

# Understanding the Career Management of Female Primary-Role Advisors

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*In the United States, academic advising is among the highest turnover professions in the university system. Academic advisors, who work at the intersection of academics and student life, bear the brunt of increased pressures and decreased resources. Yet, primary-role advisors often do not experience high salaries or opportunities for advancement. Despite a high turnover in advising, some advisors have intentionally chosen to remain in advising. Framed by the social cognitive model of career self-management, this phenomenological study examined the workplace career management of female primary-role advisors at public institutions in the midwestern region of the United States. Through holistic coding, three primary factors emerged from the data: students, supportive environments, and balance and benefits. We offer implications for practice.*

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Academic advising is among the highest turnover professions in the university system, as the median time spent in these positions is three years or less (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021). In the midwestern United States, public funds are being restricted and student enrollments are declining (Kremer, 2020; Nietzel, 2021). These factors, initiated by a decrease in high school graduates (Kremer, 2020) and fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic (Nietzel, 2021) place additional pressure on the workforce of public institutions. Academic advisors bear the brunt of these increased pressures and decreased resources (Maller & McGill, 2021).

Contrary to classic motivation theories (Adams, 1963; Herzberg et al., 1959; Vroom, 1964), primary-role advisors, individuals whose main job function is to provide academic advising to students (Larson et al., 2018), largely do not experience high salaries (Fuesting et al., 2021) or opportunities for advancement (Taylor, 2011;

Thomas & Cunningham, 2018). Yet, despite high turnover, some advisors persist. As the advising role is heavily populated by women (Fuesting et al., 2021; NACADA, 2019), it is important to understand what inspires the career management of female primary-role advisors. Through a systematic review using the *NACADA Review*, the *NACADA Journal*, and the ERIC and EBSCO databases, we identified no literature on the career management of female primary-role advisors. Therefore, this study aims to examine this subset of professionals at public institutions in the midwestern United States. The following research question guided this study:

RQ1: What encourages female primary-role advisors to remain academic advisors?

## Literature Review

Despite a lack of advisor-specific research, a growing body of literature examines the experience of women in higher education. Here, we review the literature about women in both staff and faculty roles, as primary-role advisors are classified inconsistently across institutions (McGill, 2019).

## Staff

### *Stress and Well-Being*

Women's well-being emerged as an important theme in the available studies of female staff in higher education (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020; Smerek & Peterson, 2007). Through an investigation of occupational stress among university employees, female staff displayed higher scores for anxiety than males (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020). This anxiety was partly related to an imbalance between effort exerted and professional rewards. Additionally, women demonstrated an increased tendency to over-commit professionally, compounding their stress and anxiety (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020).

Despite high levels of anxiety reported among staff-role women, He et al. (2020) discovered

academic advisors reported high levels of well-being. The advisors' sense of well-being may be related to their self-efficacy, the meaningfulness of their work, and the enjoyment of creating relationships with students. These findings support an earlier study (Smerek & Peterson, 2007), which relied upon the Herzberg et al. (1959) two-factor theory to examine job satisfaction among staff-classified employees. This study found that in a university staff role, women were overwhelmingly more satisfied with their work experience in relation to motivating and hygiene factors. Motivating factors include the type of work and positive feelings about their organizations; hygiene factors include supervisor efficacy and relationships with workers.

### ***Recognition and Compensation***

Despite higher overall work satisfaction scores, women did not feel satisfied with their compensation (Smerek & Peterson, 2007). This finding is consistent with recent studies indicating that women in staff roles strive for greater recognition of their value to their institution (He et al., 2020; Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020). Jerg-Bretzke et al. (2020) determined that women sought additional recognition for work well done. He et al. (2020) indicated that 65% of academic advisors reported desiring salary supplements as recognition for this work.

Historically, "the classification system for non-academic staff tended to perpetuate low salaries for women by grouping 'female' jobs at the bottom of the salary scale and allowed little room for lateral or upward promotion" (Ford, 1988, p. 62). While women hold most positions in staff roles, they also experience a significant pay gap compared to their male counterparts across the board (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Fuesting et al., 2021; McChesney, 2018; Whitford, 2020). In a recent study, almost 30% of female participants indicated that meeting economic requirements was their greatest motivation for work (Brajabalav et al., 2019). Compensation was the biggest indicator of perceived work-life balance among staff-classified women in higher education.

