Advising Experiences and Needs of Online, Cohort, and Classroom Adult Graduate Learners

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Although a majority of graduate students fall under the definition of adult learners (over age 24 years), many traditional institutions do not offer advising specific to them, nor do they recognize advising needs of these older students in online, classroom, or cohort situations. In this phenomenological study, 9 adult graduate learners were interviewed, 3 from each learning environment, to understand and explain the perceived advising needs and experiences within and among learning environments. Findings suggest that adult learners, regardless of learning environment, require complex and holistic advising. Five themes of good graduate advising are discussed. The need for immediate advisor response varied with respect to participants' learning environments. Implications for practice are discussed.

[doi:10.12930/NACADA-13-044]

KEY WORDS: adult learners, cohort advising, graduate students, online advising

Current student support systems foster growth and assimilation for traditional college undergraduates; however, many ignore the unique characteristics of adult graduate learners and rarely address student groups independently. Additionally, universities have adopted new learning opportunities such that graduate learners may study in cohorts or online. Although the college student population has diversified, advising systems have remained largely unchanged.

Light (2001) concluded, "Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. B11). This axiom may ring especially true for adult graduate learners and those studying online or in a cohort, all of whom have been insufficiently researched. Very little has been published to identify specific advising needs of these individuals because investigations on graduate students have focused primarily on collaboration with regard to a thesis or dissertation. Furthermore, the literature addressing online study primarily emphasizes the role of instructors over advisors, and cohort advising has been directed at the cohort members' largely recognized reliance on one another over a university appointed advisor. In addition, many university policy makers have inaccurately assumed that adult or graduate learners do not require as much advising as do traditional-aged undergraduates (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Potthoff, Dinsmore, & Moore, 2001; Wiesenberg, 2001).

In this phenomenological study, we sought to understand the advising experiences of nine adult graduate learners in three learning environments. To this end, we asked: What are the perceived advising experiences and needs of graduate learners who study primarily online, in a classroom, or within a cohort?

Graduate learners were conceptualized as adult learners over 24 years old completing at least 80% of their graduate course work exclusively in a classroom, cohort, or online environment. Table 1 offers a distinction between an online, cohort, and classroom learner based on the current practices of the studied university.

Graduate Student Advising

A majority of graduate students may also be classified as adult learners; that is, they are older than 24 years with commitments and responsibilities outside of higher education. Current literature on advising does not reflect exploration of common advising needs specifically among graduate students. Instead, research on graduate learners describes advising through the progression and completion of students' theses or dissertations (e.g., Faghihi, 1998; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Polson, 2003; Selke & Wong, 1993). Specifically, no one has looked at advising as a holistic practice or discussed the programmatic role of advising as they relate to graduate students.

In a 2003 qualitative study, Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill identified themes among graduate students who were and were not satisfied with their advising experiences. Satisfied students noted that they had chosen their advisors. Their advisors held regular and frequent meetings, were readily available, offered career and academic guidance, demonstrated an interest in their

Table 1. Definition and distinction of on-campus, online, and cohort learners

Learning Environment	Study Definition	Unique Advising Characteristic
On-campus	Graduate students completing at least 80% of their graduate degree course work in a classroom setting at the identified university.	Students are frequently on campus and readily have physical access to the university and their advisors.
Online	Graduate students completing at least 80% of their graduate degree course work online and geographically distanced from the identified university.	Students maintain no in-person contact or interaction with their advisors and are geographically distanced from the university.
Cohort	Graduate students completing at least 80% of their graduate degree course work as part of a cohort geographically distanced from the identified university.	A small set of students go through the program together, follow the same program of study, take each course together, and live in the same geographic area. However, the entire cohort is distanced from the university and advisors. Students may meet in person with their advisors between one and two times through the duration of their degree program.

students' research, and encouraged professional engagement by treating students like colleagues. In contrast, those who related negative advising experiences had been assigned advisors who held infrequent meetings (identified as fewer than two per semester), demonstrated no knowledge of students' research topics, and did not treat students like equal partners (Schlosser et al., 2003). Outside of the aforementioned research, much of the literature on graduate student advising is significantly dated (e.g., Berg & Ferber, 1983; Grives & Wemmerus, 1988; Magoon & Holland, 1984; Witters & Miller, 1970).

