Online Master of Business Alumni Perceptions of Academic Advising: A Qualitative Narrative Inquiry Study

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Abstract

Academic advising plays a vital role in shaping the student experience and significantly impacts an institution's retention rate. When students establish a supportive relationship with an academic advisor, they feel more connected to their institution and are more likely to remain engaged. Identifying proactive strategies in online learners' interactions with academic advising can enhance learner satisfaction, improving student retention rates. This study used qualitative narrative inquiry to explore student perceptions through their stories regarding the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming and resources on their academic success in online Master of Business programs. The findings suggest that the academic advising relationship is essential for academic success and student retention in online programs. Advisors need to address the challenges facing students in their program and respond promptly and efficiently. Recommendations include stakeholders and policymakers in higher education institutions prioritizing academic advising and allocating resources to improve the student/advisor relationship. Training and improved resources for academic advisors can improve student experiences and increase student retention. Future researchers may wish to conduct similar studies with increased population sizes, different programs, and different program levels.

Keywords: *Academic Advising, Academic Advisor, Completion Rate, Online Learning, Student Retention, Student Satisfaction*

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Academic advising is a critical component of the student experience and significantly affects an institution's retention rate (Alzen et al., 2021). Students are more connected to their school and continue to participate when there is a relationship with an academic advisor providing academic support (Kinash, 2021). As students have a sense of belonging to their institution, they are less likely to drop out, which increases retention rates (Williams & Roberts, 2023).

Stakeholders within higher education, including the organization, current students, and future students, are impacted by retention rates due to the student experience with academic advising (Muljana & Tian Luo, 2019). When an institution has low retention rates, its financial resources may become limited, and it may be at risk of losing accreditation (Maldonado et al., 2021). Higher education institutions already deal with meager funding and high competition to attract future students (Sa, 2023). Currently enrolled students who do not have a relationship with their advisor do not feel supported and are more likely to drop out of the program, resulting in reduced retention rates (McGill et al., 2020). Low retention rates negatively influence prospective students, as knowledge of declining completion rates damages the institution's reputation (Williams & Roberts, 2023).

Although current research has addressed how academic advising has been associated with student retention efforts, more knowledge is needed regarding different types of students, such as online learners (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Online learning has exponentially increased; however, the completion rate is continually lower than in traditional classroom settings (Muljana & Tian Luo, 2019). By pinpointing proactive measures in online learners' interactions with academic advising, learner satisfaction and student retention rates can improve (Martin & Bollinger, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

Through their stories, this qualitative narrative inquiry study provided insights into student perceptions regarding the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming and resources upon their academic success in online Master of Business programs. Further exploration of students' experiences with online academic advising while obtaining their master's degree revealed the importance of academic advising in retaining students in their programs.

In this study, four research questions were used to explore student perceptions through their stories of the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming and resources upon their academic success in online Master of Business programs. Those are as follows:

RQ1 What perceptions do alumni of online Master of Business programs have towards efficacy of academic advising?

RQ2 What challenges do alumni of online Master of Business programs perceive as problematic with the efficacy of academic advising on their academic success?

RQ3 How do alumni of online Master of Business programs perceive their lived experiences through their stories regarding the efficacy of academic advising?

RQ4 How do alumni of online Master of Business programs narrate the efficacy of academic advising on student success and retention?

The research questions align with the study's purpose to understand the impact of the relationship between academic advising and student success and retention. The study revealed the academic advising experiences of alumni in online business programs and student retention. The results can inform and aid decisions in online higher education.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Bandura, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Bandura and Vygotsky emphasized how environmental factors influence personal behaviors (Kitchen et al.,2023; Macro, 2021). The theoretical framework focused on the environmental impact of the students' relationship with their academic advisors and their influence on students' academic success.

Self-efficacy theory, derived from Bandura's social cognitive theory, explains how external factors such as environment, motivation, and social influences shape behavior (Medaille et al., 2022). Academic advising serves as a key external force that motivates students to persist in their academic goals (Talbott, 2022) and actively engages them in their educational journey by addressing questions and troubleshooting academic challenges (Ramsey, 2022). Bandura (1997) emphasized the impact of social persuasion from authoritative figures, such as teachers, in fostering individuals' confidence in their abilities. Similarly, student support services, including online academic advising, help students feel secure in their academic progress and expectations (Sheu et al., 2022).