## **Faculty**

### ***Work-Life Balance***

Many scholars have examined the career management of female faculty (Eddy & Ward, 2015; Fontina et al., 2019; Hogan et al., 2014;

Rivera, 2017; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). A recent study indicated the work-life balance issues experienced by female faculty could be offset by a higher salary and opportunities for advancement (Bibi et al., 2017). This same study revealed women value opportunities for advancement over wages; however, the authors also identified a positive relationship between promotion and compensation. Though compensation and opportunities for advancement are important, women faculty members also value clarity of expectations and having their individual needs met (King et al., 2018).

A recent study compared the quality of working life between faculty and non-faculty members within university communities (Fontina et al., 2019). Faculty experienced higher levels of stress at work than non-faculty participants. Additionally, work-life balance created greater buy-in to the organization, regardless of position classification.

### ***Prioritizing Others***

Some female faculty find work-life balance "impossible to achieve" (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016, p. 501). Additionally, some believe an institutional narrative of promoting work-life balance damages their careers. This "balance is couched in terms of first meeting commitments to others (children, students) ... it is individual women who accommodate the cost of caring by accepting that their 'choice' to balance work and life will be detrimental to their career" (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016, p. 499). Women, both with and without dependents, identified dependents as a career liability.

Another study (Eddy & Ward, 2015) found that women frequently structured their careers to accommodate the needs of their children and their spouses, despite the disadvantage. While finding a career to prioritize familial needs may be viewed as a woman's prerogative and adherence to a work-life balance narrative, these choices may still negatively impact faculty career progression (Eddy & Ward, 2015). Additionally, women reported high levels of psychological strain due to expectations of work intensity and long hours (Hogan et al., 2014). When comparing male and female faculty who have children, men reported working longer hours than their female counterparts. However, male and female faculty perceived the organizational expectation to do so (Hogan et al., 2014). These studies underscore the

complexity of factors and motivations women face in the higher education workplace.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Social Cognitive Model of Career Self-Management (CSM; Lent & Brown, 2013) serves as the theoretical framework for this study. CSM captures the complexity of the career process by illustrating how individuals obtain their career objectives through adaptive behaviors. CSM explores how goal setting, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and contextual and personality factors are antecedents to career outcomes and attainments.

As CSM explores the career process and the interplay of personal and contextual factors moderating the attainment of career outcomes, it is appropriate to explore how work-life balance and familial issues experienced by women in higher education (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Eddy & Ward, 2015; Fontina et al., 2019; Fuesting et al., 2021; McChesney, 2018; Rivera, 2017; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016) moderate career attainment. Additionally, emphasis on contextual factors in CSM makes it a nuanced framework through which to explore the challenges experienced by academic advisors, such as role definition, systemic issues, and autonomy concerns (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Cate & Miller, 2015; Larson et al., 2018; McGill, 2019; White, 2020).

CSM is built from the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994), which illuminates how individuals develop career interests, select educational or career options, and persist in the attainment of academic and occupational goals. Rooted in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986), both CSM and SCCT demonstrate that the ability to learn is socially constructed and relies upon the individual, their behavior, and their environment.

According to CSM, individuals more likely persist in careers affording high levels of self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 2013). Personal accomplishments and positive psychological and emotional experiences lead to the enhancement of self-efficacy. Positive outcome expectations are connected to personal effort and persistence in career-related activities.

Contextual and personality factors are believed to motivate career actions and moderate career attainment (Lent & Brown, 2013). Thus, CSM considers an individual's social address—comprised of personal inputs like gender, class,

ethnicity, and contextual affordances such as education and socioeconomic factors—and its impact on the career management process.

