe that access to education is critical for a strong civil society. I know that on a daily basis I am making a difference to the student, the department, the college, the community, and society in general. It is hugely rewarding. I only wish that we were compensated for this excellence.
- Having started as an advisor at a 4-year small university, I truly love working at a community college because I can provide resources and help to students who would not have the option of attending a university directly. I am passionate about the

community college mission to be accessible and provide extra assistance to students who are developing their skills.

- I love working at my community college. I would not trade it for anything. Every day is different. I enjoy the diversity of students. Most students here appreciate the fact that they are in college.

Another unexpected finding was that when advisors were asked to describe students who are likely to be successful versus students who are unlikely to be successful in the open access community college, their responses, once organized into codes, revealed an interesting dichotomy. Advisors described students who are likely to succeed in terms of *behavior*. Students likely to succeed were described as “stays organized,” “studies and asks for help,” “doesn’t work too much outside school,” “on time,” “sets and meets goals,” and “able to plan ahead.” In contrast, when asked to describe students who are unlikely to succeed, advisors used descriptions of *personal characteristics* instead. Top responses included “poor,” “minority students,” “first-generation students,” “unprepared,” and “unmotivated.” This finding, and what the implications are for how advisors advise students that they perceive as having the personal characteristics not associated with success, would be an interesting area for future research.

### **Final Summary**

This study was designed to explore a topic that is at the heart of community colleges: Who do they serve and how do they best serve them? Community college academic advisors are committed professionals who are passionate about serving students but frustrated about their working conditions and the expectations placed on them by internal and external pressure to be a part of the solution to the community college graduation problem.

Community colleges are at a crossroads, clinging to their access mission (and the robust enrollment numbers that have come with that) but facing the reality that far too many students are leaving with debt but no degree. In this liminal phase, there is tension keenly felt by those non-faculty members who work most directly with students: academic advisors.

There is no doubt that academic advisors are concerned about graduation rates but are also concerned about making sure that the most vulnerable populations continue to have access to higher education. This research can contribute to the ongoing national conversations about college completion so that their voices may be heard.

### **Personal Reflection**

When I began my doctoral studies in 2013, I knew that the dissertation was the final stage of a process of learning and research. Given that I had completed a lengthy thesis as part of my master's degree program, I felt that I had a sense of what completing a dissertation would require. I knew that I would choose a topic of interest and would explore it deeply, with the end goal that I would answer a question that nobody else had answered before. I knew that it would be hard intellectual work, requiring time and focused attention. I was right about that, of course, but I what I didn't expect was the ways in which the process of writing this study have changed me, for the better, both as a researcher and as a higher education professional.

As a researcher, I have had highs and lows in the course of working on this dissertation. I felt the satisfaction of watching survey responses flood in, ensuring that I would have an "N" I could be proud of. I wrestled with survey design and had the sinking feeling of realizing too late that there was a better way I could have asked a question or there was an additional question that might have made an answer to a research question more

robust. I spent hours transcribing and coding and observed as themes, both surprising and expected, emerged. Most importantly, I felt the thrill of discovery as unexpected findings revealed themselves to me and the satisfaction of feeling that I could confidently say that I had answered the questions I set out to answer.

A dissertation represents both an end and a beginning. Although this study marked the end of my life as a graduate student, it also marked the beginning of my future as a researcher. The experience of writing this dissertation gave me a sense of both confidence and humility when it came to my research goals for the future. I now know that, yes, I can do it. I can move from wondering about a topic to seeking to find an answer in the literature to forming research questions and designing a research plan. I also know now that quality research takes time, often much more time than I anticipated, and the ability to recognize one's own strengths and limitations as a researcher. The solitary nature of writing a dissertation made it clear to me why so many articles have more than one author!