Advising the Adult Learner

Many studies that focused on adult learner advising did not specify the pursued degree (undergraduate, graduate, professional) of the study participants. Instead, the researchers discussed the experience of the learners in relation to their age (Allen, 1993; Council on Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2000; Flint, 2005; Frey, 2007; Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

Adult learner advising experiences have been positively correlated with retention, persistence, and alumni donations (CAEL, 2000; Flint, 2005; Frey, 2007; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Lowe & Toney, 2000; Noel-Levitz, 2008; Noel-Levitz & CAEL, 2011). Crisp (2010) reported a positive association between one's advising experience and his or her grade-point average (GPA), classroom performance, ability to think critically, persistence, future aspirations, and confidence to succeed academically. However, Noel-Levitz (2008) identified advising as one of the four most poorly addressed priorities of adult learners; of all the factors identified for meeting their goals, students reported advising as their greatest need and the area with which they were most dissatisfied.

Learner Populations: Classroom, Cohort, and Online Students

Literature on student advising generally describes needs of undergraduate learners who primarily study on campus. Little research has been devoted to the common, distinct advising needs among graduate students, online learners, or those studying in a cohort with the exception of those studies that have explored the need for graduate advising with regard to completion of a dissertation or thesis (e.g., Faghihi, 1998; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Polson, 2003; Selke & Wong, 1993).

Much of the research related to online study describes class management and student persistence rates, not advising needs. The small, dated body of research about online advising states that a good online advisor responds to the needs and competing demands of students (Granger & Benke, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001), assists in identifying resources, helps set an academic plan,

supports students coping with distance education, adds to students' online study skills, sets short-term immediate goals, encourages personal evaluation (Granger & Benke, 1998; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003), demonstrates familiarity with various computer software and advising media, and offers career counseling (Granger & Benke, 1998). They also had been trained specifically on ways to advise online learners (Beaudoin, 1990; Granger & Benke, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001).

A cohort is comprised of a group of students moving together through their courses and programs of study with a shared graduation date (see, e.g., Chairs, McDonald, Shrover, Urbanski, & Vertin, 2002; Fenning, 2004; Imel, 2002). The literature addresses the benefits and drawbacks of cohort learning, but does not discuss the advising needs of the participating individuals. The authors who discussed the role of student leaders and the responsibility of cohort instructors paid no attention to the role of academic advising (Potthoff et al., 2001). Additionally, the studies rarely discuss the location or geographic dispersion of the studied cohorts.

The literature has provided an abundance of information on effective advising for traditional, undergraduate, and classroom learners as one group. These past investigations have quantified students' advising experiences as well as the various positive student outcomes associated with good advising and have established predetermined categories of good advising in the absence of theoretically based conceptualizations (e.g., Frost, 1993; Lloyd & Bristol, 2006; Marques & Luna, 2005; Sorrentino, 2007; Stokes, 2008; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004; Zimmerman & Danette, 2007). Past survey research on specific learners typically replicated researchers' perceived understanding as experienced or established prior to administration of the instrument. To add and update the current knowledge base, we describe the experience of advising through the lens of adult graduate learners across three learning environments.

Design of Study

This phenomenological exploration was designed to provide understanding of the shared advising experiences and needs of nine adult graduate learners. We also describe the importance and variation of themes within and among three learning groups: classroom, online, and cohort. To date, literature has not demonstrated exploration on the relation of advising needs to one's medium of study, nor has it identified the possible dual needs of an adult learner studying in a nontraditional environment.

Participants and Setting

Nine adult learners seeking a master's degree were recruited within a department of education at one public university in the upper Midwest. Advisee lists were obtained from three faculty members who advised students across all three media: through the Internet, in a classroom, or in a cohort. Using this list, we employed stratified sampling procedures to select students who were both over 24 years old and completing at least 80% of their course work in one of the three media.

We needed to interview students within the same department. This restriction ensured that identified differences described the learning environments and not the culture or advising requirements of particular departments.

Nine participants comprise an adequate sample size for a clear, in-depth description of the perceived advising experiences among a small group of learners. Creswell (2007) stated that in a phenomenological study "between 5 and 25 participants" (p. 61) are required, while Morse (2000) reiterated that one may rely on a smaller sample size if (a) the topic is clear; (b) the questions are obvious for those being interviewed; (c) a significant amount of data (conversation) will be forthcoming from each participant; and (d) the interview has been designed to produce a significant amount of information (pp. 3–5).

