

Running head: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECOND YEAR AND ADVISING

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECOND YEAR AND THE ROLE OF ADVISING

By

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# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SECOND YEAR AND ADVISING

## ABSTRACT

Increased attention has been placed on the second-year college experience in the higher education literature (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller & Schreiner, 2009; Schaller, 2005, 2007, 2010). It is a time when developmental changes occur and many students may feel increasingly uncertain and confused, often leading to student attrition (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Despite the recent emphasis on the importance of the second year of college, little empirical research has examined students' perceptions of their second-year experiences; a critical year in a college student's development. Two opposing theories have primarily been used when discussing students' second-year experiences. Focused on the struggles that second-year students are likely to encounter, Freedman (1956) coined the term "sophomore slump." Using a developmental framework, Schaller (2005) described a four-stage model that provided an understanding of how second-year students exist and make transitions in college. However, due to the limited empirical research that has been conducted, it is uncertain if either theory adequately describes the experiences of second-year students attending a large, public research university. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the second-year experience of a diverse group of students in the liberal arts college attending a large, research university in the northeast region of the United States. Also examined were students' perceptions of the role of advising in supporting their development during the second year of college. Attention was paid to students' perceptions of their needs as well as insights into what specific advising experiences they considered helpful to their academic transitions in the second year. Based on the findings, recommendations for improving the experiences of second-year students were suggested. These

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findings were discussed within the context of developing institutional policies and practices designed to increase the retention and academic success of second-year college students.

*Keywords:* second-year, sophomore, advising, college, university

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The second year of college holds a special place in my heart both personally and professionally. It was the year that I dropped the pre-med track, and after agonizing and exploring multiple disciplines, I discovered my major and seized as many opportunities as I could. Professionally, I began my career in higher education advising as the Advisor to the Sophomore Class and became invested in the second-year experience. This study has brought me full circle.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

For me, decisions just got a lot harder to make because the first two semesters I could take [any] intro I wanted to take...But now it hit me that, 'Ok, you've got six semesters left; that's not that long.' (Student quote as cited in Gansemer-Topf, Stern, & Benjamin, 2000, p. 37)

Beginning in the 1970s, significant attention focused on the transition of students from high school to higher education. Costly programmatic efforts were developed to create a structured first-year college experience, which often included orientation, developmental courses, and freshman seminars (Schaller, 2010; Tinto, 1987). Countless studies were conducted to examine and assess these first-year initiatives (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Jessup-Anger, 2011; Potts & Schultz, 2008). Factors associated with persistence, such as student academic and social integration were examined with a goal of increasing graduation rates. Although theory and research have led to a clearer understanding of the first-year experience, comparatively little attention has been focused on retention rates beyond the first year. Specifically, there lacked research focused on students' second-year experiences in college.

The second year is a critical time when students make impactful decisions, which may affect the remainder of their college career (Frost, 1991; Schaller, 2005, 2007, 2010). Assumptions have been made about the issues and challenges second-year students faced as they integrated both socially and academically in the institution. The available empirical evidence indicated the range and severity of issues that students face during the second year (Tobolowsky, 2008). Factors that played a vital role in the second-year experience included issues around selecting a major, self-efficacy, motivation, reevaluating values connected to majors and interests, social involvement, institutional satisfaction, and finances (Hunter et al., 2010). Failure

to understand and address issues specific to the second year can lead to attrition in the second year (Schaller, 2010). For example, the 2012 retention rate between the first and second year at an undergraduate college of a large, public, research university in the northeast region of the United States was close to 90% while the second to third year retention rate dropped to just above 85% (Institutional Research, personal communications, June 24, 2015).

Schaller's (2005) study at a medium-sized institution has been one of the few empirical studies conducted that explored the second-year experience. Her framework provided a comprehensive approach to understanding the second-year experience, describing the transitions second-year students made during this developmental year. In contrast to Schaller's (2005) model, the *sophomore slump* phenomenon, proposed by Freedman (1956), has most often been used to describe the characteristics displayed by some second-year students during this period of their academic career. It has been, however, unclear whether second-year students at a large, research university manifest similar experiences as described by these two dominating frameworks.

The available, yet limited, empirical research on the second-year experience identified quality interactions with staff and faculty, commitment to a major (Graunke & Woosley, 2005), approachable and knowledgeable advisors (Juillerat, 2000), and effective advising (Wilder, 1993) as important experiences for second-year students. These findings about second-year students extended research on the role of academic advising in the second year, and how the student advisor relationship can influence student retention, satisfaction, and persistence (Wilder, 1993). For academic advisors, the second year can be an opportunity to help introduce students to a potentially more effective role that advising can play in supporting their college experience (Frost, 1991). Advisors typically aim to ensure that students are meeting graduation requirements

and inform students about the objectives, ethics, and goals of careers within the field (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Academic advising is an important role; it is critical for institutions to assist in connecting students with advisors through an effective academic advising experience.

In contributing to the limited literature on second-year students, this study explored students' college experiences. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand how a diverse group of second-year students attending a large, research university located in the northeast region of the United States experienced their second year. Also, their perceptions of the role of advising in supporting their transition and overall development in the second year were examined. The following questions were explored.

1. What do a group of second-year students pursuing various majors identify as key issues and challenges faced during their second year?
2. What are second-year students' perceptions of advising and its role in supporting them during their second year?

### **Literature Review**

Due to the limited data in this area, the literature review for this study began with a search of empirical studies and books related to academic advising, attrition, and the second-year experience using Academic Search Premiere, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar, and employed the key terms “advising,” “sophomores,” “second year,” and “attrition.” These words were then combined with the words “style,” or “advisor,” or “approaches,” or “slump,” or “experience,” or “issues.” The search on advising resulted in an extensive number of studies and articles related to advising across grade levels. The findings were categorized under three major areas: supporting student retention, impact of advising, and approaches to advising. Consistent with expectations, few results were found on second-year

students, therefore, reference lists in the articles and books were used to gather more information on the second-year experience. However, many of the references were not empirical studies, but instead were descriptive reports on programs and services that institutions have implemented or should implement to support second-year students.

An extensive review of empirical studies and literature related to academic advising, attrition, and the second-year experience yielded few results. Although there has been an abundant focus on understanding the first-year experience and designing programs to support their retention and satisfaction, many colleges and universities found that attrition exists between the second and third years as well (Hunter et al., 2010; Tinto, 1987). The literature discussed here provides an understanding of the second-year experience and the role that academic advising might have in supporting students. The review of the literature analyzed the complexities of the second year and the role of academic advising in supporting students, including perceptions of advising. These themes helped to describe the issues that second-year students face and how academic advising can address issues that second-year students face during this pivotal year, as well as help to address issues of attrition; an issue that colleges and universities face with their second-year students. Including student perceptions of advising in the second year provided a much-needed understanding of what issues current second-year students faced as well as students' perceptions of the role of advising during their second year.

### **The Second-Year Experience**

Research on higher education has given a great deal of attention to the first-year experience due to a focus on first to second year retention. This has led to the implementation of countless programs and services to retain these students in order for them to persist toward graduation (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Schaller, 2010; Tinto, 1987). However,

many institutions found that as their first to second-year retention rates increased, graduation rates were not increasing at the same rate (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Tinto (1987) cited estimates that showed that “after two years, approximately 44 of every 100 of those new entrants will have departed their first institution” (p. 15). This offered evidence that high levels of attrition often occurred between the first and third years and a focus on second to third year retention was as necessary as the attention given to the first to second year. These findings reinforced the need to recognize the importance of continued efforts beyond the student’s first year, and to evaluate the needs of students across class years with the ultimate goal of retaining and graduating students.

**Issues second-year students face.** Second-year students returned to campus with the advantage of being familiar with the college environment and an overall reduction in the adjustment issues that students faced in their first year (Freedman, 1956). Despite having the first year to become familiar and comfortable with the college and campus environment, second-year students faced new responsibilities, choices, and a sudden independence from faculty and staff who had once monitored first-year students closely. A pilot study conducted with six second-year students at a small, private, liberal arts institution revealed that they were unprepared to utilize the campus resources and academic opportunities that were introduced to them during their first year, and it was unrealistic to retain the information into their second year when they were ready to utilize the information (Kim-Lee, 2015). As second-year students, they required a different kind of support and guidance from the institution, but the institution expected that they were familiar with the system at this point in their academic career and, therefore, were often left to be self-reliant; this left many second-year students feeling embarrassed to ask for help (Coburn & Treegeer, 2003).

Many four-year colleges require students to declare a major before the end of their second year (Schaller, 2010). This expectation leads to a feeling of urgency, particularly because postponing this decision may lead to delayed graduation and further costs in tuition (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000). Additionally, although a connection between selecting a major and a career did not need to exist, second-year students may have felt pressure from the institution, their family and friends to decide a major and a related career (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000). This process can be overwhelming, particularly for students who were undecided, but also for students who were far along in their major due to pressures of deciding a career path (Schaller, 2010).

The second year was a time when developmental changes occurred, and students may have feelings of uncertainty and confusion (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). In their interviews with second-year students, Coburn and Treeger (2003) captured feelings of being unsettled, confused, and overwhelmed by the decisions and choices they faced during this pivotal year. "Triggers," the term coined by Kuhn, Gordan, and Webber (2006), were the observable behaviors and patterns such as undecided, underprepared, and major-changing students may convey during an advising session. Kuhn et al. (2006) argued that understanding these triggers and other second-year issues and concerns may help advisors to identify the best approach in working with second-year students. Therefore, further research on the second-year experience is necessary in order to understand how advising can effectively support these students.

Many second-year students had an enhanced focus on academic work and engagement with campus life based on their intrinsic interest, ability, and motivation (Freedman, 1956). This may be reinforced by students having had increased freedom in choosing courses that were directly related to a major or interests (Schaller, 2010), which led to increased enjoyment in their academics (Freedman, 1956). Alternatively, others cited feeling challenged by tougher courses

within their major (Hunter et al., 2010). Second-year students described having a more intense and heavier academic workload, which required the sacrifice of social activities (Kim-Lee, 2015).

Academically, although second-year students were taught the skills in their first year to approach college-level work, many had yet to immerse themselves in courses towards their major, leaving them unsure about their abilities (Coburn & Treeger, 2003). As students began to understand and evaluate their abilities to be successful in areas of interest, issues of self-efficacy around academics may come to the surface (Schaller, 2010). Second-year students who were certain about their major were found to have a higher grade point average and higher levels of academic satisfaction and self-efficacy; students who had yet to decide on a major or were changing their major were found to have lower rates of persistence and academic performance (Schaller, 2010). Therefore, effective advising may play a critical role in supporting these students.

**Schaller's Four-Stage Model.** Schaller's (2005) study has been one of the few empirical studies conducted on the second-year experience. Using narratives from interviews and focus groups of nineteen second-year students, predominately female and White, at a private, mid-size, Catholic university, Schaller (2005) identified four stages – *random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment* – that she asserted second-year students moved through (See Appendix A).

Schaller (2005) described *random exploration* as the stage in which most first-year students arrived at college. She argued that those in this stage when transitioning to their second year were aware that they must make choices, particularly around a major and career. They, however, chose to wait to make this decision and seemed undirected with their plans. Typically,



most students moved from *random exploration* into *focused exploration* during the summer prior to their second year. According to Schaller (2005), during this stage they may express frustration, anxiety, and have moments of crisis over their choices, particularly around their academic, personal relationships, and future plans. Schaller (2005) argued that the longer students existed in this stage, the more prepared and confident they would be during the next two years whereas external forces, such as peers and family, may sway students who quickly passed through this stage.

The majority of students, however, began making decisions during their second year, which shifted them out of *focused exploration* and into the stage of *tentative choices*. In this stage, students began to see their future plans more clearly and recognized a new layer of responsibility about how their decisions may impact their future plans. Many of Schaller's (2005) participants were unable to confidently reach the final stage she referred to as *commitment* by the end of their second year. Those who recognized the responsibility of using their education to prepare for their future relied on the consultation and mentorship from faculty and staff. Students in this stage were unwavering about the decisions they made about their academic plans and relationships and were eager to accomplish what they needed to in order to secure their future.