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) emphasizes the difference between what an individual can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance from a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher, peer, or advisor (Vygotsky, 1978). Online academic advisors play a crucial role in providing students with guidance and individualized support throughout their educational journey (Suarez & Beatty, 2022). As part of ZPD, Vygotsky introduced scaffolding, which enables knowledgeable individuals to support student learning and development (Shipton, 2022). By sharing knowledge, demonstrating skills, and leveraging personal experiences, advisors expand students' capacity for learning and growth (Jeeyoung Chun & Cennamo, 2022).

Literature Review

The literature review explored academic advising with a focus on online academic advising and its impact on student retention in higher education. A review of current student retention efforts, known areas of focus, and practices in curbing this obstacle was conducted. The advising role was assessed from the perspective of leadership, advisors, and students.

Higher education institutions function through interconnected academic and administrative systems, with academic advising serving as a crucial bridge between institutional operations and student success (McGill et al., 2020; Rubin, 2021). This is especially vital for online learning modalities as students are isolated and tend to rely on their independence (Seery et al., 2021). Advising plays a key role in student retention by providing personalized support that fosters a sense of connection and commitment to academic goals (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). First-year advising is particularly influential in shaping student persistence, and equitable access to advising services is essential for success (Yang et al., 2021; Soria, 2023). Additionally, advisors provide critical assistance to marginalized students, those struggling academically, and individuals adjusting to new academic environments, helping increase engagement and academic performance (Yang, 2021).

Academic advising is especially vital for online learners, who represent a growing segment of the student population (Talbott, 2022). Online students face unique challenges, requiring targeted support to maintain engagement and ensure retention (Martin & Bollinger, 2022). Advisors contribute significantly to fostering a sense of belonging and guiding students through career transitions, which is particularly beneficial for those entering unfamiliar fields (Talbott, 2022). Institutions must prioritize effective advising strategies, as they are integral to

student success, institutional retention efforts, and overall organizational longevity (Hart-Baldridge, 2020; Yang, 2021).

Leadership often views academic advising primarily as a service focused on course selection and student enrollment rather than a developmental tool for student learning (Menke et al., 2020). This limited perception creates a disconnect between leadership and advisors, as institutional leaders may not fully understand the complexity of the role or the workload advisors manage (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Leadership perspectives are often shaped by institutional priorities and financial considerations, emphasizing outcome-based metrics like student completion rates over the relational and developmental aspects of advising (Menke et al., 2020). However, leaders hold the power to implement meaningful changes, and advisors rely on them to conduct research and advocate for structural improvements that enhance the advising experience (Streufert et al., 2023).

Academic advisors view their role as essential to student success, yet they often feel undervalued and unsupported by leadership (Menke, 2020). They recognize the importance of individualized advising, tailoring their approach to different student populations such as adult learners and first-generation students (Survase & Johnson, 2023). Beyond providing accurate program information and policy guidance, advisors act as liaisons between students, faculty, and administration, ensuring smooth communication and problem-solving (Kapinos, 2021). Relationship-building is at the core of advising, helping students critically assess their goals and develop lifelong skills (Spratley, 2020). However, advisors frequently experience frustration due to unrealistic expectations, lack of consistent training, and increasing workloads, which can lead to burnout and high turnover, ultimately harming the student experience (Survase & Johnson, 2023). Despite these challenges, advisors see their work as transformative, fostering student growth beyond graduation rates and positively shaping their academic and career journeys (Hart-Baldridge, 2020; McGill, 2021).