Research Methods

One-on-one interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants. The interview protocol illustrated a semi-structured design of inquiry, was reviewed by colleagues, and tested in two pilot interviews (see Appendix A). Students studying online or in a cohort completed their interviews over the phone or through Skype (an electronic video messaging system). All interviews were audio recorded. Following data review, all nine participants were again contacted for follow-up and clarification of responses. The Institutional Review Board of the institution approved the research, and fictitious names are used to protect confidentiality.

Relevant artifacts related to master's degree student advising in the Department of Education were also reviewed as a data source. Documents,

as mentioned by interviewees or identified through interview transcripts, were obtained and reviewed to test the reliability of the data (e.g., student handbooks, participants' programs of study, requests for a permanent advisor).

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis as a guide. This approach is utilized to report experience, meaning, and the reality perceived by participants without limiting interpretation to themes supported by a predetermined, potentially irrelevant, theory.

We classified data into 100 unique codes after removing duplicative titles. We used a pattern coding method called "categorization," and 10 categories emerged. Categories were reviewed for patterned relationships, which yielded five themes. Data were again reviewed within the lens of each theme. The themes were bound by one central phenomenon. Member checking, triangulation, and peer review as well as a pilot study were all employed to reduce threat to study validity.

Findings

We undertook this research to determine if distinct advising needs were related to students' learning environment. Based on the varying characteristics of individuals described in the literature, we hypothesized that they may present distinct needs (Allen, 1993; CAEL, 1999, 2000; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Leonard, 2002; Merriam et al., 2007; Peck & Varney, 2009; Stokes, 2008). Students described similar characteristics of good advising but their conceptualization of *good* varied.

The following five themes of good graduate student advising and advisors were identified across learning groups: (a) Students need good advising to guide them through their program; (b) students trust the process of advising through their experiences with advisors; (c) good advisors see students as individuals and provide individualized advising; (d) good advisors believe good advising is imperative for student success; and (e) good advisors are readily available and immediate in response such that advising is timely. When cumulated, the five themes of good advising and advisors illustrate the importance of holistic and complex advising for graduate learners. However, within each theme, we found variation in the students' explanations relative to the medium of study. The variation found within each theme is presented to address the unique needs of those in the three graduate learning environments.

Shared Advising Needs

Good advising, by all definitions, reflects a complex process and requires a holistic approach by the advisor. The nine graduate learners all identified advising needs that fit in each of the five themes. Table 2 provides an example of the graduate students' descriptions of good advising related to each emergent theme.

Theme 1: Programmatic Guidance. Good programmatic advising was conceptualized through statements referring to the guidance, direction, scheduling, course selection, program assistance, policy knowledge, or paperwork information and support required by the students. Regardless of their learning environment, each student identified the importance of an advisor who had program knowledge and was able to set appropriate time lines while identifying the necessary courses. Deb explained that

> [The advisor] filled out the paperwork for me . . . guiding me through the whole program . . . [telling me] which classes to take. . . . As I went through the program she would change it for me for what I liked or didn't like and [was] somebody that I know will know what they are talking about.

In addition to assistance with course selection, deadline identification, and form completion, participants indicated that the advisor must demonstrate strong organizational skills, knowledge, and comfort with the program requirements and offer this guidance while working with the student. Deb explained: "If an advisor is knowledgeable about the curriculum and what classes need to be taken but does not take into account the student's perspective, I don't think that advisor would be as good."

Theme 2: Trust. Good advising was described as students' ability to trust the process of advising through the role of, and the relationship with, their advisor. Confidence in both the process and the individual were imperative for students' reported satisfaction.