I've had the good fortune to work in higher education for over 16 years, at institutions both large and small. The process of writing this dissertation has confirmed to me that I have a place here and contributions to make. When I look at my professional life over the last few years, I am struck by how much I've grown in the area of assessment and evaluation. I attribute this growth both to the coursework I've taken and to the improvement in my skills as a researcher and reader of research that came with writing a dissertation. I now approach the work that I do regarding program development, assessment, and evaluation in a more sophisticated and defined way, something that is making me more effective in my professional life.

Honesty compels me to acknowledge that there is, of course, a sense of relief at completing this project. This study dominated my thoughts and my time for a long time, and there is a part of me that rejoices to be at the finish line. But there is also a sense of something like sadness or perhaps impatience. I have new questions I want to answer now. I'm finished but just getting started.

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## APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4560  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 5/5/2015

**To:** Wendy Robinson  
4012 Pleasant Street  
Des Moines, IA 50312

**CC:** Dr. Larry Ebbers  
N256 Lagomarcino Hall  
Dr. Carol Heaverlo  
218 Carver Hall

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Community College Advising at the Crossroads

**IRB ID:** 15-177

**Study Review Date:** 5/1/2015

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

**You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**

**You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

**Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form.** A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that **approval from other entities may also be needed**. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu).

## **APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT INFORMATION**

(provided electronically and required an affirmative response to launch the rest of the survey)

This survey is part of a research project. This question contains information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who chose to take part- your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with Wendy Robinson (wendysueroobinson@gmail.com) before deciding to participate.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This is a study designed to explore topics related to open access admissions policies and completion and retention projects at the community college at which you are employed. This research will be used for completion of dissertation for Wendy Robinson, Iowa State University doctoral student.

### **Confidentiality**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subjects research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law the following measures will be taken: you will not be asked to provide your name, the name of your institution, your IP address will not be collected or stored, and your answers to the survey will only be seen by the primary investigator. All electronic records associated with this study will be encrypted and saved on a password protected site and computer.

### **What Will Be Done**

You will complete a survey, which will take about 15-20 minutes to complete. The survey includes questions about your work experiences as an academic advisors or counselor as well as some demographic questions. You will not be asked for your name or other personally identifiable information. Please refrain from using the name, location or other identifiable details about your self or your college when answering questions.

### **Benefits of the Study**

You will be contributing to the knowledge about how academic advisors view admissions policies as well as student retention efforts at community colleges but there will be no direct financial or other benefit to you. If you are interested in seeing the final report for this study, you may do so by emailing Wendy Robinson at wendy@iastate.edu.

**Risks or Discomforts**

No risks or discomforts are anticipated from taking this confidential survey. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may skip that question or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit at any time before you have finished the questionnaire, your answers will not be included in the final research.

**Decision to Quit**

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. If you do not wish to continue, you can simply leave this website. You may also choose to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

**Participant Rights**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions *about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury*, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

**How the Findings Will be Used**

The results of this study are for scholarly purposes only. The results of the study will be presented to a committee of faculty at Iowa State University as part of a dissertation defense. Results may also be shared at a professional conference and/or a professional journal in the field of higher education.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Wendy Robinson at [wendy@iastate.edu](mailto:wendy@iastate.edu) or [wendysuerobinson@gmail.com](mailto:wendysuerobinson@gmail.com).

**Indication of Consent**

By beginning this survey, you acknowledge that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. If you would like a written copy of this consent form please contact Wendy Robinson.

## APPENDIX C. SURVEY

### **Informed Consent**

This survey is part of a research project. This question contains information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who chose to take part- your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with Wendy Robinson (wendysuerobinson@gmail.com) before deciding to participate.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This is a study designed to explore how student services professionals in positions where they have regular, direct contact with students feel about their professional lives during the month of August and about their perceptions of students during the same month. This research will be used for completion of a dissertation project for Wendy Robinson, Iowa State University doctoral student.

### *Confidentiality*

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subjects research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law the following measures will be taken: you will not be asked to provide your name, your IP address will not be collected or stored, and your answers to the survey will only be seen by the primary investigator. All electronic records associated with this study will be encrypted and saved on a password protected site and computer.