Although academic advising has been extensively studied, there is a lack of research on students' perspectives, which is crucial since students are the central focus of advising (Alvarado & Olson, 2022). Martin and Bollinger (2022) shared how studies have been conducted regarding online students and learner satisfaction; however, few have focused on the relationship and building communities in a virtual setting and how that would impact student satisfaction. Students have varied expectations of their academic advisors, with adult learners requiring

personalized support tailored to their individual needs (Townley et al., 2023). Advisors play a vital role in helping students navigate program details, course selection, and transfer processes, which fosters a sense of confidence in their ability to complete their studies (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). While efficiency is appreciated, students place a higher value on a personalized, one-on-one approach and the ability to discuss academic and career goals (Alvarado & Olson, 2020; Survase & Johnson, 2023). Advisor turnover negatively impacts students, as they seek continuity in their relationships, which contribute to their sense of belonging and trust in the institution (Yenney, 2020). Students, particularly in online programs, rely heavily on their advisors for support, feeling that consistent and compassionate advising increases their persistence and success (Alzen et al., 2021). The advisor-student relationship, characterized by accessibility, dependability, and expertise, plays a key role in student engagement and degree completion (Liu et al., 2022).

Study Procedures

Research commenced by recruiting through social media site platforms, with prior approval from social media site moderators to seek participants. Once participants were identified, they were sent a consent form. This document included the purpose of the study, participant eligibility, the time requested of the participant, the data collection process, a voluntary statement with the right to withdraw, and how the results would be used. Six participants who had completed their degree within the last three years from a fully online Master of Business program were selected based on the eligibility requirements. Consent was obtained through video conferencing after reviewing the informed consent documents.

Following the recruitment process, initial interviews were conducted via video call utilizing an interview protocol. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for review, allowing for data credibility through member checking. Second interviews ensured participants' responses were accurately captured and provided further insights into participants' experiences. Data analysis was performed through manual coding and Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) using NVivo Pro.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced with two open-ended semi-structured narrative interviews. The first interview was approximately 60 minutes long, followed by a follow-up interview of approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom

videoconferencing in the participants' natural setting. This option allowed the researchers to record and receive a transcription of the interview. Before the interviews started, verbal consent was obtained from the participants to record the interview and confirm if they had any questions about the process. Throughout the interview, electronic journaling pertaining to the participant's responses and any visual or silent cues was noted. After the first interviews, follow-up interviews with the same participants were conducted to allow participants to provide additional insights or information regarding academic advising. Data shared by the participants was reviewed by the individual participants through member checking.

Data Analysis

Once interviews were conducted and participants confirmed accurate transcriptions, data were analyzed through manual and CAQDAS coding using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. This option involved several steps, including data familiarization, systematic data coding, generation of themes, review and continued development of themes, refining and naming themes, and producing a report.

The transcript recordings were read and listened to in great detail multiple times to thoroughly absorb the collected information by the researchers. Field notes were taken during this process, and interesting insights were highlighted. The researchers practiced reflexivity by being self-aware of their assumptions, biases, and qualitative positionality that may impact the interpretation of the data due to their prior experience in higher education, including being an academic advisor, as well as through the lens of a student and interacting with their academic advisor.

Initial codes were generated based on highlighted words, patterns, key phrases, repetitions, and commonalities supporting a theme. Immersion in the data resulted in an initial 130 codes. During this initial coding phase, the researchers maintained an open mind while reviewing the transcripts, allowing any potential idea or phrase to be coded. Through subsequent reviews, the researchers continued to assess the codes, combining or eliminating any redundancies. This refinement process reduced the number of codes to 36. Continued analysis resulted in themes and subthemes as codes joined in common meaning.

With the research questions in mind, the codes, patterns, and perspectives from the narratives led to the emergence of the final themes. Research questions were adequately

addressed and aligned with the themes. Themes were heightened with substantiated participant quotes and extracts. The result was nine themes across four research questions.

The themes that answered the research questions are: online advisor accessibility affects student support, advisor personality impacts advising effectiveness, advisors struggle to support students due to their caseload size, advisors lack empathy impacting students feeling supported, advisors lack appropriate resources to be academically successful, alumni highly value personal connection with their advisor, alumni express concerns for reactive advising, tailored communication is vital for student success, and advisor relationship greatly impacts student success and retention. The data analysis results produced insights into the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming and resources on student success in online Master of Business programs. Table 1 showcases the research questions and emergent themes created throughout the data analysis process.