The graduate learners stated that an advisor need not undertake any action or discussion to acquire the advisees' trust, but instead, must work to maintain their confidence. Mike shared:

Table 2. Themes of good advising: data support from all learning groups

	Learning Group		
Theme	**Online**	**Classroom**	**Cohort**
Programmatic Guidance	"She let me know at the beginning when we set up which classes I need to take and what semester I needed to take it. She also put like 'during each semester this form needs to be turned in' and like 'that form needs to be turned in' so she let me know."	The purpose of advising is "to provide guidance throughout the program so that the student is able to complete the correct course work in a timely manner and not make mistakes, take the wrong classes."	"We did my academic life plan . . . [and with] my unique circumstances with the grad school and having past classes, I would not have been able to handle that on my own."
Trust	"I usually figure she probably knows what she is doing. Um, I feel like she is an expert at what she does so I kind of take her advice as, you know, truth."	"I think a lot of it was just a need to trust her."	"The whole experience might not be as positive as just having a person to go to that I know I can trust and work with and that I know she is working to help me as much as she can too."
Individual	"She asked a lot of questions about my goals and where I am at now and where I want to be, and she just seemed like she was genuine in the questions."	She was "understanding where I was coming from—like my background, what I needed, what I wanted to get from my program of study and just listening to what I needed. . . . [I didn't feel like] I was being packed into a mold."	"She always said that, you know whatever makes you comfortable is what I, it's what will be done . . . . I want to be told up front what's best for me and not what's best for the college!"
Important	"I think that advising is important for all students—online learners or traditional students. An advisor is someone who you should be able to trust to provide you with assistance throughout your program."	"Good advising is important for quite a few reasons . . . it is very important for [the] advisor to take whoever they are working with you know, take them with commitment, with a lot of engagement and good will."	"It would be difficult to try to get through the program without an advisor who guides you through the different stages of the program."
Immediate/Electronic Communication	"As soon as I e-mailed her I got an e-mail back within a couple of hours . . . . If I don't find out the answer to my question soon I start worrying."	"I would e-mail and say 'what was it you said about this?' and she would e-mail back right away and so I have a hard copy like that and I can refer to it. . . . The session was just so available . . . worked around my schedule."	"Whenever I have a question she is always the first person that I e-mail, and we don't talk face-to-face hardly at all."

> She seemed like a trusting person and she obviously knew what she was talking about so that there, it doesn't take a lot for me to trust someone and I'm not saying that as a bad thing for her but, I don't know, she seemed trusting and I heard nothing but good things about her.

Students placed faith in advising as they all took advantage of this resource and found it necessary for their success and program management. Participants described trustworthy advising as informative, clear, concise, and accurate and indicated that it was used to provide guidance. They thought a good advisor demonstrated dependability and created a comfortable relationship with their advisees to foster a culture of trust.

Theme 3: Individual. According to the findings, good advisors see each student as an individual and provide personalized advice. They develop relationships with and come to know and understand advisees. They foster a collaborative approach to education and take time to involve each student in developing her or his academic plan.

One participant explained that good practice required identifying courses that "would better serve *me* throughout the progression of the program." All learners adamantly expressed the importance of an individualized plan, including time lines and course selections, not standard, universal plans for program completion. They insisted that good advising "put the student first" and ensures adult advisees did not "feel like one of 50 people that [the advisor] has to deal with."

Theme 4: Important. Participants stated they believed that they would have experienced hardship, excessive struggle, and the potential of noncompletion had they not received good advising. Their use of advising services and reliance on the advisor were predicated on a shared perception of the value of advising. Specifically, they discussed that advisors who recognize the advisees' perceived value of advising, along with a personal conviction of the importance of their role as an advisor, culminated in good advising.

Mike shared his realization that, although important for all students, "*good* advising is *essential* for graduate students." Mike did not speak to the significance of good advising specifically for those in his learning environment, but for all graduate learners. Amanda also noted that no matter how well written the graduate student handbook, "It would be difficult to try to get through the program without an advisor who guides you through the different stages of the program."

Theme 5: Immediate/Electronic Communication. Portable tools such as e-mail and text messaging on mobile devices have contributed to the accessibility of higher education from a distance. They have also changed student expectations of the primary mode of advisor–advisee communication and influenced adult learners' perceptions of adequate advisor response time. Graduate learners identified a good advisor as one who was readily available and willing to communicate frequently through e-mail (the preferred mode of communication). They explained that good advising was based on students' schedules and demonstrated when advisors addressed student questions and concerns within 24 to 48 hours.