### **Methods**

CSM, as a theoretical framework, naturally lends itself to the constructivist paradigm as CSM assumes uniqueness in each individual's experience (Lent & Brown, 2013). The constructivist paradigm recognizes reality is constructed through an individual's experiences (Mertens, 2020). Though recent CSM studies have been largely quantitative (Kim et al., 2018; Lent et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2016; Perez-Lopez et al., 2019), we utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the career self-management of women remaining in primary-role advising. With roots in philosophy, phenomenologists are interested in understanding the essence of an experience as described by those who have encountered and/or lived that phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological study investigates the meaning of a group's lived experience through in-depth interviews (in this case, the experience of women working in primary-role advising positions without holding advising administrator positions) to capture the essence of their collective lived experiences (van Manen, 2017). The basic goal is to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

### **Participants**

Primary-role advisors (with staff or academic staff classifications) were recruited at four-year higher education institutions in the midwestern United States. Though initially targeting the Midwest, a heavy concentration of participants emerged from a four-state region within NACADA's Region Seven (NACADA, 2021). The focus became this four-state region to reinforce the cultural homogeneity of participants, a defining feature of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Mertens, 2020) using personal contacts within NACADA and individually contacting advising centers at four-year institutions. The first author also recruited participants through social media by posting about the study on her personal and on the S.A.M.S. (Student Affairs Mothers) Facebook pages. Snowball sampling (Mertens, 2020) was also used, as three

**Table 1.** Participant Social and Professional Context

<b>Name, Age</b>	<b># of Years Advising</b>	<b>Caseload/ Mandatory (M) and Optional (O)</b>	<b>Advising Structure</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Dependents</b>
Daisy, 36	10	75 (M) + 450 (O)	University Advising Center	Married	2 children at home
Dakota, 39	10	600 (M)	College Advising Center	Married	1 dog
Elizabeth, 33	9	125 (M)	College Advising Center	Single	None
Ginger, 41	18	325 (O)	School Advising Center	Divorced	1 child at home
Gretel, 58	6	400 (M)	College Advising Office	Married	1 dog
Gwen, 33	8	150 (M) + 200 (O)	College Advising Center	Married	2 children at home
Jewel, 43	17	100 (M)	University Advising Center	Married	3 children/ stepchildren at home
Kristin, 32	7	475 (O)	Special Populations Office	Married	1 child at home
Lara, 47	9	300 (M)	College Advising Center	Married	3 grown stepchildren/3 cats and a dog
Mamabear, 74	20	400 (M)	School Advising Office	Widowed	2 grown children
Rosemary, 31	8	100 (M) + 3000 (O)	Special Populations Office	Married	2 children at home
Ruth, 54	18	450 (M)	Department Advising Office	Married	2 grown children
Shelly, 41	18	300 (O)	College Advising Center	Partnered	Mother/2 dogs
Stephanie, 47	12	200 (M)	College Advising Center	Married	1 child at home
Vera, 60	10	250 (M) + 1000 (O)	University Advising Center	Married	2 grown children
Violet, 52	10	200 (M)	Department Advising Office	Single	1 dog
Wanda, 33	8	200 (M)	University Advising Center	Partnered	1 cat

participants recommended advising colleagues to participate.

The first author interviewed 17 women who met the criteria: at least 6 years in primary-role advising positions without holding advising administrator positions within their institutions. Six years was chosen for two reasons: 1) NACADA demographic information breaks between categories of advisors who have served in the field for three to five years and advisors who have served six to ten years (NACADA, 2019); and 2) as recent data suggests the average lifespan of an advising career is three years (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021), we wanted to interview women who had surpassed the three- to five-year threshold. To assemble social and professional context, each participant was asked about their age, number of years advising, advising structure, caseload, current (personal) relationship status,

and dependents. Though the authors recognize pets are not traditionally included as dependents, when asked to share information about their families and support systems, many participants included their pets as important members of their families. This information is listed in Table 1, along with each participant's self-selected pseudonym.

### Data Collection

Interviewing elicited rich data and emphasized understanding the subjective experience of each individual, with recognition of their social context (Ryan et al., 2007; Seidman, 2019). The interviews were designed to uncover factors that encouraged women to remain in advising positions while also allowing greater focus on the lived experience of the interviewee (Seidman, 2019).

The interviews were conducted via phone, Zoom, or face-to-face according to participant preference. Using multiple interviewing modalities permitted participants to complete interviews in their chosen location and helped accommodate privacy or work-life balance concerns. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a complete line of questioning with the flexibility to further explore themes presented by the interviewees (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Beginning with a planned set of interview questions, the order and the line of questioning was adjusted to respond to new ideas presented by the participants.