Although Schaller's (2005) model offered a framework to examine the second year and the transitions that they may experience, her study had several limitations. Schaller's (2005) study only took place at one institution, specifically a mid-size, private, Catholic university. Further analysis of her study was necessary to determine whether her model could be applied to students at another institution and specifically a large, public, research university. Additionally, the current study aimed to capture a richer range of experiences by including residential status

(i.e. commuter or resident) as a criterion in purposefully sampling participants, in addition to varied gender and major. Lastly, by examining the second-year experience and the role of advising, this study explored how this specific resource was utilized; a factor that was not discussed in Schaller's (2005) study. This study further expanded on Schaller's (2005) assertion that a student's second year "is a unique experience" (p. 20) that is part of a bigger context of transforming into an adult and her argument that second-year students need to be taught, encouraged, and guided through this developmental process of engaging and making decisions through exploration, which was identified as the role of the advisor.

**Sophomore slump.** Coined by Freedman (1956), the *sophomore slump* became a popular term used to describe the confusion, anxiety, and disconnect that many second-year students felt when faced with struggles like declaring a major, taking more challenging courses in their academic field, and clarifying their purpose at the institution. The term also encompassed issues with academic deficiencies, feeling unmotivated by the same routine, academic disengagement, unhappiness with the college experience, indecisiveness with career and major, and developmental confusion with one's values, life purpose, and identity (Hunter et al., 2010). The *sophomore slump* also illustrated assumed characteristics and behaviors second-year students conveyed, such as an increase in absences and a decrease in grade point average (Gump, 2007).

A criticism of the term *sophomore slump* has been its overuse to define second-year students without a clear definition and understanding of the number of students it affects; much of this has been due to the lack of supporting empirical evidence (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Hunter et al., 2010). Based on Freedman's (1956) study of undergraduates at Vassar College, he later argued that feelings of disorganization and ennui normally attributed to the *sophomore slump* may be more characteristic of second-semester freshmen. The term, however, continued to

be applied to describe the second-year experience (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Hunter et al., 2010).

### **Role of Academic Advising In Student Success**

Although academic advising was an available resource at most colleges and universities, its methods and staffing models varied. The faculty-based model, where a faculty member from the student's academic major serves as the student's advisor, has been the most prevalent advising structure at four-year private institutions (Pardee, 2000). Studies overwhelmingly found that student and faculty interactions led to student success and persistence and were critical in a student's development and learning (Baker & Griffin, 2010). It has been suggested that the earlier a student connected with a faculty member from their major, the greater the likelihood a student attained future academic success (Baker & Griffin, 2010). However, with pressure for faculty to conduct research and perform administrative duties, their roles as advisors have decreased in priority; this can greatly affect their availability to students and the overall advising experience (Allen & Smith 2008). Researchers found that although faculty advisors were familiar with their discipline and field, professional advisors had a better grasp on the breadth of available programs and could maintain advising as a priority (Lynch, 2004). The ability to offer more access and availability to students has led to more colleges and universities employing professional advisors (Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010).

Academic advising has been considered one of the major cornerstones of practice to promote retention and student satisfaction in higher education (Mottarella, Fritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004). Research has overwhelmingly found a positive relationship between faculty and staff interactions, particularly a student's advisor, and second-year retention, student satisfaction, high grade point average outcomes, and personal development (Graunke &

Woosley, 2005; Pascarella & Terezini, 1980; Wilder, 1993). Therefore, academic advising can positively impact student persistence as students further connect with the campus community and institutional resources (Metzner, 1989). In fact, longitudinally, the number of informal contacts students had with faculty were consistently a factor of student attrition (Pascarella & Terezini, 1980).

Research that looked at advising at public, four-year colleges and universities, such as Low's (2000) report on student expectations using the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) that collected data from 745 institutions and over 420,000 students, overwhelmingly found that quality advising appeared as a priority among students across all institutions. According to the SSI, academic advising continued to increase in importance among students at four-year public institutions (Low, 2000). Additionally, with the rise in tuition, students at four-year public institutions had higher and increased expectations for quality services, including academic advising (Low, 2000).

An effective advisor can help enhance students' social and academic integration by introducing them to various opportunities the college has to offer and helping them to connect these opportunities to their individual goals (Hale, Graham, & Johnson, 2009). This has been critical during the second year as students transition to taking more major courses, therefore, increasing the frequency of faculty interactions (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Building positive relationships during this time can support second-year student success (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). Many studies reported that quality academic advising was directly credited for student retention and persistence, and indirectly credited for student satisfaction and academic success (Allen & Smith, 2008; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon & Hawthorne, 2013). Young-Jones et al. (2013) found in their study of investigating "how advising predicts student grade point average, a

known measure of academic success,” (p. 9) that high scores on student efficacy and study skills were related to high grade point average and that meeting with an advisor who could provide them with assistance and support contributed to these factors. They argued that effective interactions and discussions on tips for academic success could support student academic success (Young-Jones et al., 2013).

The length and frequency of contact between a student and advisor positively influenced student motivation and campus involvement (Broadbridge, 1996). In her study, Broadbridge (1996) found that juniors and seniors were more likely than first-year and second-year students to report having an extended relationship with their advisor that went beyond the explanation of academic procedures and policies. One reason for this may be that upperclassmen have had time to establish a personalized relationship with their advisor which may naturally lead to discussing individualized plans and goals (Broadbridge, 1996). These findings reinforced the need to connect second-year students with advisors early in their college careers and help to establish deeper relationships and quality interactions.

**Advising second-year students.** The second year can be an opportunity for deliberate and intentional advising that allows for continued conversations that began in the first year around goal-setting and planning (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000). Although during the first year students may be too distracted to set a plan and goals, second-year students may be more settled and ready to discuss a more realistic and comprehensive plan that can guide them in their remaining three years (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000). Developing an academic “road map” can be desirable because students described the second year as being the mid-point in their academic career that was moving too quickly (Kim-Lee, 2015). Described by a second-year student at a small, private, liberal arts institution,

...we're halfway done, almost, not just for the semester, but our undergrad experience so that's one step closer to having responsibilities in addition to working and all that and getting closer to finding a job and being secure with whatever you want to do and figuring out your plans after post-graduation (Student quote as cited in Kim-Lee, 2015).

The second year can also be a time for advisors to have intentional conversations with their students and to share their academic and professional journey; this can lead to opportunities for mentorship (Ennis-McMillan, Ammirati, Rossi-Reder, Tetley, & Thacker, 2011). Receiving guidance from an advisor based on their experience in the field can be particularly important for a declared second-year student who is ready for the next level of understanding her future options in the field and designing her graduation plans. For students who were still narrowing their interests, providing focused and structured programming opportunities for second-year students allowed them to explore majors, careers, and themselves (Ennis-McMillan et al., 2011).

**Student preferences in advising.** Advisors typically had a prescriptive or developmental approach to advising, and studies demonstrated that students varied in their preferences towards a particular approach (Crookston, 1994). Prescriptive advising is an authority-based approach where the advisor limits him or herself to basic procedural and informative advising activities (Broadbridge, 1996). According to Christian and Sprinkle (2013), students in their first two years preferred a more prescriptive approach to advising; they placed larger expectations on their advisor to direct them on what classes to take. Although students who preferred a prescriptive approach tended to focus on course selection and procedures in their advising sessions, some studies found that they continued to want developmental interactions with their advisor; someone who could mentor them and have broader and more substantive discussions (Creeden, 1990; Smith, 2002).

Alternatively, developmental advising is a two-way, cumulative relationship between the advisor and advisee that supports and stimulates the identification and accomplishment of personal and intellectual goals (Broadbridge, 1996; Hale et al., 2009). Although advisors systematically advise students on policies and procedures, developmental advising attempts to establish a personalized relationship that is not centered entirely on academics and aims to support their entire college experience (Broadbridge, 1996; Crookston, 1994; Frost, 1993). Students who preferred a developmental approach to advising were eager to establish a relationship with their advisor. These students rated depth in a relationship with their advisor as the most important characteristic in an ideal advising relationship (Mottarella, Fritzsche, & Cerabino, 2004). Some studies, however, found that they still expected advisors to maintain some prescriptive advising qualities, such as keeping track of their academic progress and having correct information regarding program requirements and policies (Broadbridge, 1996; Winston & Sandor, 1984).

In addition to approaches to advising, researchers suggested the need to understand the organization of advising services, its various advising models, and its implications on student success. King (2008) argued that several factors influenced the organization of advising services at a university such as its mission, the type of programs it offered, its selectivity, student population, and budget. Students were best served when learning opportunities, services, and programs were easily accessible and were interconnected (Hunter et al., 2009; King, 2008; Pizzolato, 2008). An emphasis on building positive relationships through on-going interactions between students and advisors may require adjustments to advising caseloads and resources (King, 2008).

Tinto (1987) argued that a mismatch or incongruence between the student and the institution, such as class size and on-campus resources, affected a student's commitment to the institution and potentially led to withdrawing from the college. Possible sources of incongruence could be related to interactions with advisors. Studies on advising congruency and student satisfaction argued that when the advising styles were congruent students experienced a higher level of satisfaction with advising than those whose experiences were incongruent (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013; Creeden, 1990; Hale et al., 2009). A qualitative study on advising conducted at the University at Albany with 11,000 undergraduates found that students expected to be "treated like a number" (Smith, 2002, p. 45) and assumed that there would be little interaction with advisors and professors. Although many, therefore, expected to have a more prescriptive advising experience, students who received personal attention from their advisors and professors recalled a more developmental and positive advising experience (Smith, 2002).

These findings demonstrated that complexities exist in the second year. The attrition that exists between the second and third years and the complexities of the second-year experience demand a need for this population to be studied. Exploring the issues that second-year students face and how the role of advising can support students during this transitional year can provide critical research to the limited empirical literature. Understanding the needs of second-year students can also help faculty and administrators to further understand how effective advising can play a role to support second-year students and ultimately efforts to retain them in college.



## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

According to Patton (1990), "...a phenomenological study...is one that focuse[s] on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (p. 71). This study examined and described the *lived experiences* of second-year students at a large, research university in the northeast region of the United States as they transitioned and advanced in their academic and personal development (Creswell, 2007). The study explored the role of advising, and its varying policies and structures, and the way in which advising shaped the second-year experience. Therefore, participant responses were examined to understand their second-year experience, the role of advising during their second year, the role advising played in supporting their academic career, and their overall perceptions with the support service. The findings from this study may help to provide advisors, academic departments, and administration with valuable information on how to best support second-year students by effectively strengthening and promoting the practices of an advising program. The findings also may add to the limited literature on the second-year experience, helping to raise the level of attention given to academic advising as a critical student service during this unique year.

### Interview Design

To understand students' perceptions of their second year and the role of advising, data were collected on second-year students primarily using semi-structured focus groups. This approach placed them in a social context with peers who may be going through similar experiences and allowed students "to consider their own views in the context of the views of others" (Patton, 1990, p. 335). Patton (1990) argued that focus group interviews allowed individuals to express their personal experiences and comment on others' experiences; this approach offered the attainment of "high-quality data in a social context where people could

consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (p. 335). Through focus group interviews, participants may be able to further express shared feelings or occurrences related to their second-year experience and perceptions of advising. It may also aid participants in developing a feeling of trust and community in order to express their voice during the interviews. Due to scheduling conflicts and diminishing response rates as students were recruited closer to the end of each semester, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with two students. They were asked the same 12 open-ended questions asked in the focus group interviews (See Appendix F). The one-on-one interview structure allowed the participants to openly respond to the questions and discuss their experiences and perspectives in greater depth.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

As a form of interpretive research, qualitative research requires the researcher to have a sustained relationship with participants (Creswell, 2007). It is, therefore, common in qualitative studies to be explicit about the researcher’s background, participation, and experience with the research topic to ensure dependability and credibility in the results of the study (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guber, 1985). The researcher of this study has served professionally as an advisor in higher education for twelve years, including two years at the site of this study. As an employee at this institution, the researcher was familiar with the advising structures, policies, and institutional and social environments. The researcher had some previous knowledge of second-year student experiences and was involved in second-year advising. Also, consistent with Turner and Thompson’s (2014) guidelines, in order to avoid bias, the researcher did not make any assumptions about the participants’ perspectives or opinions regarding the research questions while conducting the study. The researcher did not offer any opinions or esoteric information

that would have influenced the participants' responses. Additionally, students who were part of the researcher's advising caseload were excluded from participating in this study.