Theme Variation Across Graduate Learning Environments

While the data illustrate a shared advising experience in which all graduate learners wanted a complex and holistic advising system, findings showed variation within each theme of need. With regard to programmatic guidance, online graduate learners put the most emphasis on the advisor serving as their primary and sole link to the university and all requirements. Cohort learners did not address needing such a link; rather, they expressed a desire for an advisor to offer clarification of university requirements. When discussing the university handbooks, a cohort learner shared that her advisor offered "more clarification on different things or resources that we could look up . . . more just like clear-cut direction to things." Finally, only classroom learners shared a need for their advisor to periodically check on their progress toward program completion.

The students trusted the university and their advisors. In fact, all nine learners appointed the temporary advisor assigned to them as their permanent advisor. However, only cohort and online learners discussed the importance of the university assigning advisors for them. For example, Amanda noted the ways her needs differed from those of her undergraduate on-campus experience:

> I knew a bunch of the professors and I knew the advisor so it was more easy for me to choose one there. Whereas when I was going to . . . [current university] I had no idea and

> so it was nice to have them hook me up with somebody.

Although all graduate students want individualized advising, online and cohort learners expected their advisors to remain flexible and understand the dueling roles of their advisees. Specifically, these two groups of participants indicated that they needed to access advisors outside of typical office hours and through various modes of communication; they also expressed a need for an advisor who could work with and negotiate student deadlines.

Classroom learners did not address flexibility; instead, they emphasized the advisor's role in provision of emotional support. Sara shared, "Having a strong relationship is really important . . . they need to know me! [It] is important too because that's the best way they can serve."

All graduate learners identified the importance of advising and expected the advisor to undertake their responsibilities seriously. The findings showed no variation across learning groups. Each student risked noncompletion or significant struggles had they not had good advising: "Good advising is important for graduate students because it could make or break your academic experience!"

Although all participants identified the need for a quick advisor response time, the conceptualization of *fast* depended upon the student's learning environment. Classroom learners needed to hear from their advisor within two days, cohort learners were willing to wait 24 hours for a response, and online learners required notification from their advisor within hours, would be frustrated after 24 hours, and would begin to significantly worry by the 48th hour.

Discussion

Historically, academic communities have not recognized graduate student adults as learners in need of distinct attention and advising that differs from that needed by undergraduates (Lau, 2003). However, learners whose advising needs remain unmet may feel lost and overwhelmed (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Furthermore, a limited body of research shows this population's advising needs in the contemporary online, cohort, and classroom environments. Central to our research on adult graduate learners' advising experiences and needs, two conclusions shift the archaic paradigm on educating adults and make a contemporary contribution to the literature: Regardless of learning medium, all adult graduate students require quality, holistic advising to meet educational goals, and the need for each important advising component varies depending on the learning environment of the student.

Quality and Holistic Advising

Consistent across all three learning groups, the findings show that students need quality, holistic advising for successful program completion. Supporting evidence for this need was documented across online, cohort, and classroom learning groups.

Students operationalized quality in advising largely by the personable attributes of the advisors and consistent incidences of fulfilled advisor responsibilities. Ultimately, students felt good advisors must demonstrate a passion to advise adults and share a vested interest and belief in practice. Edwards (2007) stated that the ability to offer a quality advising experience correlates to the advisor's passion, interest, skill, knowledge, and personality. The adult graduate learners in our study identified the same essential characteristics as Edwards described but did not put them in a hierarchical nor selective context.

Using a circular reasoning paradigm, we thus conclude that quality advising is holistic. That is, adult graduate learners across all three learning groups needed their advisors to provide good programmatic guidance they could trust, care about them as individuals, and remain readily available with timely responses. In sum, students need their advisors to demonstrate all these qualities, not parts of the whole.

Unfortunately, not all adult graduate learners receive holistic advising due to misconceptions or discrepant findings in the research. For example, the leading misconception is based on the falsehood that adult graduate learners are "self-supporting and do not need the same level of supports as 18–23 year olds" (CAEL, 2000, p. 11). Adult graduate learners demonstrate advising needs similar to traditional undergraduates; however, despite the similarities, such as the need to follow time lines (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jones, 1993; Leonard, 2002), adult learners may not follow linear long-term schedules typical of undergraduates (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Jones, 1993). Both traditional undergraduates and adult graduate learners want advisors in their support system to provide encouragement and motivation (CAEL, 2000; Frey, 2007). However, adult learners who need motivation to complete the

degree benefit from an advisor who recognizes the multifaceted responsibilities that sometimes overwhelm their schedules or the roadblocks created by their lack of confidence (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). In contrast, undergraduates typically need support adjusting to their first experience away from home (Merriam et al., 2007) and completing course work (Lau, 2003; Light, 2001; Martin, 2004). Both graduate and undergraduate populations also demand adequate follow-up by advisors. Yet, adult learners require frequent advising and support, whereas typical undergraduates prefer to meet with their advisors once each semester (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Peck & Varney, 2009).