Each participant participated in 2 interviews, lasting between 48–77 minutes. The first interview investigated the participant's background, established their social address and professional context, and explored their career motivations and limitations. Sample questions included: "What made you choose advising as a career?" and "Given your longevity in the advising role, can you talk to me about some of the most rewarding experiences you have had as an advisor?" The second interview investigated stakeholder attitudes of advising and explored perceived support systems on participants' campuses. Sample questions included: "How do you feel the role of advising is perceived on your campus by (other) staff members?" and "When you consider your personal situation, do you feel there are any barriers toward advancing your career? If so, what are the barriers?"

In sum, 45 hours of interview data were collected. The interviews were conducted approximately two days to two weeks apart, which enabled the interviewer and the participant time to process the information discussed in the first interview. With participant permission, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed through an electronic transcription service.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

After each interview, we reflected on each conversation and noted thoughts about the participants' experiences in relation to the interview question. Then began the process of constant comparative analysis, allowing for comparisons between data points as the data emerged from each interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After all data collection, the interview transcripts were coded using horizontalization, a process in which all data is laid out and the researcher assumes the equal weight of all data

points (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, we used holistic coding (Saldaña, 2021) related to the study research question. Holistic coding is commonly employed by researchers who have large data sets and serves as preparation for more detailed coding. The process allows researchers "to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole rather than by analyzing them line by line" (Dey, 1993, p. 104). Through holistic coding, any discussion of participant motivation was designated with the code 'motivation.' In total, 417 significant statements concerning workplace motivation were identified. Within these statements and subsequent subcodes, three dominant clusters of meaning were established by noting the frequency and impact of factors explored. These dominant clusters described the essence of female primary-role advisors' career management.

We performed member checking (Mertens, 2020; Tracy, 2010), confirming research results with study participants. Through this process, some members identified additional elements they wanted to include in the description of their social addresses and occupational contexts. For example, some participants wished to clarify the number of children they had or pets they considered family. Other participants clarified their advising load and offered distinction as to which student groups were required to meet with them and which were optional. These clarifications allowed members to take ownership of their identities as presented in this study.

### **Findings**

Our research team sought to understand what factors encouraged female primary-role advisors to remain in a primary-advising role. Three primary factors were students, supportive environments, and balance and benefits.

#### **Students**

In one word, 'students' emerged as the principal motivator for female primary-role advisors. Out of the 17 participants, 15 cited students as their most salient reason for remaining in the advising role. There were two dimensions to this: helping students and forming student relationships.

#### **Helping Students**

Participants cited helping students as an important motivation for remaining in the

primary-advising role. According to Ruth, “This is a service job. . . You have to want to serve the student and to make sure that you’re helping them make the best decision for their future. That’s what motivates me. It is just something inside of me.” Jewel also discussed the intrinsic desire needed to support students: “I really was called to higher education and helping students.” Jewel is so satisfied with her experience assisting students that she feels perplexed when others leave the advising field.

Violet described how serving students motivates her: “I want [students] to at least be able to say, ‘Well, Violet did everything that she could. There was never a point where she didn’t answer my email or turn me away when I needed to talk to her.’” Lara echoed the satisfaction she experienced when helping students: “I’ve met with a lot of students in the last couple of weeks, but there have been several who have been like, ‘I always feel so much better after I leave a meeting with you.’” Dakota also recognized the fulfillment in assisting students: “The a-ha moments are very rewarding. . . [students] just get that look on their face like, ‘Oh, it makes sense now.’ And I’m like, there it is. That’s why I do this.”

Several participants recalled their own needs in college, which now serve as a purpose for helping their students. According to Dakota, “When it comes to ‘why be an academic advisor?’ It always comes back to being the person you needed when you were young.” Elizabeth described the powerful experience of assisting students in the way she needed. She said, “You can just see it. They feel calm. They feel heard. They feel like they have a voice. They feel like they matter. All those things I wanted as a student, they *feel*. And that is the biggest reward.” Stephanie echoed the rewarding feeling of supporting students: “These are my people. These are people I can help. . . Helping them get connected to resources and overcoming obstacles and just helping them set goals and reach goals . . . that’s where I find my joy.”

Many participants also noted their ability to assist students in navigating the complex arena of higher education as a significant motivating factor for serving as an advisor. Lara described the challenges that many students face: “Helping students navigate bureaucratic red tape. It is like being that guide at the same time saying this is how you get this done.” Regarding her role, Rosemary explained, “You can change a person’s life. . . it’s so great to say, ‘Yeah, I know that

doesn’t make any sense, but I can help you figure that out. Here’s the crack in the system.” Gwen elaborated on this point, saying, “It’s not easy for the students to navigate their own experiences.” Gwen recounted how grateful students have been for her help and juxtaposed her experience of being an advisor against a partner’s experience working in the corporate world, concluding: “You don’t get that kind of validation in every job.”