### **Site of Study**

This study took place during the spring 2016 and fall 2016 semesters in the undergraduate liberal arts school of a large, public, research university in the northeast region of the United States. The undergraduate liberal arts school formed the School of Arts and Sciences, which served close to 21,000 full-time and part-time undergraduate students (University Fact Book, n.d.). Close to 90% of undergraduate students were residents of the state, the majority resided in the county where the university was located. There were slightly more females (53.5%) than males (46.5%) (University Fact Book, n.d.). The University was also made up of a high percentage of first-generation students, including first and second-generation immigrant students; the race/ethnicity breakdown was 43.7% White, 25% Asian, 12% Latino, 7.4% African American, and 5.9% International students (University Fact Book, n.d.). The top three majors at the University were psychology, communication, and economics (Office of Academic Services, personal communications, March 2, 2016).

At this university, students were responsible for seeking advising for their major and graduation requirements. Through a split advising model (Habley, 1983), faculty and professional advisors were available in many academic departments to advise students based on their major, and professional advisors were available in the advising centers, with specific advising deans for the first year, transfer, and senior populations. Outside of these populations, advisors were not assigned to a specific caseload of advisees. Students in the honors communities and in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), a grant funded program which provides additional financial and academic support to qualified students, however, were assigned

to advisors who assisted students from matriculation to graduation. There were also opportunities for specialized advising and resources available for veterans, athletes, low-achieving students, adults, and other non-traditional students. There was an expectation that these advisors understood the characteristics and distinct needs of their respective student populations.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Participants for this study were recruited from the approximately 3,500 students who entered the institution as first-year students based on their matriculation dates and the number of semesters they had been at the institution regardless of the academic credits earned<sup>1</sup> (Institutional Research, personal communications, July 13, 2015). This group was intentionally selected because they arrived together and socially identified as a class. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could inform the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). To minimize internal threats to credibility and ensure transferability, students were purposefully sampled to obtain a range of rich experiences based on the following six criteria: 1) a student who entered the institution as a first-time, first-year student; 2) representative of the University's gender diversity; 3) representative of the University's ethnic diversity; 4) major in the liberal arts; 5) range in grade point average; 6) diverse residential status.

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<sup>1</sup> Second year or sophomore can be defined in multiple ways. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition define sophomores as full-time undergraduate, traditional-aged students who are enrolled in the second year of academic coursework. However, the number of academic credits attained may include pre-college transfer credits, so a student in their first semester can be at sophomore standing. Sophomores can be defined by their second year since matriculating college, although because of non-credit bearing courses or unearned credits due to failed classes, a student may not have earned the minimum academic credits needed to be academically considered a sophomore. A transfer student may also matriculate as a sophomore based on the number of credits they have transferred in, although this may only be their first semester at the institution.

Patton (1990) cited phenomenological studies that used sample sizes ranging from one to 325 participants. A total of 14 students were recruited to participate in this study. During the spring 2016 semester, an announcement was made to second-year students who matriculated in fall 2015 to the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program requesting volunteers to participate in a focus group for this study. In April 2016, after adjusting for scheduling conflicts and omitting the researcher's advisees, a total of six students were interviewed. Participants were asked to complete a *Demographic Questionnaire* prior to the interview (See Appendix E). Then, the researcher conducted two focus group interviews with three students and two students respectively, and one individual interview. In September and October 2016, the researcher requested lists of e-mail addresses of second-year students who matriculated in fall 2015 as first-time, first-semester students from the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning. Each list contained 400 e-mails and was made available by the Office to the researcher through a password protected website. This request was made three individual times resulting in a total of 1200 students who were each sent one recruitment e-mail requesting volunteers to participate in an approximately 60-minute focus group study on second-year students and advising (See Appendix B). The recruitment e-mails yielded a total of seven participants. After adjusting for scheduling conflicts and omitting the researcher's advisees, two focus groups with three students and two students respectively were held in October 2016, and one focus group with two students was held in November 2016. After the sixth interview was conducted, 13 students had been interviewed, and saturation was reached. Participants were not presenting any additional or new information related to their second-year experience (Patton, 1990). However, to ensure overall representation of student ethnicity enrolled at the University, the researcher requested one final list of 400 e-mails. The recruitment e-mail yielded two responses. After adjusting for scheduling

conflicts, one individual interview was held on November 2016. This final interview further confirmed data saturation (Patton, 1990).

Of the 14 participants, five were male and nine were female. Participants were asked to self-identify their race/ethnicity, and five students self-identified as White, seven self-identified as Asian, one self-identified as Hispanic/Latino, and one student self-identified as African American. One participant self-identified as a first-generation college student. A second student disclosed during the focus group that she was also the first in her family to attend college, and two students disclosed that they were first in their families to attend college in the United States. Two participants were commuter students, one participant was an international student, and eight students self-identified as being a member of an honors community.

Participants represented 14 different majors, with four students pursuing a double major and the largest representation from psychology and public health. One participant self-identified as undecided about their major on the *Demographic Questionnaire* that they filled out prior to participating in the focus group, however, five additional participants self-disclosed being undecided about their current major during the focus group interview. Although students in their second year typically earned between 30 to 60 credits, participants ranged in credits based on the number of credits they transferred in and/or successfully completed. Participants' cumulative grade point averages ranged from a 1.98 to a 4.00. Table 1 includes a summary of demographic and factual data of the participants gathered from a *Demographic Questionnaire* they were asked to complete prior to their interview (See Appendix E).

All 14 participants had met with an advisor at least once by the time they were interviewed; the majority had met with an advisor more than once, typically during their first year. Only two of the nine students in the honors community had met with both their assigned

honors advisor and with a professional advisor from the University's advising center. Eleven of the 14 participants cited having sought advice from a professor or a departmental advisor. Nine of the 14 participants shared that they met with a professional staff member, such as the Dean of Students or from Career Services.

### **Data Collection**

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, each student was first sent an electronic copy of the *Participant Consent Form* and the *Audio Addendum to Consent Form* to read and review (See Appendix C and Appendix D). Interviews were held in various conference rooms in the student centers. Upon arrival, students signed the provided *Participant Consent Form* and the *Audio Addendum to Consent Form* (See Appendix C and Appendix D). They also completed the *Demographic Questionnaire*, which captured basic information including their gender, grade point average, and ethnicity (See Appendix E). Participants were given a brief overview of the study, and then asked 12 open-ended questions from the IRB approved interview protocol with follow up questions (See Appendix F). The questions were designed to address the study's two primary research questions and were formed around the current literature on second-year students and advising. Although the first and last questions were always asked in the same order during each interview, the remaining 10 questions were asked in varying sequence to allow for casual conversation between the researcher and participants.

Each focus group and individual interview ranged from 50 to 80 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded using a password protected iPad, and handwritten notes of nonverbal communication, and reoccurring reactions and themes were taken. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim on a password protected laptop within 24 hours of the interview in order

ensure an accurate collection and recollection of data. The transcribed interviews resulted in 79 single spaced pages.

### **Data Analysis**

Miles and Huberman's (1994) 'transcendental realism' (p. 174) approach for data analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The three components of this approach include the reduction of data, data display, and verifying and drawing conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the focus group sessions were completed, the audio taped recording were transcribed and uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data software. Dedoose is a password protected web program which allows qualitative data to be organized and analyzed. Once the transcriptions were uploaded, the program allowed for reoccurring words, phrases, and paragraphs to be highlighted and linked to various codes, created by the researcher; Dedoose served as a data organizer to effectively review participant responses across multiple interviews. The emphasis on analyzing the data was to search for patterns and themes around the second-year experience and perceptions of advising (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, the data were first reduced through coding. Descriptive codes and pattern codes were then created (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Descriptive codes require minimal interpretation beyond the data; examples of descriptive codes that were used in this research were "first-generation student," "first year," and "second year" to identify the time that the experiences and feelings occurred (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pattern codes are inferential and help to cluster and identify patterns in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Preliminary codes were created by finding common phrases, words, and general themes that appeared, such as the issues second-years were facing, how they viewed the role of advising and their advisor, and what resources they turned to for support, as well as



descriptive words and phrases (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Several pre-specified codes were created based on the research questions, such as “expectations from advisors,” “negative advising characteristics,” “positive advising characteristics,” and “second-year experience” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The remaining codes were developed from reading the data multiple times and memoing common words, feelings, and phrases that appeared in each of the data sets, such as “large university issues,” “major exploration,” “time of advising,” and “advisors/non,” which included faculty advising and advising from professional staff. A total of ten codes were created.

Miles and Huberman (1994) regarded data display as a helpful approach to organizing typically bulky information. This step can occur at different stages of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher found this step to be a helpful approach when identifying common themes among participants in this study since many of them expressed similar feelings and experiences based on their identification as an honors or non-honors student, as well as a declared or undecided student. Drawing diagrams helped to see patterns among these groups of students and the relationship to advising. For example, honors students who were assigned to an advisor held higher expectations towards a developmental approach to advising than non-honors students, unless they were undecided, non-honor students seeking guidance and advice about their academic plans.

Although verifying and drawing conclusions is the next logical step after reducing and displaying the data, it often occurs concurrently as the researcher is reducing and displaying the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition to using excerpts from the data to guide the analysis, through memoing, each code was further defined and an evidence trail was built to

track decisions made on coding and re-grouping evidence supporting the codes (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

### **Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Conformability**

To ensure that the data reflected the *lived* experiences and perceptions of the participants, several criteria were utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Individual quotes were selected to more fully describe the themes that emerged from the data.

**Credibility.** During the interviews, the researcher regularly repeated and summarized back the participants' responses to validate and corroborate what was being discussed. Responses from the sample participants were carefully reviewed to ensure that students' voices were reflected in the findings. To further ensure accuracy of the transcriptions, the audio recordings were reviewed a minimum of two times; once during the transcribing process and a second time to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions.

**Transferability.** The setting and students participating in the study were carefully described in order to provide the research context, thereby aiding with the transferability of the results. It is important to note that the findings in this study may not reflect the experiences or perceptions of other students at the institution or at other similarly situated institutions. Nonetheless, these findings may be useful in suggesting patterns of experience for second-year students.

**Dependability.** The method of memoing to track decisions was made when coding by building an evidence trail that the researcher could refer back to ensure consistency in how the codes were being applied. The codes were then re-reviewed to ensure that the evidence supporting the themes were uniform and reliable. Once the themes were finalized, transcriptions were reviewed a third time to confirm consistency (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Confirmability.** The researcher's advisees were omitted from the participant sample. Also, due to the researcher's background in higher education advising and knowledge of the institution, self-reflexivity was regularly employed to discourage self-bias or assumptions, and a data audit was conducted to examine the data analysis and collection procedures. All notes and audio-recordings were immediately transcribed after each focus group in order to ensure that all details were recorded while fresh in the researcher's memory (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

### CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which a group of second-year students, ranging in gender, major, and grade point average from a large research university experienced their second year. It also examined their perceptions of the role of advising in supporting their transition and overall development in the second year. Focus group and individual interviews were conducted with 14 second-year students, ranging in gender, major, grade point average, and ethnicity in order to explore the key issues and challenges students faced during the second year at a large, research university. In addition, students' perceptions of the role of advising in supporting their transition and overall development also were examined.

#### Participant Descriptions

The following is a summary of the demographic and anecdotal data of the 14 diverse participants based on the *Demographic Questionnaire* and referenced throughout the following sections (See *Table 1*).

**Hope:** A White, female, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 4.0 grade point average and 78 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. Hope arrived at college as a psychology major, but remained open to exploring other majors. She decided to minor in criminology and planned to explore pursuing law school to study criminal law. Hope met with her assigned honors advisor and a faculty advisor multiple times. She also referred to her mother, who graduated as a psychology major from this university, as an important resource.