Upon review of the literature, we found an extensive list of practices for quality advising; however, the qualifiers identified in individual studies are limited or discrepant. For example, Haricombe and Prabha (2008) identified personal characteristics such as patience, empathy, and kindness, in addition to execution of key responsibilities, as important contributors to good advising for graduate students (Edwards, 2007; Stokes, 2008). In contrast, Allen (1993) and Frey (2007) specifically focused on the tasks of advising, with an emphasis on skills teachable by any faculty member working with adult learners.

To further illustrate the importance of advising for adult graduate learners, CAEL (1999) conducted a benchmark study of six colleges and universities it considered highly directed to adult learning. CAEL transformed the findings into eight principles of effective practice (see Appendix B) as a framework for higher education to develop in adult learning–focused institutions (CAEL, 2005).

To measure importance and satisfaction using a 7-point Likert scale, CAEL created an adult learner inventory from these eight principles. Findings are reported in the *National Adult Learners Satisfaction—Priorities Report* (Noel-Levitz & CAEL, 2011). Advising falls under *student support systems* and *life and career planning* principles. Results revealed that although adult learners were satisfied with student support systems (M = 5.46) and life and career planning (M = 5.33), these practices fell short on the importance ratings given to them: For student support systems, M = 6.22, and for life and career planning, M = 6.39. Adult learners ranked life and career planning as the second-most important principle, but ranked their overall satisfaction with it eighth overall. Clearly, adult learners value advising and they believe practice can be considerably improved.

Common Needs to Varying Degrees

Our research illuminates the social reality that learning groups present with distinct needs. Subsequently, the skill sets and personal approaches of advisors must match the diversity of these unique demands. Figure 1 illustrates the individual and interrelated advising needs of online, cohort, and classroom learning groups identified in this study. We found discriminate advising preferences relative to programmatic guidance and communication.

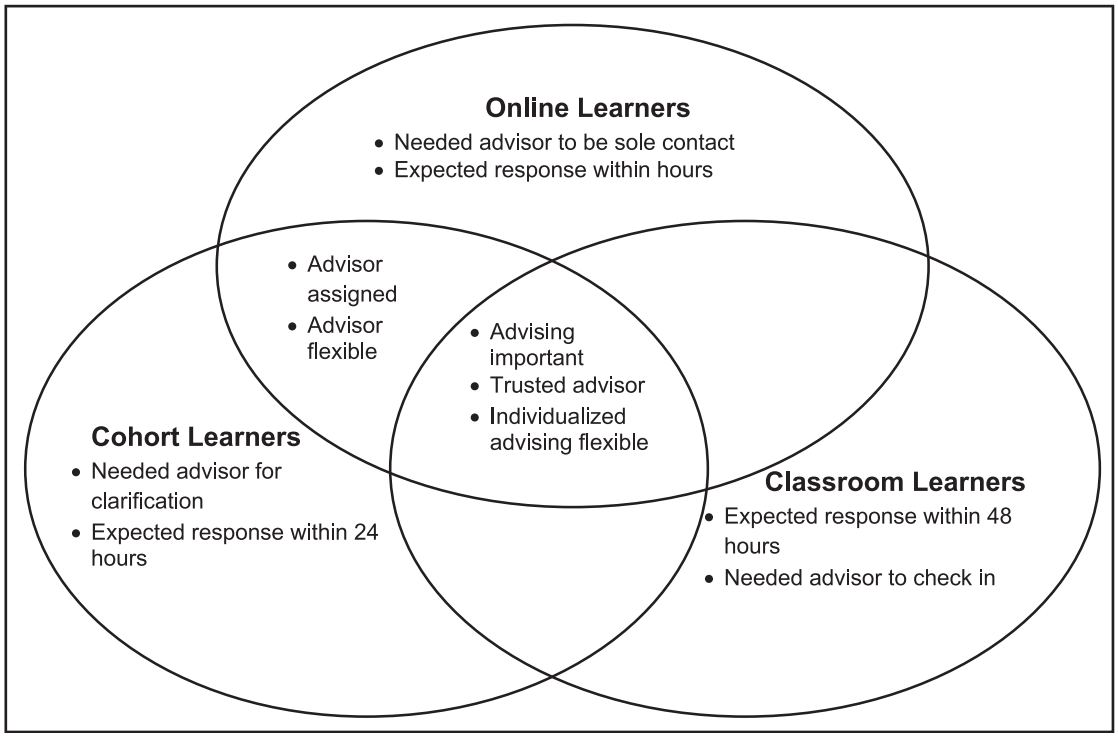
Graduate learners in online environments expressed the greatest need for programmatic guidance and assistance that comply with institutional policies. They intimated not having adequate time to locate answers to their questions by searching student handbooks; they simply directed questions to their advisors through e-mail. Interestingly, Richardson and King (1998) reported that many adult learners fear asking for career and graduate school advice because they believe they should already know how to manage these decisions.