### ***Student Relationships***

Participants also explored the inspiration they found in forming meaningful relationships with students. Vera discussed how creating enduring relationships with students can be a form of serving students:

It was really the ability to see a class through from freshman to senior. When I came into that role, there had been significant turnover, and I had kids coming in, and they’d say, ‘You’re my fourth advisor; how long are you going to [stay]?’ And I said, ‘Well, I should be here at least four years. That’s my plan. I can’t guarantee anything.’ And you just could tell that after a while, [advisees] finally started relaxing and sharing with me because they realized I was still there the next time they came and the next time after that.

Jewel described the joy of forming relationships with students spanning the duration of their college careers. “Since I have students at the very beginning. . . I could potentially see them as a freshman all the way until they graduate. . . That’s very exciting to see them start to finish.”

Gretel discussed the reward of continuing relationships with her students after they graduate and leave the university:

At first, it was really hard because I’d probably never see them again. . . it got easier to push them out of the nest. . . And there’s some that I still am friends with now. If you look at my LinkedIn page, you’ll see so many of my students I keep in touch with because of all their accolades when they move up in the company, when they change jobs, when they *do* get jobs, there’s so many opportunities for me to stay in touch with them and I’m so happy to see how they prosper.

Daisy also explored the relationships she maintains with students once their university career has ended: “I love the relationships I made with them. . . I have students who have been in the NFL, and now they’re selling real estate and just inspiring the hell out of me and just doing big things. And it’s awesome to see them grow up and be a better person than they were when they started.”

Gwen experiences happiness when seeing individual students achieve their potential, providing an example of a student “who really struggled to make it through school” and became a father during his degree program. Gwen assisted him with navigating his challenges through finding an appropriate degree option. “And, he finished [the degree], and I remember seeing him for the last time with his wife and his baby. And it was great.”

### **Supportive Environments**

In addition to providing support to students, participants also described their own supportive environments and the impact these climates had on their decision to remain in a primary advising role. Participants shared information about the professional support they received from colleagues and immediate supervisors.

### **Supportive Colleagues**

Many participants were very clear about the coworker support they received and its impact on their desire to remain in an advising role. Wanda felt compelled to remain in an advising position because the work environment was more supportive than in her previous position: “I came from. . . a pretty toxic [work environment] and then now back into a very healthy one. So that has been really refreshing.” According to Dakota, “My teammates are very important to me. And so, building the relationships with my teammates over the years has been very rewarding.” Vera described the support she felt in her professional environment, explaining, “I really like the people I work with. . . I walk in, and I’m happy to see my coworkers.” Mamabear agreed that a supportive environment was among her greatest motivators:

Every day I walk in the door, everybody saying, ‘Hi. Hey, Mamabear, what’s going on?’ I got hugs every single day because that’s just what we did. And it was not something weird. It was just nice. It was like

going home for a holiday. See the family. It was awesome.

Violet described a relationship with a particular advising colleague who provided support. She “took me under her wing. . . really helped me out trying to figure out what I needed to do in certain situations and how I needed to take care of certain tasks. . . I have learned a lot.”

### **Supportive Supervisors**

In addition to supportive coworkers, participants identified having supportive supervisors as another incentive to remain in their roles. When asked about the support she experienced from her supervisor, Rosemary said, “Yes, in my current position, assistance in achieving my goals would be absolutely welcomed and encouraged. I honestly would not have taken this job if I felt like I was going to be cornered.” Shelly affirmed this sentiment, saying, “I would receive the support I would need here from our director. They would help me find those opportunities and would be supportive of that.” When Kristin discussed her supervisor, she said, “She’s like my best friend. So, I get to see her every time I come in, which is nice, or if I’m working from home, we’re constantly chatting each other with whatever. . . And she’s an amazing boss.”

Lara described how her supervisor promoted a supportive environment in her office. She explained, “I am lucky my director models [balance] and encourages. . . you to take care of yourself. I have no hesitations sending an email for taking a mental health day. . . That is supported in my office.”