**Heather:** A White, female, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 3.732 grade point average and 69 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. Heather came to the university interested in pursuing history, but decided to find a major

that she felt was more marketable. After exploring economics, she decided to double major in health administration and classics and minor in economics. Heather met with her assigned honors advisor and with faculty advisors multiple times, and regularly sought advice from her parents and upper-class students.

**Ellen:** A White, female, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 4.0 grade point average and 83 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. As an undecided student, Ellen first considered attending community college to explore and decide on a major in order to avoid “wasting money.” She explored several different majors including communications, business, psychology, and Spanish, and ultimately decided to major in psychology and minor in Spanish. Ellen was unsure what area of psychology she wanted to pursue further and planned to participate in more internships. Ellen met with her assigned honors advisor and faculty advisors multiple times. She also cited getting guidance from another honors advisor and a staff member in the student leadership office often.

**Steve:** An Asian, male, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 3.8 grade point average and 93 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. Steve arrived undecided, but considered majoring in physics. He explored possible majors in physics, philosophy, and English, and after taking classes in economics and mathematics, declared a double major in the fall of his second year. Steve met regularly with many people on campus, particularly during his first year: the chancellor, professors, and assigned honors advisor. He also cited receiving a great deal of guidance from upper-class students.

**Albert:** A Latino, male, commuter student and a member of the honors community with a 3.926 grade point average and 67.5 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. Albert attended a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) high school, but arrived undecided. After exploring different majors and classes, he decided to major in English and pursue a career in teacher education. As a first-generation student whose parents did not attend college and having joined the honors community in his second year, Albert often met with his professors during office hours to get advice and guidance. He also met with a professional advisor at the University's advising center and a staff member in career services a few times.

**Evelyn:** An Asian, female, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 3.3 grade point average and 77 earned and attempted credits through spring 2016. Evelyn arrived to college undecided, but soon declared a major in public health after taking several classes during her first year. She met with her assigned honors advisor a few times, but predominately relied on her friends, family, and the university websites for most of her information.

**David:** An Asian, male, commuter student with a 1.98 grade point average and 44 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. David considered majoring in physics, but after realizing that he earned stronger grades in psychology, he switched to a psychology major the summer before his second year and was considering a minor in business. He was thinking about pursuing a Ph.D., but continued to be unsure about his career plans. He met with a professional advisor at the University's advising center, staff members in the Deans office and in career services, and a professor a few times. He cited not being able to talk with his family because they did not attend college in the United States.

**Jabin:** A White, male, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 3.9 grade point average and 79 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Jabin was a member of the marching band, which took up a lot of his free time. His goal was always to become an astronaut and go to space and, therefore, arrived as an astrophysics and computer science double major, which he believed would set him on course towards his career goal or offer him a backup career plan. Jabin met with professors and with his assigned honors advisor a few times, because it was required, and primarily relied on the university websites for most of his information.

**Grant:** A White, male, resident student and a member of the honors community with a 3.431 grade point average and 68 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Grant was the only student who self-identified as undecided. He had been taking a variety of classes to explore multiple majors and continued to remain undecided, but enjoyed the skills he was learning in each of the classes he was taking. He has spoken with multiple honors advisors and professional staff in career services many times, and met with faculty advisors a few times. He also used the university websites to gather information.

**Yeong:** An Asian, female, international, resident student with a 3.1 grade point average and 46.5 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Yeong listed environment and business economics as her major on the *Demographic Questionnaire*, however, she shared that she first tried to transfer to the business school during her first year and then recently decided she wanted to transfer to the environmental school. As an international student, her parents did not know how to help her with the process. Yeong met with a few professional advisors at each of the two schools and with an advisor in the international office a few times, and relied on the university websites for information.

**Kelly:** An Asian, female, resident student with 45 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. She did not disclose her grade point average. Kelly listed her major as actuarial specialization and a Spanish minor on the form, but disclosed that she was undecided during the interview. She met with professional staff from residence life multiple times, and with a faculty member and professional advisors from the advising center a few times. Kelly, however, cited talking to her mom, who earned a master's degree at this university and who currently works at another university, as an important resource.

**Amie:** An Asian, female, resident student with a 2.567 grade point average and 48.5 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Amie recently switched from an exercise science major to a human resources major, but admitted to being unsure and confused about these plans. Amie met with a professional advisor in the University's advising center once, and primarily relied on her friends to give her advice and support.

**Lisa:** A White, female, resident student with a 2.64 grade point average and 44.5 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Lisa was a member of a sorority, which took up a lot of her free time. She also disclosed during the interview that she and her older brother were first in their family to go to college; he attended a private school on an athletic scholarship. She began on the pre-medical track and was struggling with whether she could successfully continue on this track. She was recently advised to consider a psychology major, but she was determined to major in a science and recently decided to pursue a genetics major with a public health minor after speaking with a sorority sister. Lisa met with the professional advisors in the University's advising center multiple times.



**Carla:** An African-American, female, resident student with a 2.8 grade point average and 37.5 earned and attempted credits through fall 2016. Carla's goal was to become a pediatrician, but was struggling with whether she could successfully continue on this track. She was advised to pursue a degree in social work, but Carla recently decided to pursue nursing by declaring a public health major. She was, however, unclear about the steps to apply to nursing school with a public health major. Carla met with one specific professional advisor in the University's advising center multiple times. She also referred to her mother as an important resource.

In analyzing the data, 12 categories were identified. Diagrams helped to illustrate the patterns, and the 12 categories were then collapsed into the following three major themes;

1) Halfway Over, Halfway To Go; 2) Major Opportunities and Major Challenges; and 3) Managing Expectations. In this section are participant descriptions and the themes that emerged from the data, including selected individual quotes that help to provide a fuller description of the themes.

### **Halfway Over, Halfway To Go**

When asked to describe their second year at the university, participants often compared it to their first-year experience and how different they felt emotionally going into their second year. This theme was captured by "Hope", a resident, honors student.

I just feel like it's gone so fast, but there's a clear distinction between first year and second year. I feel like when I left last year to go home for the summer, I was still like, 'Oh I don't know what I'm doing,' but now like, 'I'm okay. I'm going home for the summer and coming back is going to be great. It's going to be fine.' I kind of felt like that last year, but not as much, like I wasn't as sure. And now I feel like I'm definitely more sure. I

don't really know if that's because of something that changed in me or exactly what, but I definitely feel more sure about a lot of different things at the end of this year than last year.

For many students, the first year was less about academics and more about becoming familiar and comfortable with the social aspects of the campus and college experience. Students described arriving to the university in their first year “having no direction on what to do,” but being okay with “exploring...putting myself out there and taking classes I didn’t know if I would like or not.” The majority of the participants used the first year to “navigate the college environment” by learning “where the offices are, what these offices do, and how to register for classes.” Participants who successfully learned how to navigate the campus during their first year spoke about how it helped them in their transition into their second year, as described by “Albert”, a first-generation college student, “Now I know how to use my resources and all. Now that I have these tools, I know how to implement them in my education and in my undergraduate life.” “David”, whose parents did not attend college in the United States, described a similar experience of feeling more prepared going into the second year having gotten a year to familiarize himself with the university, “...now I know how the fall and spring semesters work, I feel more ready to go into this semester. I haven’t skipped classes or anything, so I already know what to do and what not to do for my success.”

Most of the participants described feeling unsure about what to expect during their first year, and, therefore, prioritized finding and making a community at the university. Participants described the first year as a time to focus on “exploring” and needing to “find friends and make a place.” They reminisced about the effort and energy they spent during their first year attempting to meet everyone on campus. For students like “Steve”, meeting as many people as he could

during the first year was more important than what was being discussed with them. This may be a reflection of “Steve’s” self-described “extrovert” personality, but it may also have been a self-awareness that as a first-year student, people had low expectations from him.

I would go to the deans. Even like I remember a few of the Chancellors had open office hours so I would go to those too, and I would literally not know what to talk about so I would talk about the weather or sports...freshman year they expected nothing from me.

In their second year, all the participants described a level of confidence in having established a community at the university, as described by “Kelly”, “I guess I finally figured out who I like in terms of friends. They have now carried over from freshman year to sophomore year...socially, I’ve been able to find myself.” Some of them laughed nostalgically as they recalled knocking on doors during the first day of move in and introducing themselves to everyone on the floor, which they watched this year’s current first-year students do during move in. Students who lived on campus described the dramatic difference between moving in during their first year, which they described as “oh my god. Panic! Panic! Don’t cry!” to moving in during their second year when they were “literally sitting on the bed” waiting for their parents to “go home.” Their behavior conveyed a feeling of familiarity and confidence in what was once unfamiliar and unsure. This led to responses from participants like “Ellen” who described no longer feeling a need to further explore socially.

There’s still exploring to do, but there’s not a need for it. Freshman year you really feel the need to find friends and make a place, but sophomore year it’s like, ‘Well, do I like that? Mm maybe I don’t.’ And then you pursue something else, but you have something like a basis.

Other students like “Evelyn” discussed the friendships she made and maintained into her second year. She credits these established friendships to helping her second year be fun and comfortable during a stressful year as opposed to feeling “crazy” during her first year.

Freshman year you meet like everyone and it’s crazy, but now it’s just like I know what I want to do. I have my group of friends. There’s more of like a schedule or a comfortability to it so it’s like better...I think it is just more stressful in a way than last year, but it is still fun I guess because of my friends and everything.

During the interviews, there was a noticeable shift in conversation towards prioritizing academics during their second year. All the participants entered their second year with strong expectations about what they felt they needed to accomplish, primarily related to academic expectations, such as earning a "good" grade point average, deciding on a major, and exploring opportunities within their major. They shared how unlike the summer before their first year, they used the summer before their second year to prepare academically and emotionally for the upcoming year, as described by “Grant”.

What I did over the summer was at [name of university] they have departmental websites so I went to my major, and I looked at what courses are required to pass, and then I went on degree navigator (an online advising tool) and looked for classes that were interesting to me and were also towards my major. So I’m already on that track. I’ve already followed the courses I chose over the summer to take this semester.

This shift was also observed when participants discussed prioritizing their focus on academics over their friends. Some participants described no longer needing to spend time on cultivating their social commitments, and sacrificing some of the social activities that were now viewed as a deterrent to reaching their academic goals. They expressed confidence in having established their

social relationships. This was indicated by “Lisa” who remarked on her decreased involvement with her sorority in order to focus on her academics because she had put in enough effort during her first year.

I joined a sorority; that's a very huge involvement in itself. I think last year I was constantly like I'll do that and I'll do that. But this year, it's kind of I have my friends in there. I'm established. People understand that I like to be involved, and I care about the things that I'm doing so I don't have to be so hands on. I've already made that impression. So I still have that, but I have just given myself more time for school because I realize that was necessary.

Other students like “Carla” also shared being more selective about her friends this year as she focused on prioritizing her academics.

...I would hang out with that friend group all the time. It was social, social, social. I've had these friends secured, but I made my circle smaller so I wouldn't have as many people to focus on and that would only have people around me who have the same goals and mind set as me so these are people that I can study with or go to the library with versus having people who I can only party with.

**The mid-point.** A predominant theme that arose from the focus group interviews was the urgency that second-year students felt about making decisions that would set them up to have an academically successful junior and senior year in order that they could graduate “on time.” The participants expressed various issues and challenges unique to the second year, but also unique to individual student factors, particularly in terms of their commitment to a major and satisfaction with their current grade point average. They unanimously described the second year as being the mid-point in their academic career that was moving too quickly. Many of their

concerns related to how this year was pivotal in setting the foundation in order to attain their future goals, including graduating and securing a job.

When the participants were asked to state words or feelings that came up when they thought about their second year they described it as “fresh,” “focused,” and needing to academically “narrow down and intensify the subject core” while socially “getting more involved in the things you enjoyed freshman year deeper.” However, the term “stressful” was the most common word used to describe the second year: “comfortable, but stressful;” “very stressed because I feel like I’m not where I should be;” “I think it was just more stressful in a way than last year, but it is still fun...;” “very unsure, and kind of scared.” This overarching feeling of being stressed was connected to the perception that the second year of college was the half way point in their academic careers. Students like “Hope” described feeling stressed over the expectations that others had of her progress at this mid-point in her academic career.