In comparison, cohort learners primarily asked for clarification on policies and procedures, and classroom learners just wanted advisors to periodically contact them to ensure they were progressing as expected. Perhaps online learners' increased dependence reflects the increased physical distance from the university and the limited (nonexistent) face-to-face contact with advisors, instructors, and staff; cohort and classroom learners had more opportunities for in-person interaction.

Cohort and online learners wanted an advisor assigned to them and appreciated flexibility offered by good advisors. Students in these groups do not frequent campus, thus they experience minimal opportunity for interaction with potential advisors. Classroom learners preferred selecting advisors, citing a desire for a personable relationship that provides emotional support; yet, they expressed satisfaction with the least amount of contact for programmatic guidance.

All three groups need immediate, electronic communication. However, the temporal conception of *immediate* ranged from a couple hours to two days. Online learners, in particular, rely on advisors as a sole link to the larger university,

Figure 1. Individual and interrelated advising needs



possibly explaining their desire to hear from their advisors within a couple of hours. Classroom learners felt comfortable with an advisor response time of as many as 48 hours; perhaps they had established communication networks with others as well as their advisors.

No current body of research offers an explanation for these distinct advising needs of adult graduate learners across the online, cohort, and classroom learning environments. Results from this study suggest that the farther the learner is located from the university, the greater his or her reliance on an advisor for prompt, ongoing communication. With this understanding, advisors are better suited to provide quality, holistic advising.

In conclusion, we assert that adult graduate learners across all learning environments need advising, but not just programmatic or sporadic as may have been assumed. Like undergraduates, they need holistic advising that offers quality responses to their unique needs. This finding is significant because past research narrowly focused on holistic advising for traditional undergraduates and did not include information on adult graduate learners, and a focused investigation of advising needs of learners across various learning media had been absent from the professional literature.

Implications

The findings of this study show that adult graduate learners need holistic advising individualized for their specific learning group. As a result, institutional stakeholders must tailor advising to meet the distinct needs of adult graduate learners.

Implications for Practice

With strong consensus on the need for advising for adult graduate learners, university stakeholders should assess advising programs to ensure a holistic model is developed and implemented with fidelity. In addition, they must restructure any current system to identify and develop specific skills of dedicated advisors. Adult graduate learners appreciate the importance of advising and so should any administration concerned with the retention of these students. Universities commonly evaluate student satisfaction with instructors and course experiences to identify areas for improvement. A similar

assessment for advising should be used to set and review goals for advising adult graduate students.

Undoubtedly, adult graduate learners need advising in the same areas as traditional undergraduate students; advisors must account for advisees' unique professional and personal goals. In addition, advisors of adult graduate students must intentionally seek understanding about the distinct needs of learning groups so they can develop relationships and resources for online, cohort, and classroom learners.

Some departments make advising an option for those with an interest while accounting for this work in tenure (Edwards, 2007; Frey, 2007; Stokes, 2008), a policy that we encourage. Adult graduate learners do not perceive those who view advising as an unwelcome obligation as beneficial to their academic success. If student satisfaction depends on the character and personality of the advisor, as well as her or his desire to advise, the delivery structure in some institutions must change. Students in this research suggested that good advising involves more than teaching a skill or undertaking other advising duties; they expressed a need for trustworthy, dedicated individuals who demonstrated responsiveness and flexibility.