Table 1

Totals of Emergent Themes for Research Questions 1-4

Research Question	Emergent Themes	Reference Count (number of times the theme was referenced)	Frequency (number of participants that referenced the theme)	Participant (participant(s) that referenced the theme)
RQ1	Theme 1: Online advisor accessibility affects student support	11	6	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
RQ1	Theme 2: Online advisor personality impacts advising effectiveness	4	4	P1, P3, P4, P6
RQ2	Theme 3: Online advisors struggle to support students due to their caseload size	5	4	P1, P2, P4, P6
RQ2	Theme 4: Online advisors lack empathy, impacting students feeling of support	7	4	P1, P2, P3, P6
RQ2	Theme 5: Online advisors lack appropriate resources to provide students to be academically successful	11	5	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
RQ3	Theme 6: Alumni highly value personal connection with their online advisor	11	4	P3, P4, P5, P6
RQ3	Theme 7: Alumni express concerns about reactive online advising	7	3	P1, P2, P6
RQ4	Theme 8: Tailored communication is vital for student success	8	5	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6
RQ4	Theme 9: Online advisor relationship greatly impacts student success and retention	10	6	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6

Results

Research question 1 focused on alumni of online Master of Business programs' perceptions of the efficacy of academic advising through their stories. Two themes developed from the data are that advisor accessibility affects student support and that advisor personality impacts advising effectiveness. These themes aligned with existing literature highlighting the importance of online learners' need for individualized support and academic advisor behaviors impacting the student relationship.

Theme 1: Online Advisor Accessibility Affects Student Support

The first theme is that online advisor accessibility affects student support. All participants shared how their advisor's accessibility affected their feelings of support. Half of the participants shared how their advisor was easily accessible, and they could go to them with any concerns. Participant 3 shared:

> I had a great advisor through my master's program, and she called me weekly. I reached out to her with any other concerns during my program. She was very accessible; if she were out of town, she would still keep in contact with me or have me talk to somebody else. So, she was very accessible to me, and she made time for me.

However, three alumni shared their frustrations about not being able to contact their advisor, which impeded their ability to move forward in their academics. Participant 1 expressed their frustrations:

> I did have an academic advisor that was assigned, but she never reached out. So, I guess I would have been okay with anybody, somebody. It was on me to reach out if they were available, it was a one-way interaction. They never proactively reached out to me.

The accessibility of online advisors played a significant role in students' experience of support. While some participants experienced highly accessible advisors who maintained consistent communication, others faced challenges. The absence of advisor engagement left some students feeling unsupported and hindered their academic progress.

Theme 2: Online Advisor Personality Impacts Advising Effectiveness

Participants articulated how the advisor's personality impacts the effectiveness of their advising experiences. Participant 1 shared their experience:

> I don't know how many people were aligned with this advisor, but you don't get to build that personal relationship, and she didn't proactively try to build it with me. I feel there

are problems. I don't think you can be efficient unless you know somebody, like their background, history, and personality. It's impersonal, and they don't know you.

Participant 4 echoed this experience by highlighting how the online advisor's lack of personality caused them not to want to listen to any recommendations they offered. When online advisors lacked warmth and authenticity students were less likely to trust their guidance or feel connected. A personable and approachable advisor can significantly enhance the online advising experience.

Research question 2 examines the challenges that alumni of online Master of Business programs perceive as problematic, with the efficacy of academic advice on their academic success. Three themes emerged from the data: online advisors struggle to support students due to their caseload size, advisors lack empathy, impacting students' feeling supported, and online advisors lack appropriate resources to help students be academically successful.

Theme 3: Online Advisors Struggle to Support Students Due to their Caseload Size

Most participants indicated notions of online advisors struggling to support their assigned students due to their assigned caseload amount. Participant 4 articulated their experience:

I did not have the best advisor at the beginning of my master's program. She was unavailable. I don't know if she was overwhelmed with the number of students she was in charge of, but I did many things on my own. If they have too many people, there's no way they can pay attention to all of those students and be effective for every one of them.

Participant 2 mirrored this sentiment, "My perception is that online advisors have a substantial caseload. The result is that they have very little time to devote to ad hoc, tailored, or real thought behind the communication." Participant 1 underscored the significance of online advisors struggling to support their caseload size, "I guess I just feel that I wasn't a priority. She was overwhelmed by the number of students assigned to her. That stuck out, not in a positive way." Predominantly, participants felt like just a number to their online advisor, emphasizing the struggle advisors faced in managing large caseloads. The overwhelming number of students assigned to each advisor made it difficult to provide individualized support, leaving many students to navigate their academic journey alone. To ensure students feel supported, online advisors need manageable caseloads that allow for meaningful engagement and personalized guidance.