We're approaching the half way point like okay we've been here for like two years now. I think people also look at you like, 'Well what have you done? What can you say about your time?' Stuff like that, so it's like very stressful.

Other students like “Ellen” also described higher expectations others had of her as a second-year student. She remarked, “...people expect you to have it all together, and you can't ask like those very basic questions that freshmen can ask...” Students like “Lisa” also described a change in expectations that she had for herself as a second-year student.

I feel like maybe freshman year you kind of have an excuse. This is my first year, I shouldn't have it figured it out, and I'm probably going to make a few mistakes. If I get a bad grade it's like whatever...I had so many other things going on like mentally and with my social life, but like sophomore year you should be established. You should kind of

have these things figured out. You don't have as much of an excuse to not have it together.

Students described how the realization of being at the mid-point in their academic career led to a significant change in their mindset to plan for the future and recognition that their current academic progress would influence their post-university options. “Evelyn”, an honors student studying public health, discussed the pressure she felt to plan her remaining years and no longer be able to academically slack off. She remarked, “freshman year you can slack off. You can be like, oh this is just freshman year it doesn't matter. Now it's like, oh, now I need to get my life together. We have to get internships. My grades, matter.” “Yeong”, an undecided, international student, shared how during her first year she focused on enjoying being in a new country, while in her second year she felt enormous pressure to prioritize her academics in order to attain a successful future. This enormity may have also been felt because she lacked the support from her family who was unfamiliar with the American school system.

Because in the first year I come to America, I feel very curious. I go travel and go on trips. I think I'm very happy, and that I don't care about the GPA. But near the end of the last year I began to get worried about the GPA because I don't have a very good GPA then I can't go to a very nice graduate school so I feel very worried about it. And also because my parents didn't go to an American university, they can't give me any help. I think in the first year I really enjoy my life, but in the second year I start to really think about my future...It's just one year, but I change a lot and I have to think about so many things. I have to think about this to myself. My parents can't help me. I have to make a decision by myself.

### **Major Opportunities and Major Challenges**

Now in their second year, participants who declared a major remarked having more opportunities as they narrowed in on their academic and co-curricular interests. These students were predominately the students interviewed in spring 2016, the second semester of their second year. Most of the participants reported meeting with faculty and departmental advisors who they viewed as experts in the discipline and who could give them a preview into the major or career. Some students like “Grant” discussed the “insider information” that faculty and departmental advisors could share and pass on to students, which was often information and opportunities that could not be easily found online.

...I wanted to do a summer accelerated language program abroad, and I already looked online at the study abroad website and saw all their requirements. Then, I happened to be talking with the Japanese advisor, and I mentioned that I wanted to do that program, and he said that you needed to be nominated by your 101 teacher, and I saw that nowhere else on earth on the website. So I had no idea that was a requirement, otherwise I would have thought it was like applying and hoping to get in.

**Declared majors.** Participants who had decided on their major expressed a great feeling of relief to have decided on their academic plans. They understood the necessity of declaring a major and deciding on an academic direction, as described by “Evelyn”, “I’ve decided to do public health after taking a few classes in it, and I feel like that’s a huge relief off my brain that I know what I want to do.” For the majority of these students, they arrived at the university with a sense of their possible academic interests, but remained largely undecided about their major and were open to taking different classes. They described using their first year to explore and take a



variety of classes, as described by “Steve”, a male honors student who declared his majors in economics and mathematics during the first semester of his second year.

I think there is a serious difference in intensity from the attitude as a first-year coming into the college environment and progressing to the second year...I came in as undecided.

I thought I was going to be a physics major, jumped around, took classes in the philosophy department, English department, and flirted with the idea of majors in those.

For the participants who decided on their major at the end of their first year or in the beginning of their second year, they focused their second year on narrowing in on specific topics of interest within their major, looked towards opportunities within their major such as internships, and explored possible minors to complement their major. They looked towards the second year motivated and excited about the increased opportunities, as stated by “Grant” a recently declared psychology major.

...now that there are more challenging courses that also means the material that you want to go for is also more interesting. And it also encourages me to keep going on with these new courses...it's motivating because you want to learn.

“Jabin”, an astrophysics and computer science honors student also echoed this enthusiasm.

First semester, I took completely junk easy courses for requirements because I didn't know how to college yet. And then second semester, I started taking more stuff for my major and had to actually start putting some work in. And now it's just the next step better, so more work, more lectures, fun stuff. I'm loving the heck of getting to see what actually is needed to do what I want to do.

Students who declared their major began to view the various advising resources differently. They referred to professional advisors from the honors community and the

University's advising centers as "general advisors," and as resources first-year students turned to when they "are looking for that general advising experience." During the previous year, these students viewed faculty advisors in the departments as someone they would have been too intimidated to talk to. This year they described faculty as "looking at someone 30, 20 years ahead of where I am" and someone to go to for "more specific advising targeted." As "Ellen", a psychology major explained, "I never would have gone to a psych. advisor as a freshman; it's just like that's too specific...Now that I know what I want to do, I would avoid the more general advising now as a sophomore."

They believed that the faculty advisors offered "insight into the department," and could offer them "factual" information about "opportunities" in the major and department and let them know that they "can do this or that." Even students like "Evelyn", who met with her assigned advisor in the honors community a few times during her first year and had typically relied on obtaining information from her friends and family and looking "up things online," shared that she planned to meet with a departmental advisor in her public health major.

I just got accepted to the Public Health School. I just put in a major request to them to their advisor to say like can we meet? But I think I specifically want to do that because I have no idea how the public health school works; what I need to do. If they have a five-year program or anything like that. I want to know more about it so I'm pushing myself to go to that advising meeting over like I guess regular advising. I think that's just because I need to know what's happening, and I can't find that information readily available online as opposed to having somebody explain it to me in person.

**Challenges.** Some of the students who initially explored different academic areas and

decided on their major late in their first year or in the beginning of their second year shared feeling “behind.” They shared feeling intimidated by other students who were pursuing the same major, as well as from the faculty teaching the courses. This is described by “Steve”, who during his first year explored numerous majors. He then narrowed in on taking math and economics courses in the fall semester of his second year, and waited to declare his majors in the spring semester of his second year.

So especially the fact that I declared my major in my sophomore year, you're kind of entering in this world of the department and faculty and students who are already established there and all that stuff and the feeling that you get. And this was especially for me in the mathematics department is that oh my god there's so much I need to catch up on! I felt like I was starting at a disadvantage because everybody there was already thinking as a math major...a lot of people in that class have already taken some version of this course either in high school or community college or somewhere else...I have never been exposed to some of these things...they're able to have an intelligent conversation about the material with the professor, and that's a bit intimidating...I felt like it was hopeless because all these people were so far ahead of me...So it's like very fast and the people around you are getting it so you think yea, I should get it too, but you look at your notes later and you're telling yourself I don't get it, but everyone else got it so if I go to his office hours it's almost showing a sign of weakness. And the whole reason the first year it worked out well is because they're thinking you're coming in with nothing...but it's a lot harder to do that in the second-year...the professors are expecting you to know a little bit more because you are in these more advanced classes. It's a little

bit harder to have that interesting dialogue to convince them that you are genuinely interested and adept at what you're doing and that you're in the right place...

Students reflected on the increase in the academic work load and rigor of the courses as they advanced in their major. With an emphasis on grades and earning a high grade point average to support their future plans during the second year, students recognized the need to adjust the time and effort they put towards their academics, as described by "Kelly", who listed herself as an actuarial studies major but disclosed during the interview that she was undecided.

All the pre-requisites for a lot of classes were already done. I couldn't cruise by anymore. I really had to go to instructors, and I really had to go to deans and advisors and really start studying now. I spend more time at the library rather than at home enjoying my time, watching movies. So it's a lot more work, exponentially each year, more and more work.

"Steve", an honors student who waited to declare his majors in economics and mathematics, also described the change in intensity in his courses since his first year and the extra effort he felt he needed to put in to keep up with his peers.

I took a course my first semester here...I already had a bit of experience with the course so I didn't have to stress out as much when I was taking that...it came to me rather naturally. Now, I'm in a class which is a slightly more intense version...I have to put in double if not triple the amount of effort these people do in order to get the same amount of success.

Balancing their academics with the various academic and co-curricular opportunities

centered around their academic interests was another challenge that some of these participants shared. For students like “Jabin”, an honors computer science and astrophysics major, it was the first time he wanted to spend extra time researching topics that were discussed in his classes.

Like this is the first time I’ve ever sat down and on my free time researched something we talked about in class because I wanted to know more about it and sat there and did the work to self-direct myself towards a new topic.

Other students like “Steve” described the lack of “white space” in his calendar because he wanted to take advantage of all the opportunities that were available to him based on identifying his academic interests.

There’s so many things I want to do between extracurricular activities, between my staying in shape, and taking the classes I wanted, and the workload that comes with those classes...there’s so many things that I want and there’s really finite time and resources to accomplish it...sophomore year has been a huge, huge learning experience in that regard...there are so many opportunities available now that I have a clearer idea of what I want to do, you know, and the things I want to study and the things I want to do moving forward career wise and educationally. Your eyes start to catch the things that interest you and are tangentially related to the things you want to study.

“Albert”, an honors English major, also described similar challenges with an increasing lack of free time available this year.

I guess one challenge I would say is how much less time I have compared to my freshman year...now that I have these tools that I know how to implement in my education, my life, in my undergraduate life I would say, those tools have really allowed

me to fill up my schedule because now I know where to look to and what to do...I've afforded myself the ability to add more things into my schedule.

After deciding on a major, participants discussed shifting their focus from the courses required for their major to planning ahead. The feeling of being "stressed" continued to permeate throughout the second year even after they had declared a major. This may be a reflection of the preparation that second-year students tried to attain academically in order to be prepared for their junior year, "where you're then thinking about careers and making more concrete decisions." This was described by "Heather", an honors student majoring in classics and health administration.

'Okay, so now I know my major and what I want to study in college. Now what do I want to do after college?' So now I've shifted the focus from major class wise and figuring out what I want to do with that.

Students like "Ellen" also described how the pressure she felt from others did not stop, even after she declared her major:

...it's like alright done with the major, but then it's like the same thing...I'd go home and they're like, 'Oh, you picked a major!' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm doing psychology,' and they're like, 'So what are you going to do with it?' And I'm like, 'That's the next question.' So I don't know what I'm going to do career wise at all. So I've got the major, and I've got potential minors, and no career.

**Undecided majors.** For students undecided about their major, there was an urgency to evaluate and reevaluate their plans as a second-year student. Deciding on a major was a critical goal for all these students and was the primary focus of conversation during the interviews. As described by "Grant", deciding on a major consumed much of his time, "...my focus almost

every day is constantly thinking about my major, possible majors and minors; practically every day wondering what I am going to do, planning out courses I would take this year, the next year.” This pressure was particularly felt by the participants who were unsure whether they could successfully achieve their long-term goals based on the grades they were earning, like “Carla” who wanted to become a pediatrician, but was struggling in her required science courses.

I feel like I’m not where I should be at all...since I was little, I always wanted to be a pediatrician. I’ve always wanted to work with kids and wear the white coat and everything, but now that I’m here and I’m taking science classes...this year I’m really struggling with chemistry...it’s frustrating because this is something I know I want to do, but it’s like, 'Can I attain it? Can I actually get there?'

These participants described being at a critical and defining midpoint in their four-year college experience, and needing and wanting to meet with an advisor. Students like “Yeong”, who wanted to transfer to the business school during her first year and was now looking to transfer into the environmental school, associated the second year to deciding a major and planning her future. “...actually sophomore year, I think the major is very important. We need to make sure what we want to do in the future.” “Kelly” also shared feelings of confusion, stress, and uneasiness in the importance of selecting her major this year.

I feel like when you see people the first thing they ask is, 'Oh, what are you studying? What are you majoring in?' And you're like, 'I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing'... It kind of makes you feel a little like uneasy because you don't know what you want to do and then you're stuck feeling very confused, and then you don't know what to take for next semester so it's like a constant circle of stressful not knowing what to do and where to go.