### **Balance and Flexibility**

Finally, participants described how having a work-life balance and good benefits were strong motivators for remaining in a primary-advising role. In addition, the opportunity for self-care and taking care of their families was important to many participants. Wanda discussed her advising position in relation to other positions she held in higher education: “[My advising job] gives me a little more balance; I’m not working seventy hours a week. . . I am also growing a lot here, both professionally and personally, because I have a lot more balance now, I’m able to do it. I’m able to not feel as burnt out because I have built-in time to recharge myself to do the things that rejuvenate me but not feel bad about them.”

Wanda described how she could attend exercise classes, which her schedule did not previously allow for. She also shared the joy of adopting a cat named Winston. Wanda had wanted a pet for a long time and now experienced enough work-life balance to care for Winston properly.

Jewel also used the term 'balance' to describe motives for remaining in a primary-advising role: "It's pretty balanced. . . I'm able to leave it pretty much at work, thankfully. . . I took my email off my phone. . . And that's really helped over the past couple of years to separate the home from work life." Lara discussed how flexibility with work hours enabled work motivation, "Between 8:00 and 9:00, I'm going to be making my coffee and my breakfast. . . and so I'm going to come in at 9:00. . . and my boss is okay with that."

While several participants noted their careers enabled them to care for themselves, many others discussed how their primary-advising role allowed them to care for others. Rosemary explained how the flexibility she experiences in her position enables her to take care of her children.

There is a lot of flexibility in advising. It's perceived as being comfortable while having children. . . If I miss a day of work because I have a sick kid, no one [is having an emergency] ...My husband's a [medical worker]. It's a pandemic. Medical workers don't get to just take a day off, so it's essential for my family that I have a certain level of flexibility in my work.

Stephanie agreed that flexibility in her role helped balance her work and family life. She said, "Just simply being able to pick my daughter up at noon on Wednesday. . . and her not having to sit in an after-school program until 5:00. Having that flexibility. . . has been huge for me." Ginger concurred that flexibility was a reason for staying in her position. She shared, "I feel fortunate that I have plenty of sick leave and people are understanding when your kid gets strep and those sorts of things [or] to leave for a Halloween party. . . I just use my vacation time; it's not that big of a deal."

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Resoundingly, participants viewed their ability to assist and form relationships with students as the

primary motivation to remain in the advising role. While a host of research demonstrated the positive effect advisors could have on students (Greenleaf, 1977; McClellan, 2007, 2009; McGill, 2016; Mohamed, 2016; Mu & Fossnacht, 2019; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Vianden & Barlow, 2015; Young-Jones et al., 2013), this study identified the student-advisor relationship to be reciprocal. As frequent advising meetings improve the chances of students' academic success (Mu & Fossnacht, 2019; Young-Jones et al., 2013), the opportunity to build relationships through regular meetings also encouraged participants. Similarly, while students value their advisor's ability to assist them with navigating the university experience (Mu & Fossnacht, 2019; Young-Jones et al., 2013), participants cited guiding students through this complex system to be among the most rewarding of their job responsibilities.

CSM explores self-efficacy and outcome expectations as important factors of career self-management (Lent & Brown, 2013). Enduring relationships with students may allow some primary-role advisors to feel the impacts of their work, affirming that they are good at their jobs and promoting feelings of self-efficacy. Additionally, repeated positive interactions with students create an expectation that meetings with students are a positive experience. When viewed through CSM, self-efficacy and outcome expectations directly impact professional goals. "Behaviors are most likely to be enacted and sustained when people possess favorable self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in relation to these behaviors" (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 562). Thus, through positive experiences, primary-role advisors may be driven by the goal of connecting with students. Nurturing this behavior may have important implications for advising administrators.

The powerful motivation created by student contact can enable universities to ensure advisors receive the motivating benefit of forming relationships with students. Where possible, advising structures can be built to ensure longevity in the student-advisor relationship. For example, a fully centralized or decentralized advising model where students have continuous contact with a consistent primary-role advisor may have advantages over a split model where students are only with the advisor during the beginning of their education and then passed to a faculty advisor. In places where longevity of student relationships is not possible within the advising model, encouraging primary-role advisors to advise student involvement in



university clubs, teams, or other campus activities may help to foster long-term student relationships.