### *What Will Be Done*

You will complete a survey, which will take about 15 minutes to complete. The survey includes questions about your work experiences as a student services professional as well as some demographic questions. You will not be asked for your name or other personally identifiable information.

### *Benefits of the Study*

You will be contributing to the knowledge about how new students transition into community colleges but there will be no direct financial or other benefit to you. If you are interested in seeing the final report for this study, you may do so by emailing Wendy Robinson at [wendy@iastate.edu](mailto:wendy@iastate.edu).

### *Risks or Discomforts*

No risks or discomforts are anticipated from taking this confidential survey. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you may skip that question or withdraw from the study altogether. If you decide to quit at any time before you have finished the questionnaire, your answers will not be included in the final research.

### *Decision to Quit*

Your participation is voluntary; you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. If you do not wish to continue, you can simply leave this website. You may also choose to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

### *Participant Rights*

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

*How the Findings Will Be Used*

The results of this study are for scholarly purposes only. The results of the study will be presented to a committee of faculty at Iowa State University as part of a capstone project and will be shared with the client, Des Moines Area Community College. Results may also be shared at a professional conference and/or a professional journal in the field of higher education.

*Contact Information*

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Wendy Robinson at [wendy@iastate.edu](mailto:wendy@iastate.edu) or [wendysueroberinson@gmail.com](mailto:wendysueroberinson@gmail.com).

*Indication of Consent*

By beginning this survey, you acknowledge that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. If you would like a written copy of this consent form please contact Wendy Robinson.

**Have you read the above information and consent to participation in this survey?**

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

**Do you currently work for a community, technical or junior college?**

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

**What title best describes your current position?**

- ☐ Academic Advisor (1)
- ☐ Counselor (2)
- ☐ Admissions or recruitment staff (3)
- ☐ New Student Orientation staff (4)
- ☐ Financial Aid Staff (5)
- ☐ Student Accounts staff (6)
- ☐ Welcome Desk, Information Center, Front Desk or Reception (7)
- ☐ Registration or enrollment staff (8)
- ☐ Other, please describe (9) \_\_\_\_\_

**How long have you held your current position?**

- ☐ Less than a year (1)
- ☐ One to three years (2)
- ☐ Three years or more (3)

**What is your sex?**

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)
- ☐ Other/ prefer not to answer (3)

**In what state do you work?****Would you describe the location of your campus as**

- ☐ Suburban (1)
- ☐ Rural (2)
- ☐ Urban (3)

**About how large is the college you work for (consider all campus locations)?**

- ☐ under 2,000 students (1)
- ☐ between 2,001 and 4,000 students (2)
- ☐ 4,001 to 9,999 (3)
- ☐ more than 10,000 (4)

**What is your best estimate of the percentage of students at your school who apply for financial aid (federal or any other sources)?**

- ☐ 25% or less (1)
- ☐ 26–50% (2)
- ☐ 51–75% (3)
- ☐ More than 75% (4)
- ☐ Unsure (5)

**What percentage of the students at your institution are non-White?**

- ☐ 25% or less (1)
- ☐ 26–50% (2)
- ☐ 51–75% (3)
- ☐ more than 75% (4)
- ☐ Unsure (5)

**What percentage of your students earn a certificate, diploma, or degree within 150% of their expected time frame for their program (for example, a full-time student who completes their associates degree in three years)?**

- ☐ 10% (1)
- ☐ 20% (2)
- ☐ 30% (3)
- ☐ 40% (4)
- ☐ 50% (5)
- ☐ 60% (6)
- ☐ 70% or more (7)
- ☐ unsure (8)

**How did you know the answer to the previous question?**

- ☐ asked supervisor or colleague (1)
- ☐ looked on institution website (2)
- ☐ estimated (3)
- ☐ checked IPEDS data (4)
- ☐ information had been provided to me previously (5)
- ☐ Other (6)

**Please describe how advising services are provided at your institution**

- ☐ advising is available on a walk-in basis only (1)
- ☐ advising is available by appointment only (2)
- ☐ advising is available on both a walk-in and appointment basis (3)