Therefore, advising should be considered in the time allocation expected of faculty members. Responsibility for advising must be included in contract development and tenure consideration. As some reallocate time for advising, other faculty members who do not demonstrate the qualifications, personality, or interest to advise may absorb some of the researching and instructing load. Such a thoughtful strategy makes the best use of individuals' skill sets and benefits students who access advising. In addition, universities should consider applicants' advising experiences and interests when hiring (Edwards, 2007).

Implications for Research

We explored advising needs and experiences of a small set of adult graduate learners within one university and one graduate program. The results provide an in-depth analysis of their advising needs and led to understanding of their shared experiences. We made a distinction between their learning environments to determine if varying needs exist. However, the results may not be generalizable to all adult graduate learners.

We recommend a comparative study of the advising experiences and needs of adult learners both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. A focused study on these two types of adult learners would provide an evidence base for similarities and differences that institutional stakeholders and advisors can leverage to retain or restructure current programs and practices.

A qualitative, exploratory analysis of the advisors' perceptions of advising responsibilities as they relate to both adult learners and traditional-aged students reveal advisors' perceptions of student need. Specifically, research that identifies advisors' view of similar or conflicting needs between traditional- and nontraditional-aged learners may provide insight into best practices for professional development and subsequent practice. Further qualitative comparisons on adult learner advising should expand across various departments in one university to determine similar and conflicting advising experiences and needs. Likewise, an undertaking at like universities would help establish benchmarks for further evaluation and assessment.

A case study of one or more public universities, schools, departments, or programs that have adopted advising as a qualification for hire, tenure, and full-time employee allocation could identify best practices. If universities adopt new advising structures as necessary, researchers must develop a reputable form of faculty evaluation in relation to advising competencies.

Quantitative survey research should explore advising needs of adult learners, regardless of learning environment, to which scholars can apply the characteristics and traits discovered in this in-depth analysis. Additional studies should explore the reasons students in the three learning environments articulated varying degrees of needed programmatic guidance and conceptualization of immediacy in response time. Finally, experimental researchers should test new systems of advising to meet the needs of adult learners.

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Appendix A. Interview protocol

Interview Code: _____

Date: _____

Time of interview: _____

Location: _____

Participant's number of completed semesters in program: _____

1. Think of your most recent advising experience [on-campus; online] at this university. I would like you to tell me about this experience.
2. Now, think back to when you experienced what you would consider a good advising session as a graduate student. Please describe this experience in as much detail as possible.
3. Can you think of a time you were not satisfied with your advising, or had a bad advising experience as a graduate student?
4. Can you describe the characteristics or traits of a good advisor (even if you have not experienced them)? OR From your description of a good advising session, can you describe the characteristics of this advising/advisor?
5. Can you describe any traits or qualities of an advisor or advising session that you do not like, whether it has happened for you or not? OR From your description of a bad advising session, can you describe the characteristics of this advising/advisor?
6. Can you write down key words, or define, what you perceive as your advising needs as a graduate student [online, on-campus, cohort] learner?
7. Is there something about your advising needs as a(n) [online, on-campus, cohort] learner that another learner wouldn't know?

Appendix B. Eight principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners

One	**Outreach**

- Overcomes barriers of time, place, and tradition
- Creates lifelong access to educational opportunities

Two	**Life & Career Planning**

- Addresses life and career goals
- Assesses and aligns student goals with the program's capacity to meet them

Three	**Financing**

- Promotes choice and payment options
- Has answers to financial questions
- Promotes equity

Four	**Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

- Aligns credits with previous work experience
- Assigns curriculum relevant to students' career goals

Five	**Teaching-Learning Process**

- Uses multiple methods to connect concepts to useful knowledge and skills
- Uses experiential and problem-based methods

Six	**Student Support Services**

- Enhances students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners
- Encourages use of comprehensive support services

Seven	**Technology**

- Uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information

Eight	**Strategic Partnerships**

- Engages in partnerships and relationships with other organizations to improve educational and work opportunities for students

Note. CAEL (2005, p. 3)