Theme 4: Online Advisors Lack Empathy Impacting Students Feeling Supported

Regarding the challenges alumni perceive as problematic with the efficacy of online academic advising, participants highlighted a lack of empathy and feeling supported. Participant 4 expressed frustration:

I had a lot of family loss. I went multiple weeks without logging in for schoolwork because I was trying to stay alive. I let him know I don't have the mental capacity right now for phone calls. If you could check in through emails? He would continue to call and leave messages even though I reminded him multiple times. And my mental health was draining, and it stressed me out. For my specific case, I think more compassionate interest is needed. Like saying, how can I help you? What's going on? What do you need from me?

Participant 2 emphasized the necessity for online advisors to ask questions to get to know them and their strengths and have an impactful conversation. Participant 3 shared, "Some mentors were not supportive, reliable, condescending, or rude, I just don't know. This one was belittling." Participants expressed concerns about a lack of empathy and genuine support as significant challenges in academic advising. Many felt their advisors did not take the time to understand their personal circumstances, strengths, or needs, leading to stressful and unhelpful interactions. Without compassionate engagement, students struggled to feel supported, reinforcing the need for advisors to foster meaningful and considerate relationships.

Theme 5: Online Advisors Lack Appropriate Resources to Provide Students to be Academically Successful

Participants reported that their online academic advisors lacked appropriate resources to help them be successful in their online Master of Business program. Participant 5 expressed their experience, "If I hadn't worked through it, it would have put me behind waiting for that. I wish my advisor were maybe a little more familiar with the courses." Participant 6 emphasized the importance of advisors having an arsenal of resources:

If they have the knowledge and the training and the ability to say, alright I think maybe you could benefit from talking to somebody about this. Here are some resources for that. They don't have to be the person, but they could steer you in the right direction. Here are some resources for mental health. Here are some resources if maybe they have picked up

that a student has an addiction or some financial coaching resources. Extra attention and care can greatly impact students' success.

Participants shared that their academic advisors lacked the necessary resources to effectively support their success in the online Master of Business program. Many felt online advisors should be more familiar with course content and have a toolkit of resources to guide students toward academic and personal support. Providing online advisors with proper training and access to relevant resources impacts student success and overall advising effectiveness.

Research question 3 expresses how alumni perceive the efficacy of online academic advising through their lived experiences. Participants were asked an assortment of questions to gain insight based on their stories. Two themes emerged: alumni highly value personal connection with their online advisor, and alumni express concerns about reactive advising.

Theme 6: Alumni Highly Value Personal Connection with their Online Advisor

Building connections with their online advisor resonated with many of the alumni. Participant 5 shared how they were going through a personal rough month, and their online advisor was supportive and understood that life has ups and downs. They built a connection with the students to support them where they were. Participant 4 remarked, "He was willing to share his personal story of how he got to where he was and his goals alongside mine. He liked to develop an actual relationship more than just trying to ensure you knew your program's outlines." Participant 6 said:

> We are more than just our academics and the tests we take. We're human and we all need connection. If an online advisor can do that, I think that makes a huge difference. I think it can make or break students. Advisors play an important role in online education, especially when it's fully online. Some of them could use a little more human connection, personal training.

Alumni emphasized the importance of building a personal connection with their online advisors, as it greatly influenced their academic experience. Many valued advisors who took the time to understand their challenges, share personal experiences, and foster genuine relationships beyond academic guidance. This human connection was seen as crucial in online education, where students often rely on advisors for both academic and emotional support.

Theme 7: Alumni Express Concerns for Reactive Online Advising

Participants expressed concerns for reactive online advising based on the stories they shared. Participant 2 stated:

> The advisor appeared to be almost purely reactive and did not appear to be someone who would help you set a goal or help you meet the goal. I could have done absolutely without the canned responses, programmatic check-in policy-based like you are part of my book of business; therefore, I'm going to do X, Y, and Z things, which are not useful at all.