Additionally, advising loads can be monitored to ensure advisors have the time and emotional bandwidth to nurture meaningful relationships. Advising loads vary dramatically. In our sample, mandatory loads ranged from 75–600 (see Table 1), as do the requirements for mandatory versus optional advising (McFarlane, 2017). While mandatory advising may provide advisors and students regular times to relationship-build, mandatory advising loads also can create student traffic that is overwhelming to the point of prohibiting the establishment of meaningful relationships (McFarlane, 2017; Terawaki, 2018). A delicate balance providing opportunities for interaction without overburdening the advisor should be sought. Creating an environment where an advisor can successfully manage their responsibilities is key to their desire to remain in an advising role, as feelings of self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations will be enhanced through successful career management (Lent & Brown, 2013).

In addition to forming relationships with students, this study highlighted the importance of having supportive colleagues and supervisors. Next to their relationships with students, participants cited these office relationships as strong motivating factors. According to CSM, “People are more likely to set and implement goals to engage in adaptive career behaviors when they are buoyed by environmental (e.g., social, financial) supports” (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 562). To allow supportive office relationships, advising administrators may consider creating environments where socializing is recognized as an important work function. To the extent that it can be managed responsibly, advisors may find great benefit in sharing information about their personal lives and spending time with their colleagues in nonstructured ways.

Participants also indicated being professionally and personally supported by their supervisors increased their resolve to remain in their primary-advising roles. Participants experienced motivation in environments that allowed self-care and professional development opportunities. Recent advising literature has explored the connection between self-care and burnout (Harman, 2018; Maller & McGill, 2021).

Further, participants valued having flexible work arrangements where they could care for their families, either by utilizing flexible work options or through the judicious use of personal or sick leave. An individual’s social address is a distal antecedent

of career self-management. While an individual may not choose a career because of their social context, that social context shapes their career goals and decision-making (Lent & Brown, 2013). Further, “the presence of supports (and the absence of barriers) may strengthen self-efficacy and outcome expectations,” (Lent & Brown, 2013, p. 562) which, in turn, could contribute to obtaining the goal of remaining a primary-role advisor. This willingness of supervisors to provide flexibility also contributed to this study’s last findings: balance and benefits.

Consistent with previous literature (He et al., 2020), this study confirmed participants experience high levels of well-being; this well-being proved to be a motivating factor for remaining in the primary-advising role. Consistent with recent studies (Fontina et al., 2019), work-life balance allowed greater buy-in to institutional roles. In contrast to earlier studies (Eddy & Ward, 2015; Hogan et al., 2014), participants experienced the advising role as accommodating to their personal self-care needs and caring for their families. Participants also expressed the desire for additional recognition and compensation throughout the data collection process. However, contrary to previous literature (Brajaballav et al., 2019), the lack of compensation and recognition did not affect the perception of work-life balance or diminish participants’ professional engagement.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are a few notable limitations to this study. The primary limitation is the short time in which all data were collected. All data were collected from mid-October through early December 2021. Participants identified this time frame as one of their busiest times. While participation was voluntary, the hectic advising period may have colored participants’ perceptions of their advising experience. Ideally, the first author would have spread out the two interviews over a lengthier stretch of the academic year. Additionally, the first author made every attempt to respect the participants’ time. Understanding the relentless advising schedules of participants, most interviews adhered to a strict one-hour time limit to avoid infringement upon work obligations. This timeline occasionally resulted in shortened interviews and limited discussion.

Another limitation is the diversity of participants. Only 17% of the participants were women of

color. This percentage is considerably lower than the nearly 40% of advisors who are people of color represented nationally (NACADA, 2019). Though the United States Midwest is not as diverse as other regions, a lack of diverse participants diminishes the richness of the study. Future research must examine the experience of women of color as primary-role advisors.

### Conclusion

While recent data indicates that academic advising is suffering from extreme turnover (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021), understanding the career management of women who have shown longevity in an advising role may inform practices that can encourage newer practitioners to persist in an advising role. Though the complexities facing the current higher education landscape may not allow for traditional incentives such as higher salaries or career advancement, this study illuminates the most inspiring factors valued by female primary-role advisors. Serving and forming relationships with students, working in supportive environments, and enjoying work-life balance and university employment incentives are the primary workplace motives of the female primary-role advisors in this study. Incorporating these motivating factors into advising offices may help retain the advising workforce.

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