Some of the pressure to decide on a major had to do with graduating “on time” due to financial reasons, as indicated by “Ellen”, who came to the university undecided, “...I was always worried that I was wasting money because a lot of people go to community college when they don’t know what they want to do.” Other students like “Kelly” also described the urgency to select the right major because of financial ramifications, “...I feel like a lot of kids, they’re worried about not just wasting time in school, but also wasting their money because it’s expensive to attend school. And I feel the same way.” Students like “Amie” shared that she felt financial and social pressures from her family to select the right major.

I haven’t told my parents about it because I don’t want to tell them in case I change again. And that’s confusing for them because it’s like choose something. You’re going to waste their money that they’re putting into this.

Participants who were unhappy with their grade point average and struggling with the classes in their major expressed hesitation in moving forward with their intended major during the interviews. The pressure of being in the mid-point of their academic career forced them to reluctantly reevaluate whether continuing forward in their major was a realistic long-term option. “Amie”, who recently switched majors from exercise science to human resources, shared being confused and unsure about this new plan, and described her experience.

My grades weren’t great from last year, and I can probably say that’s because I wasn’t good at what I was trying to do before, and I was going to stay on that path hoping that it was going to get better. My friends were like, ‘Why would you want to stay with something you’re terrible at; you’re just going to be terrible at it in the future. ‘I was like, ‘Okay, fine, I give up.’ I’m pressuring myself to get it together soon because I keep



thinking sophomore year is the half way mark, and junior year, it's like cram time; I need to get everything in. Like no matter what major I choose, I have to have that goal and go. "Kelly", who listed her major as actuarial studies, disclosed that she was undecided and confused about committing to the major.

Choosing a major and going to a direction that I actually want to go to is very confusing. There's so many options. So many things, and not enough time. Time goes by so fast. All of a sudden I'm a sophomore now. I have to start looking for internships. I have to build up my resume. I haven't even had a first job yet. And you see other people, and it seems like they have their entire life together.

In addition to an unsatisfied grade point average, some participants were forced to realize that they needed to reconsider their plans after having to withdraw from a required class in their major. Students like "Carla" had ambitions to become a doctor, but recently needed to withdraw from a required science class because of failing grades. She was still deciding whether to retake the required class the following semester and understood that her decision would determine whether she could continue with her current goal of becoming a doctor.

I recently dropped chemistry... It's frustrating because this is something I know I want to do, but it's like, 'Can I attain it? Can I actually get there?'... And it sucks because you need chemistry to get there. That's the main course that you need, and I wasn't doing well. I'm going back and forth about whether I should take the class again next semester or if I should pick a different route overall. Right now on my schedule for next semester I have chemistry, but I'm still straddling the fence. I don't really know.

"Lisa" was also going through a similar experience as "Carla" after having to withdraw from her physics class, which forced her to reconsider her plans to become a doctor.

So freshman year really didn't go well. I knew what I wanted to be doing, but I just wasn't doing it. And then this year, I was in a physics class, and I was just like I hate physics so much that I just recently dropped it...because I got a 20 on the first exam, and I studied for that exam. I know that even if I switch to genetics and I'm pre-med, I still have the same pre-reqs so I have to take physics I, II, and lab...I'm just like those science and math classes are not for me. I'm more interested in public health, but I want to have more of a science background...I don't know how long it'll take for a ball to drop.

The participants who expressed being undecided about their intended major described reluctantly needing to "come to terms" with changing a major that they had hoped to pursue and graduate with, as described by "Lisa."

You have to come to terms with like maybe I am doing something that's not meant for me. And that takes a while to come to terms with. And then it's like, 'Okay then what is my next move from there?'

Some of the participants, like "Amie", described a social stigma with changing their major, and as a result feeling shame in announcing their decision to others who were aware of their intended plans.

Everyone stared at me when they realized I had changed my major. I went to a vocational high school, and they expected me to do whatever I was doing...they're probably like, 'Oh my gosh.' They're probably judging me because I'm no longer in the sciences...I'm like, 'Okay. I'm sorry that I disappointed you, but I'm not the same person I was two years ago.'

Other students like “Lisa” also reported feeling judged socially for changing her major; “People know that you’ve committed to that. And then changing it, it’s like oh what? You’re weren’t good enough for it?”

Regardless of their current status with their major, 9 of the 14 participants arrived at the university undecided. Many of them described the amount of time and effort that it took and had been taking to declare a major. “Grant”, the only participant who wrote “undecided” on the *Demographic Questionnaire*, shared how he approached his second year as an undecided student.

I was thinking about how to get myself more involved and what sort of skills I wanted to build up, but my focus was almost every day constantly thinking about my major, possible majors and minors; practically every day wondering what I was going to do, planning out courses I would take this year, the next year; what sort of study abroad I could do. It was really a lot of finding out what there is and planning and seeing what I wanted to do...I can personally recite the requirements for five different majors and none of them I’m even doing because I looked at so many different departments to figure out what was exactly going to be my specialty.

Unlike students who arrived undecided on their major, participants who arrived to the university having decided a major were less inclined to take classes in other disciplines, particularly students who were pursuing credit intensive majors in the sciences. Students like “Lisa” shared how she arrived at the university with plans to pursue the pre-medical track, and the pressure she felt to take these classes immediately. She described a feeling of regret not having had the opportunity to explore other classes during her first year.

I kind of wish I had come into college undecided. When you do something like pre-med, that has to start right then and there. You can't be like sophomore year, 'Oh maybe I should be pre-med.' And then you're in college for an extra year...the pre-health sciences, it's very laid out like what you should be basically doing each year.

Alternatively, undecided students like "Grant", who had no plans to pursue the sciences, described how exploring different classes during his first year allowed him to effectively begin to narrow down his academic interests this year.

...I'm starting to focus more on what I want to do and what activities I want to involve myself in. Whereas in freshman year, you're sort of testing things out and really unsure and like a new environment, I think in my sophomore year I'm definitely directing my energies better.

**Opportunities.** For undecided students, advising became a sought after resource and a priority this year. This was particularly observed with students who were undecided and not part of the honors community. All six undecided students were interviewed in fall 2016, the first semester of their second year, and most of the students cited meeting with an advisor this year at least once regarding questions about their major and plans. Of the six students, five were non-honors students who sought advising from a professional advisor in the University's advising center. For most of them, it was one of the first opportunities where they met with an advisor during their time at the university. "Lisa", a non-honors student who was no longer sure about her plans to become a doctor shared why she waited until her second year to meet with an advisor.

First year I never went and saw an advisor at all...I didn't find it necessary. I don't

know what I would have said to an advisor...sophomore year, I'm not really in a place where I need guidance anymore. I need help. I need to figure out what to do right now because I'm in trouble, kind of...

"Carla", a non-honors student, also shared that she had met with a professional advisor in the University's advising center three times before reluctantly withdrawing from a chemistry course that she was performing poorly in. She continued to meet with the same advisor multiple times this year to discuss her major plans and reflected on how differently she viewed this advising meeting compared to during her first year.

So going to my advisor, that's something I scheduled, but I wasn't prepared. I wasn't focusing on it. I honestly could have cared less. I felt like that's something I should do; somebody I needed to talk to more so...I didn't know what advising was... Then this year, I'm like, 'I need to do it.' This is not like something like, oh I'll schedule it, I'll go just talk to them...make sure I've been there. This semester it's like, 'No, I need to do this.' I honestly feel like it's my lifeline, talking to my advisor. I need guidance and not having my mom around is, she's not guiding me anymore. I need somebody else to help guide me basically.

"David", a non-honors student who struggled as a physics major during his first year shared his perspective on the professional advisors in the University advising center after meeting with them to talk about improving his grades and changing his major to psychology.

I feel like most people think it's [help] not there, but in actuality it is there because the academic deans and everyone, their job is literally to help people...they're like the guides who help us...I know a bunch of friends who are like how do I get through this program...they're looking at their plan thinking, 'I don't know how to get here' or, 'I

failed this class, how do I get back in?' So they have these questions, and I already know that if you go to the dean they literally guide you through the path.

Undecided honors students like "Grant" reached out for support beyond his assigned honors advisor in the fall of his second year as he began to focus more on identifying a major.

I guess I started thinking about what I generally wanted to do. From there, what sort of majors would fit in my goals, and then I would look through department websites...then asking professors I meet in class. Sometimes I might ask a question after class or during recitation, or I even e-mailed a professor asking about a course they would be teaching in the following year. And also, I talked a lot with my honors deans. I went to four different honors deans first week of fall, and I asked slightly different questions to each one, and asked about different focuses, and they all gave me good information and different information. Not like it's a bad thing, but I'm getting a lot of sources to weigh in on my thoughts and my plans of what I want to do.

**Challenges.** Other undecided, non-honors students like "Kelly", however, described finding it difficult to identify an appropriate advisor to speak with about her struggles with deciding a major.

...unless you have a department specific question then you go to the department, but it's like you go to [the University's advising center], but you don't really know who to go to and where to go to...when you look online, there's no information except the name of the person, who they are, office hours of the deans of the advisors. It's also very hard to navigate the websites because there are so many, and each department has its own advisor. And there are so many advisors, but there is really no one to go to. Then you think of the advisors, it's more of, 'Which class should I take?' rather than, 'Which major

should I go to? How should I study? What should I do? I'm worried about my future, who can I talk to about it with?'

Students like "Amie", who was still undecided even after switching from an exercise science to a human resources major, also shared a desire to talk with someone about being undecided, but being unsure who she could talk with.

I feel like the advisor's role is just kind of like you need to graduate... 'I'll give you all the basic things you need to survive at this school and do what you want to do,' but they won't really give you guidance on where you want to go... I just wish that there was another advisor in sense to help you figure out what you wanted to do...

### **Managing expectations**

All the participants had a basic understanding that academic advising was an available resource offered at the university. They had all met with a professional advisor at least once by the time they were interviewed for this study. Most of the participants sought some form of advising from a professional advisor and/or faculty member at least once during their second year. The professional advisors in the student's respective honors programs and in the University's advising centers performed the majority of advising, although most of the students, particularly those who had declared a major by their second year, also referred to the faculty advisors in their major department. This was reflective of a mixed model advising structure that existed at the university (Pardee, 2000). For some of the students, their first advising experience occurred during the first semester of their first year. With the exception of one student who was required to see an advisor as a requirement to being a member of the honors community, the other students voluntarily met with an advisor. The reasons ranged from discussing ways to

“increase my GPA and finalize my plan for the semester,” “how to get credits to transfer over from a different school,” “major exploration,” and to discuss withdrawing from a class.

Students had a unanimous desire to have a relationship with an advisor who incorporated both developmental and prescriptive qualities. There was an expectation that advisors were responsive, listened, were resourceful, and cared about their job and helping students. Participants like “Grant” described what this combination looked like, “...I think an advising session shouldn’t just be strict business. It should be more like developing the student.” “Kelly” also shared her desire to meet with an advisor who offered more than a prescriptive approach to advising, “Being able to give resources as to hey if you’re interested in this, why don’t you go do that rather than just saying here’s the answer to your question, do this.”

**Differing advising expectations.** Depending on the participant’s personal experience with advising and their expectations of the role of advising, perceptions of advising at the university were mixed. Several of the students shared wanting to be more than a student identification number, as “Evelyn” an honors student described, “I feel like having that one extra person who knows you as more of an individual level rather than oh ID number this this this or test number is something that I really want.” Some students, like “Ellen” and “Hope”, both honors students, described enjoying the autonomy they had.

You’re really on your own. The help is there, but you have a lot of power. Like at other schools, my friends have to go to the registrar to change their major, and at [the University] you don’t have to do that. You can change it as many times as you want as long as you finish on time, it doesn’t really matter.



I have friends at other schools where the advisors tell them exactly what classes to take and then they're like, 'Oh my advisor messed up my schedule,' or whatever. That kind of like really turned me off from like small liberal arts schools because I was like, 'Okay, well if I make a mistake on my schedule at least it was me, and I'm not completely relying on this person to do everything for me.' I think in that way [the University] is good because it really teaches you to be a real person, and you're not really relying on someone else like, 'This is what you're going to do for the next four years and after you graduate you're going to do this.'