Participant 6 and 1 shared similar stories of online advisors not proactively reaching out but only aiding them to enroll in the next class at the last minute. Many felt their interactions were transactional and lacked meaningful guidance, leaving them without the help needed to set and achieve their academic goals.

Research question 4 explored how alumni narrate the efficacy of online academic advising on student success and retention. Through their stories, two themes were developed: tailored communication is vital for student success and the advisor relationship significantly impacts student success and retention.

Theme 8: Tailored Communication is Vital for Student Success

Tailored communication was highlighted by most of the participants, with five out of six sharing its importance for student success. Participant 4 shared:

> He could instruct differently, like he could see that maybe one person needed it this way and somebody else needed it differently. We stayed in touch a lot by email. Phone calls are sometimes hard because they don't always come when I'm ready to talk and have a million questions, but email was good. Anytime I had a question I could email, and I'd have a response rather quickly.

Participant 5 appreciated that their advisor communicated on a level conducive to their needs and adjusted modalities to what they needed. Participant 2 said:

> Advisors with less tailored communication, I did not care about them at all. I didn't always answer the phone, send an email, or don't care about the communication, so I didn't always respond to the communication. I had positive feelings towards the last one because the communication was significantly more tailored, and the person seemed to care a lot more.

Participants emphasized that tailored communication is essential for student success, with most sharing its significant impact on their academic experience. Many valued online advisors who adapted their communication methods to fit individual needs, whether through email, phone calls, or other modalities. When advisors personalized their approach, students felt more supported and engaged, fostering a stronger connection and a more positive advising experience.

Theme 9: Online Advisor Relationship Greatly Impacts Student Success and Retention

The online advisor relationship impacting student success and retention emerged as a pivotal theme, with all six participants expressing its significance. Participant 3 remarked:

> She helped me continue the program by guiding, counseling, supporting me, and just being there to talk to. Sometimes, you need that support and encouragement to continue because you have to believe in yourself. I feel that's the purpose of the advisor. I told her that I wouldn't have been as successful in this program without her guidance, I was very appreciative.

Participant 5 concurred with the following:

> I think that her encouragement, her understanding, and giving me the space when I needed the space and helping reel me back in when I needed it, I think that absolutely helped me finish the program. Because there were a few moments where I'm like, I don't think I can do this, and she helped.

Participant 2 shared the opposite, "Not loving the interaction with the advisor and just being kind of defiant because the interactions held no value that I definitely could have fallen out of the program."

Participants emphasized that the online advisor-student relationship plays a crucial role in student success and retention. Supportive and engaged advisors provided encouragement, guidance, and motivation, helping students navigate challenges and persist in their programs. Conversely, when advisor interactions lacked value or connection, students felt less motivated and were at greater risk of disengaging or dropping out.

Implications

The findings emphasized the crucial impact and influence that academic advising has on student success and retention in online Master of Business programs. By prioritizing online academic advising within higher education, organizations can nurture academic advisor/student relationships and cultivate connections leading to improved student success and retention.

Additionally, the study stresses meaningful professional development for online advisors and practical efforts between leadership and stakeholders to allocate resources to foster improved relationships between students and their online advisors.

Recommendations for Future Practice

The findings of this study add to existing research on graduate online academic advising and its impact on student success and retention. The findings suggested that alumni of online Master of Business programs perceive the efficacy of academic advising as impactful and influential on student success and retention. The participants indicated that advisor relationships are vitally important for their academic success and shared their perceptions regarding the problematic challenges of advising. Participants noted that challenges include caseload size, lack of empathy, and lack of appropriate resources. Another result is that accessibility, personal connection, and tailored communication may influence advisor/student relationships, impacting student success and retention. The four recommendations for future practice are as follows: stakeholders allocate resources within their organization to enhance online academic advising efforts, leaders collaborate to improve current online academic advising practices and policies, incorporate training and improvement for academic advising, and ensure advisors are aware of the impact they make on their students.

The first recommendation is for stakeholders within higher education organizations to develop practical online academic advising requirements within their programs. As higher education institutions have meager funding and are competitive to attract future students, they need to focus on the student-advisor relationship in an effort to curb student retention (Sa, 2023; McGill et al., 2020). These individuals can allocate university resources to improve student and advisor relationships. Academic advising must be viewed as important as the faculty teaching the courses.