**What is the role of an academic advisor at your college? Please describe.**



**Please rank the following statements in order of importance to YOU, personally**

- \_\_\_\_\_ All students who wish to attempt higher education should be able to do so. (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ I feel responsible to make sure students understand the challenges of being a college student before they begin. (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Students who are unlikely to succeed should have their access to higher education limited (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making sure students graduate is an important part of my job (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ It is important to me that I acted ethically when advising students (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Enrolling as many students as possible is important to my institution (7)

**What must a student do to be admitted at your college? Do you consider your school to have "open access" policies?**

**Does your school currently have any application or enrollment deadlines? When is the last day (in relation to the start of the semester) that a new student may register?**

**Is student retention and completion a concern at your institution? If it is a concern, how does that shape policy and procedures?**

**What drives admissions and enrollment management policies at your college? Please describe.**

**Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:**

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strong agree (5)
All students can succeed (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My workload is manageable (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My workload is conducive to quality advising (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Too many of the students at my school need developmental education (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Making sure new students get registered for classes is a major part of my job. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students who come to my school can get the help they need to succeed (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student retention is a faculty issue (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The administration at my school is more concerned with enrollment numbers than student success (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am comfortable with current graduation rates for my school (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel pressure to make sure we meet institutional enrollment numbers (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like there is a moral dimension to my job. (11)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Sometimes I give students advice that I don't feel comfortable with (12)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel empowered to be honest with students if I don't think they are likely to succeed (13)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Providing access to all students who want to enroll is an important part of our mission (14)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When it comes to peak time (August/January) I am still able to provide high quality advising (15)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We knowingly admit students who are unlikely to succeed (16)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial concerns drive the decision making at my institution (17)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Most people who work at my institution are "student centered" in their decision making (18)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would support an application or enrollment deadline (19)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would support limiting admission to students who have demonstrated (via assessment, academic record or other method) an ability to benefit academically (20)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Please describe the characteristics of the students who are unlikely to succeed at your institution.**

**What is one thing your college could be doing to improve graduation rates that it is not currently doing?**

**What do you see as the biggest concerns for community colleges as a whole (please select no more than 3 options)**

- ☐ Rising tuition costs (1)
- ☐ Performance based funding trends (2)
- ☐ Current retention rates (3)
- ☐ Current graduation rates (4)
- ☐ Current transfer rates (5)
- ☐ The number of underrepresented students accessing higher education (6)
- ☐ Student loan default rates (7)
- ☐ Student debt levels (8)
- ☐ The number of students who are not academically prepared/ need developmental coursework (9)
- ☐ The number of adjunct versus full-time faculty members (10)
- ☐ The employability of graduates (11)
- ☐ State and local funding trends (12)
- ☐ The number of students with disabilities (13)
- ☐ The for-profit sector (14)
- ☐ Moves to limit access to higher education (15)

**Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements**

[illegible]

**What is your biggest work related stressor?**

**What is the most enjoyable part of your job?**

**Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your feelings about or experiences working in a community college as an advisor?**

**Please indicate your highest educational level completed**

- ☐ Associates degree (4)
- ☐ Bachelor level degree (5)
- ☐ Some graduate work (6)
- ☐ Completed Master's degree (7)
- ☐ PhD or EDD (8)

**Thank you for your participation. Please click the box below to submit your survey.**

**APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Having read and signed the informed consent form, do you feel comfortable beginning this interview?
2. Can you tell me a little about your work as an academic advisor? How long have you been an advisor? How large is your institution?
3. What do you enjoy most about your work?
4. What do you find most stressful about your work?
5. This study is looking at questions related to access and completion. What does the words “completion agenda” or “completion movement” mean to you?
6. What does “open access” mean to you?
7. What drives the decision making at your institution?
8. What guides how you interact with students?
9. Is retention and completion a priority at your school? How does that manifest itself, if yes?
10. Is there a moral dimension to your work?
11. Can all students succeed?