Alternatively, "Carla", a non-honors student described the benefits of advising at a small school in respect to having more time and access to an advisor.

The rule is 15-minutes, and honestly that sounds ridiculous...I feel like at a smaller school you may be able to have a better relationship with the advisor, and you would also be able to see them more often and get more time and effort from them to help you.

Versus [the University] where there are thousands of students, and they only have so many hours in a day to schedule all those students.

Non-honors students like "Amie," also suggested creating an advising structure that required students to be more dependent on advisors.

...if they had mandated that we had at least one academic advising session a semester, at the very least, I think that would be a lot more helpful because we think we can do it all on our own, and we want to do it all on our own, but by doing that it forces us to depend on them.

Participants who were assigned to an advisor in the honors community, however, described satisfaction in not feeling like a “number” at a large institution. When asked about the role of advising at a large research university “Ellen” described it as,

...to break the rumor that you're just going to be a number. I can't tell you how many people told me that when I went to [the University] that I'm just going to be a number, which was pretty terrifying, and one of the reasons that I'm happy that I'm in the honors program. I think the advisors are the first opportunity for the student to feel like they're not just going to be a number.

*Honors students.* A feature of the honors community at the university was the academic advising resource they provided to their students. Every incoming student was assigned to a professional advisor who served as their advisor from matriculation to graduation. Honors students, therefore, approached the role of the advisor with intrinsically high expectations of having a personalized advising experience. When asked what they wanted from their advisor, honors students expressed wanting “a friend,” to “feel special,” to go “above and beyond” instead of giving out “a bunch of resources to look at.” They wanted someone that remembered their name and a little bit about them, as indicated by “Evelyn”, an honors student.

I guess when the person knows your name, which again at [the University] I know it's a big school so that's a difficult expectation, but I think if the person remembers a little something about like if you had a deep conversation with them, that makes you more prone to going back because you're like okay, this person kind of knows my story so if I have questions in the future I've already established this relationship with them.

For these students who were assigned an advisor, there was also an expectation that advisors approached students with the desire to build a long-term relationship with them that didn't

require students to re-introduce themselves or repeat their story again. “Hope”, an honors student, described the frustration she felt recalling that her assigned advisor, who she met with multiple times, did not remember her name. This led to her disgruntled feeling that she had to spend time reestablishing a new relationship each time they met.

...she would never remember who I was and like whatever, that's fine, like I know she has a lot of students and whatever...I was like alright, well this is just a waste of my time then because you have to go and repeat your story all over again, and you're like this is a waste of my time when I could be writing a paper or something.

Many of the honors students who were assigned an advisor described wanting a holistic and developmental relationship with some prescriptive qualities as indicated by “Evelyn”.

...I was looking for more personal things rather than just like, 'Well here are the numbers for this; here are the e-mails for this.' Maybe I wanted more of a personal, 'Oh like here's what I think you should do or here are what other students have done or personal stories and things like that.' I think that would have been better.

Students who had a positive experience with their advisor during their first year continued to meet with their advisor in their second year, as indicated by “Steve”, who shared that he met with his assigned honors advisor “pretty often” - at least three times a semester.

I remember it was the first week of classes and I went straight to my honors dean...and I told her, 'Listen this is where I'm at; I have eight different options on the table, and I don't even have an idea of what classes to be taking because it's all over the place.' She was very sweet walking me through what the options are.

He emphasized how their meetings were sometimes informational, or sometimes they were 10 minutes of friendly banter. For “Steve”, a satisfying advising experience was building a relationship with his advisor beyond academic advising.

It'd be about 10 minutes, then I would walk out, but those meant a lot to me because it meant that I could walk in and we were that much closer, and we could start talking about life, and how I felt about English and philosophy and music and all that stuff.

Students who had positive advising experiences during their first year reflected on their second year advising experiences as they continued to meet with their advisor. “Grant”, an undecided honors male, described a continued positive experience with his assigned honors advisors and other advisors in the honors community.

...all my deans...would look on the computer and say, 'Oh we have this and this; you could also look here, and here's a journal you can look to research.' It's really friendly. Even though they might not have had all the answers; like if it was a really, really specific question they might say, after they went through like, 'Okay, here's what you should do for Japanese. You should also contact this person at the department. This is the undergraduate director or the head person, you can also e-mail them and they'll give you information.' So I feel like they didn't just pass it along; they helped and then sent you to other resources you can build up your knowledge.

Students who did not have a positive experience during their first year did not meet with their advisor in their second year, which they cited as the reason why they never met with their assigned honors advisor this year. “Jabin” shared what he felt was an impersonal and unsatisfying advising experience with his assigned honors advisor, who he was required to meet with each semester during his first year. He expressed frustration that his advisor immediately

sent him to speak with a department advisor rather than "...sort of walk me through it. To let me know what I should be doing or if there are opportunities on campus I should know or any sort of advice beyond e-mail this person with all your problems."

She gave me the e-mail address for the undergraduate director of the physics department and was like e-mail him. Why do I even have you if a rolodex would take up less space? And I'm sure she's a wonderful person, but she wasn't very helpful at all. They're not ever helpful in telling you what you need to know or help you do what you need to do, they just shove you off to someone else.

Another honors student described a similarly dissatisfied feeling about an advising session with her assigned honors advisor. "Evelyn" shared the frustrating feeling she had when her assigned advisor immediately directed her to departmental advisors.

...the few questions that I had she gave me phone numbers for and e-mails for other departments, and I was like, 'Well I could have done that myself.' I feel like that kind of swayed me to not go out of my way to walk down or go to a different campus to find a different advisor.

When asked what would have been a more satisfying approach, "Evelyn" shared how she wished for a more personalized and individualized conversation where the advisor helped "Evelyn" make connections based on her skills, interests, and goals, and provided a different perspective.

...I'm sure they have a bunch of resources available to them. They could say, 'Oh, so you can look into this or look into that or based on your skill sets I think these scholarships or something you can apply for things like that,' and the dean would know how to cater to you more.

“Ellen”, a psychology honors female, also described being unsatisfied that her advising experience was impersonal. “She seemed to follow like a book. I didn’t ever see her pull out a book, but like I need to tell them to explore. I shouldn’t let them think that they have it all figured out.” “Hope”, another psychology honors female, shared how she felt that her advisor was not listening to what she wanted to get out of the advising appointment, which was to map out her future plans.

...I know I told her this whole story and she was kind of like, 'Alright, well let's focus on now,' and I was kind of like, 'No, I'm neurotic. You're not getting this. I have my whole life planned out.' And she was like, 'No,' and I was like, 'Okay.' I tried to go to her again in the spring of freshman year and I was like, 'I want to talk about the next few years. I want to like talk to you about this,' and she was kind of like, 'No, let's focus on now,' and I was kind of like, 'You're not getting it. I want to talk about more than just this semester because I'm fine for this semester. I need to talk about going forward so I have like a plan,' and she kind of like not necessarily that she didn't care, but she was like it's not really concerning me now so I like didn't go back. I just wanted her to tell me that it was good and that I wasn't going to like not graduate on time or something.

***Non-honors students.*** Students who were not a member of the honors community, and therefore not assigned an advisor, typically sought advising from the professional advisors in the University's advising centers. Unlike their honors counterparts, who all sought advising during the first weeks of their first year from their assigned advisor, many of the non-honors students typically did not first seek advising until the end of their first year or during their second year. The predominant complaint that these students had was not having enough time to meet with an advisor because the appointments were scheduled every 15 minutes. Students, therefore,

described feeling “rushed” or not have their issues or concerns individually addressed because of the restricted time limit. This experience was captured by “Lauren” who met with an advisor to talk about switching her major.

She did try a bit, but it felt like she didn't have the time to sit down and figure out what I really wanted to do...I also felt kind of rushed because when I walked in there was a bunch of people sitting out there, and I was like, 'Sigh, I got to be quick in there because these people need help too.' I do see how it's very difficult to advise ALL the students at THIS school. It's very difficult to make things personal when you go to a huge school. [The University] does try, but still it's a challenge. I guess you don't really have the time to sit down and say, 'Well, I didn't like that,' and the advisor's like, 'Let's recalibrate, let's think again.' Nobody really has the time to sit down and do that with you.

Since non-honors students were not assigned to an advisor, they often felt like the conversations were “impersonal,” as described by “Kelly”.

So trying to figure out who exactly I need to talk to was very confusing, and I felt like there were so many advisors, and you're not really assigned to anybody so you go to anyone, and it's kind of very impersonal because they don't know who you are...Being able to see the same person so they end up knowing who you are, what your name is, how you're actually feeling, that would be helpful instead of going to a complete stranger each time. It would definitely make it much more personalized especially at such a big school where you don't even know your professor's name half the time and they even know your name. It'll make the process of who you are, what you want to be a little more easier because at least something is constant.

The 15-minute time limit and the feeling that the advisors were “impersonal” also affected the quality of the conversations, as described by “Yeong”.

...sometimes I ask questions and the advisor is just like a machine telling me things that I already know and is repeating things and not telling me things I should know for the future. They just repeat it. Like I go and they say, 'What is your ID number,' and I give her my ID numbers, and then I tell her my classes, and she tells me what class to take next like a machine...they just do their job...I need some people to respond, ask some questions, and I need to feel comfortable that they really want to help me out.

Some students like “Carla”, a non-honors student, managed to meet with the same advisor in the University advising center multiple times and for longer than 15 minutes. This developed into a satisfying, long-term relationship.

She told me when to schedule an advising appointment so she would have more time to talk to me so I went back for another time after I had dropped the course, but right before I had to pick classes and she guided me again, and we spent like an hour together.

Advising appointments are only 15 minutes so she was basically guiding me on what to do and where to go; who to call if I needed to get into a course. I feel like she definitely helped me a lot.

### **Summary of Findings**

Due to a lack of empirical research centered on the second-year student experience assumptions have often been made about the challenges and issues that students face during their second year. Based on the focus group and individual interviews of 14 diverse second-year students attending a large, research university in the northeast region of the United States, this study found that all the students perceived the second year as the mid-point in their academic



career. For this reason, students expressed various concerns that centered on establishing a foundation to help them attain realistic and successful future goals. They described the first year as a time to focus on building and solidifying their social relationships and community. They discussed the important role that their social community has had in helping them get through the challenges of the second year, as they redistributed time and focus towards their academics. Findings from this study also identified specific challenges and issues that undecided students faced, particularly for students who were pursuing a major that they were not attaining strong grades and progressing successfully in. These students expressed feeling pressure to reluctantly reevaluate their academic plans at this point in their career. Overall key issues they identified were earning a strong grade point average, declaring a major, and exploring academic opportunities that would prepare them for a successful second half of their academic and post-college career.

This study also examined the perception of the role of advising during the second year. All the participants had a basic understanding that academic advising was an available resource offered at the university, and most students expressed a desire to work with an advisor who held both developmental and prescriptive approaches to advising. However, there were differences in the timing of when participants first met with an advisor and their expectations from advising based on two major factors. First, most students who were members of an honors community, and therefore assigned an advisor, often met with an advisor in the beginning of their first year. Many of these students described a desire to build a relationship with their advisor that did not require them to re-introduce themselves or repeat their “story” again. These students also expected the advisor to take the time to get to know them before referring them to appropriate campus resources. Students who were not assigned to an advisor typically began meeting with a

professional advisor from the University's advising center near the end of the first year or in the beginning of the second year. Students primarily met with advisors around academic issues, such as improving their grade point average or deciding on a major. Many of these students described feeling limited by the 15-minute appointments and understanding that other students were also waiting to meet with an advisor. Additionally, while many students who declared a major sought advising from a faculty advisor, who they deemed as experts in their field, undecided students expressed an urgency to meet with a professional advisor. These students wanted a holistic approach to advising where the advisor aimed to understand the student's interests and help guide them to readjust their plans towards a realistic goal.