The second recommendation is for leaders/managers to increase online academic advising programs by looking at manageable caseload sizes and ease of access for students to their advisors. Equitable access to an academic advisor is important for students to overcome barriers in their program (Soria, 2023). Expanding the frequency of academic advising increases student engagement and extends their graduation date. With increased accessibility to academic advisors, online students will have their individual needs met (Martin & Bollinger, 2022). Leaders could work with policymakers and stakeholders to instill a sense of shared priorities,

emphasizing the importance of the student-advisor relationship in online student success; this could increase the perceived value of the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming.

The third recommendation is to incorporate training and improvements for online academic advisors. The findings highlighted a lack of training and improvement in academic advising, specifically understanding empathy and its impact on the student-advisor relationship and knowing appropriate resources to guide students. Online advisors who engage in the relational components help students feel valued and build trust. As students feel invested in their advisor by building rapport, they are open to guidance and motivate students to succeed (McGill et al., 2020; McGill, 2021). Program information and referring students to correct resources in a timely fashion dramatically impact student success (Hart-Baldridge, 2020). Trainers and managers can review current training practices for their advisors and improve in areas that require additional professional development. Trainers and managers may need to collaborate with departments to ensure appropriate resources are available for advisors to share with their students.

The fourth recommendation is for advisors to be aware of their impact on their students. Having a caring and compassionate advisor helps humanize the experience and students feel more comfortable (Liu et al., 2022). Online advisors can self-reflect and check if they have tailored their communication to each of their individual students. Advisors may review their caseload to see if they have had personal connections with their students which may influence the cadence of outreaches to their population. Students count on quality conversations with an advisor that are not just transactional (Streufert et al., 2023). Advisors play a crucial role in student success; student retention increases as they build relationships.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study contributed to alumni's experiences, perspectives, and perceptions regarding the efficacy and impact of online academic advising and student retention in an online Master of Business program. Similar studies could be performed with different program types or different program levels through future research. This study was conducted using only the online Master of Business program participants. Any additional program subjects or program levels could enhance the findings and results. Future researchers may want to study the results of another program, for example, psychology, education, or health.

Second, future researchers may want to compare the results of this study for an online master's program to the results of an online bachelor's program or even an online doctorate program. The study's findings did not consider brick-and-mortar environments that may present different academic advising needs and strategies. In this study, a global perspective was not included.

This study was conducted with six alumni of online Master of Business programs. Conducting a study with a larger participant group could provide additional details, perceptions, and stories regarding the efficacy and impact of online and student retention. In addition, using a population that has experienced academic advising programming in both online and brick-and-mortar modalities may provide additional findings and results. Lastly, a study pertaining to attrition could be beneficial, as this study focused on student retention.

Conclusion

This qualitative narrative inquiry study explored stories, perceptions, and experiences regarding the efficacy and impact of academic advising programming and resources for alumni of online master of business programs. The findings highlight online academic advisors' importance in student success and retention. Themes extracted from the data emphasized crucial elements, including online advisor accessibility affects student support, advisor personality impacts advising effectiveness, advisors struggle to support students due to their caseload size, advisors lack empathy impacting students feeling supported, advisors lack appropriate resources to provide students to be academically successful, alumni highly value personal connection with their advisor, alumni express concerns for reactive advising, tailored communication is vital for student success, and the advisor relationship significantly impacts student success and retention.

The findings suggest that alumni of online Master of Business programs view academic advising as a crucial factor influencing student success and retention. Participants emphasized the importance of online advisor relationships while identifying challenges such as large caseloads, lack of empathy, and insufficient resources. Key insights indicate that accessibility, personal connection, and tailored communication enhance advisor-student relationships. To improve online academic advising, institutions should allocate resources to strengthen advising efforts, manage caseloads to ensure students have equitable access to support, and enhance training for advisors particularly in empathy and resource awareness. Recognizing the impact of advisors on student outcomes is essential, as meaningful interactions and personalized

communication contribute to higher engagement and retention. A collaborative approach among stakeholders, leaders, and online advisors is necessary to improve academic advising and reinforce its role in supporting online student success.

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