This study captured descriptions of the *lived experiences* of students in their second year and analyzed their perceptions of the role of advising during this critical time. The findings of this study offered insight on a topic that has increased in attention in the field of higher education, but that researchers of higher education have failed to respond to. This study may help to place attention on the second-year experience and the role of advising.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the ways in which a group of diverse second-year students attending a large research university in the northeast region of the United States experienced their second year. It also examined their perceptions of the role of advising in supporting their transition and overall development in the second year. This study aimed to address two main questions: 1) What do a group of second-year students pursuing various majors identify as key issues and challenges faced during their second year, and 2) What are second-year students' perceptions of advising and its role in supporting them during their second year? The intent of this study was to extend the current knowledge base of students in their second year attending a large, public, research university. In the following section, the implications of the findings are discussed and recommendations to help improve the experiences of second-year students and strengthen the role of advising and its practices are suggested.

### **Second-Year Experience**

The findings of this study unequivocally support the belief that the second-year experience is a critical time in a college student's development. Participants in this study shared that they faced a number of issues and challenges that were unique to the second year. Findings supported the assertions made by Hunter et al. (2010) that selecting a major, self-efficacy, reevaluating values connected to majors and interests, social involvement, institutional satisfaction, and finances were key issues and challenges that students faced during the second year. In addition, some of the participants in this study reported that they felt pressure with the increase in demand from their coursework as they progressed in taking advanced courses. Other participants expressed the added confusion of not knowing who and where the appropriate campus officials were to speak with about issues like transferring and major exploration.

Confusion and anxiety over identifying the appropriate officials to speak with may be a specific consequence associated with the large size of the university used for this study, and an issue other students at large, public universities may also face. Additional research conducted at other large, public universities may help to confirm the challenges students face navigating large institutions.

Deciding on a major and exploring academic opportunities were priorities repeatedly raised by all the participants in this study. Previous studies have focused on major exploration and declaration as being central issues in the second-year experience. Similar to Anderson and Schreiner's (2000) findings, participants in this study shared feeling pressure from their family and friends to have decided on a major, career goals, and plans at this point in their academic career. Additionally, a few participants in this study expressed an urgency to decide on their major plans in order to avoid delayed graduation and further costs in tuition (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000). However, since the type of institution in this study was a public university there were significantly fewer concerns raised about financial implications than might have been presented at a private institution (Kim-Lee, 2015). Contextual institutional factors may serve to impact student experience, therefore, future research may want to compare differences in issues and concerns for students attending private versus public institutions.

Consistent with earlier research exploring second-year students, participants in this study who struggled to decide on a major expressed feeling confusion and anxiety (Freedman, 1956). As discussed, Freedman's (1959) term "sophomore slump" has been used to describe these various feelings and emotions. However, unlike interpretations of the *sophomore slump* (Freedman, 1959; Hunter et al., 2010), a lack of motivation was not a challenge that was raised by the participants in this study. Additionally, other issues such as feeling unmotivated by the same

routine, academic disengagement, unhappiness with the college experience, and developmental confusion with one's values and identity were also not challenges reported by participants (Hunter et al., 2010). In this study, all 14 participants described an increase in motivation, particularly around their academics and interests, and a desire to raise their grade point average. These findings differed from Gump's (2007) study in which second-year students reported an increase in absences and a decrease in grade point average. An intentional decline in motivation was only observed when it related to their social life in order to focus more time and effort on academics. For example, "Lisa" reported not being as involved with her sorority as she had been during her first year as a conscious decision to use that time to focus on her academics. Because the majority of the participants shared the importance of friendships and social commitments, further research conducted on the second-year experience may want to look how the role and presence of establishing friends and a social community in the first year affects the second-year experience.

Although the findings in this study supported instances of Schaller's (2005) four-stage developmental framework applying to students at a large, public university, it also uncovered additional features that may be unique to the site of study and the participants of this study. Schaller's (2005) stage of *random exploration*, in which she claimed most first-year students arrived to college in, focused primarily on the observation that students had undirected plans related to their major and career. Although this was observed with some of the participants in this study, depending on their major, some students expressed feeling pressed to immediately direct their studies and coursework towards their intended academic plans; this was primarily observed with students on the pre-medical track. Additionally, participants described focusing much of their attention during the first year towards forming and understanding their new

community, which Schaller (2005) does not mention. For the students in this study, establishing friends and commitments to extra-curricular activities during this stage appeared to result in critical social relationships that supported students during the second year. Thoroughly understanding the community and its surroundings were also critical factors that, when established during the first year, allowed second-year students, particularly first-generation and international students, to navigate the second year more effectively.

Contrary to Schaller's (2005) findings that the stage of *tentative choices* was when students began to recognize a new layer of responsibility about how their decisions may impact their future plans once they could see their future plans more clearly, participants in this study described experiencing these feelings at the start of the second year regardless of where they stood academically. As participants unanimously described the second year as the mid-point in their academic careers, this study found that earning a strong grade point average was a driving factor for many of the decisions that the participants made since they associated a good grade point average to access to future opportunities, such as obtaining successful jobs and acceptance to competitive graduate schools. Therefore, students were motivated to achieve good grades even if this meant changing or limiting their social commitments. For some students, this also meant hesitantly withdrawing from required classes for their major, which could set them a semester or a year behind in coursework. For other students, particularly students on the pre-medical track, it also meant reluctantly reevaluating their major and career plans, and life-long dreams.

### **Role of Advising**

As the Student Satisfaction Inventory (Low, 2000) and other research reported, participants in this study also supported the desire for quality academic advising. Although most participants expected advisors to review the general education requirements, provide clarification

on academic policies, help them select classes, and other prescriptive approaches to advising, most students expressed also wanting elements that were more developmental. Regardless of the reason why they met with an advisor, students wanted advisors to give them personalized suggestions based on the opportunities and options that advisors were aware of that were related to the student's individual interests. This may be partly why some students cited moving from meeting with a "general advisor" to meeting with a faculty advisor, who they described as experts in their field. Students also disliked being immediately referred to a website or another campus resource. Therefore, although students were not dissatisfied with the advisor referring them to a different campus resource who could provide more detailed information, students wanted to feel that the advisor was responding to a question with more than a quick response. An assumption could be made that students are aware that there may be more things to talk about with an advisor beyond their immediate question, and believe that it is the advisor's role to help uncover them. Although Mottarella, Fritzsche, and Cerabino (2004) found that students who preferred a developmental approach to advising rated depth in a relationship with their advisor as the most important characteristic in an ideal advising relationship, this study found that students who were assigned to an advisor were more likely to prefer depth in an advising relationship than students who were not assigned to an advisor. Assumptions may be made that assigning students to advisors through an advising caseload model could lead to higher student expectations that their relationship with their advisor should deepen over time.

Schaller (2005) did not explicitly identify the role of the advisor, however, she argued that second-year students needed to be taught, encouraged, and guided through the developmental process of engaging and making decisions through exploration. Although the participants in this study referred to consulting with family, friends, upper-class students, and

other campus staff, findings of this study uncovered that an advisor may effectively serve this role and responsibility by possessing both the prescriptive and developmental qualities needed. The findings in this study also tended to support Anderson and Schreiner's (2000) argument that first-year students may be too distracted to set a plan and goals, and that the second year may be when students are more settled and ready to discuss a more realistic and comprehensive plan that can guide them in their remaining three years. Some of the honors students and many of the non-honors students in the study expressed feeling unprepared or intimidated to meet with an advisor during the first year. Some of the students suggested requiring students to meet with an advisor at least once during their first year so that they were more prepared to meet with an advisor during their second year. Although this may be an unrealistic expectation to mandate based on the size of the university, students might be provided a list of various advising resources and a guide that includes advising items to be discussed during an advising session in the first and second years. This may help to encourage more students to meet with a campus official and have a clearer understanding and plan of what to discuss.

Students' satisfaction with advising was related to expectations for their advising meeting. Students who primarily met with the professional advisors at the University's advising centers shared feeling frustrated with having only 15 minutes to meet. An awareness of time constraints and of the line of students waiting to meet with an advisor were issues that were frequently mentioned by non-honors students and never mentioned by honors students. Students were also very dissatisfied when their request for help in planning ahead was dismissed. There may be hesitation by advisors to plan beyond the current or next semester because they feel compelled to help students "slow down." Additionally, if time is a constraint, advisors may believe planning without assurance that the student's plans are realistic may be considered a low



priority item to work on during the limited time that is available during the advising session. However, students were clearly dissatisfied when their expectations were not met during an advising session. As King (2008) argued, building positive relationships through on-going interactions between students and advisors may require adjustments to advising caseloads and resources.

With reference to Schaller's (2005) four-stage developmental framework, the findings from this study emphasize the importance of the second year as a critical time when in depth exploration should occur in order to assist students with informed decision-making. Adequate exploration and informed decision-making appeared to be key issues and challenges for students in their second year of college. Participants reported returning back to the university for their second year with an urgency to select and commit to a realistic and successful major and academic plan. Advisors can play an effective role in teaching, encouraging, and guiding second-year students in these decisions through informed exploration that helps them to explore with a purpose, or as Schaller (2005) argued with *focused exploration*. Participants who adequately explored classes in different disciplines and researched various majors and requirements reported greater confidence in their major selection and career plans. Participants like those pursuing the science or pre-medical track who were unable to explore classes in other disciplines, and may have made uninformed or forced decisions about their major were not confident in their major selection and choices, which appears to have had significant consequences. These students had not made their decisions as a result of successful exploration, but rather may have felt pressured to choose a major. These students seemed to want and need to meet with an advisor who would take the time to provide personalized suggestions and adequate information that would encourage thoughtful and thorough exploration of their options. As Schaller (2005) argued, the

longer that students fully explored and reviewed all their major options, the more successful and confident they were in setting the course for the remainder of their college career.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study that may affect how the findings can be generalized and used to impact the larger second year and advising communities. Although this study included interviews conducted with students in the fall and spring semesters, it is an unrealistic expectation and assumption that the issues and challenges that the participants reported were static. Experiences are dynamic and influenced by recent decisions and circumstances. In other words, experiences must be understood with a context. For example, the individual interview with “Carla” had just occurred soon after the deadline to withdraw from a class. The focus group with “Lisa” had just occurred after she had a disappointing meeting with an advisor about her grades. Their responses, therefore, may have been shaped by the recent events and may not be a reflection of their entire second year and advising experiences. The campus setting is unique and is likely to influence students’ perceptions and interactions, thereby affecting experiences in their second year.

Literature claims that advising relationships deepen over time (Broadbridge, 1996). Therefore, the advising experiences that participants described at the start of the semester may have been different from the experiences at the end of the semester after they have had time to get to know each other and developed a deeper relationship. Again, their responses captured a specific moment of time, which may have limited the spectrum of the experiences they could reflect on.

Although, this study did not aim to compare how challenges differed between the first six participants interviewed in the spring semester and the eight participants interviewed in the fall

semester, observations were occasionally identified in the findings. The two student populations differed in several ways; specifically, the participants interviewed in the spring semester were all honors students who had been assigned an advisor, as opposed to six out of the eight participants in the fall semester who were non-honors students. The honors students also had significantly higher grade point averages. This could arguably make it difficult to generalize comparisons made about their experiences based on semester.

Additionally, there is always a concern of researcher bias. Patton (1990) cites that, "the idea that what is true depends on one's perspective, and is, therefore, inherently definitional, situational, and internal, is associated with phenomenology" (p. 483). Because of the researcher's experience with advising and her role at the institution, students who were part of the researcher's caseload were excluded from participating in the study and other rigorous efforts were made to avoid personal bias. The technique of self-reflexivity was frequently utilized to ensure that the data reflected the *lived* experiences and perceptions of the participants, and to avoid any threat in the credibility and dependability of the data and findings (Finlay, 2002).

Lastly, there is always a risk that the sample size and data may not fully represent the larger population. Although there is a belief that the findings of this study will be transferable to other institutions, it is still a study conducted at one school during two specific times of the academic year, which may hinder its transferability. However, due to the limited empirical studies that exist about the second-year experience, this study can still add to the growing literature in this field.

### **Conclusion and Future Considerations**

This study examined the second-year experience of a diverse group of students attending the liberal arts college of a large, research university in the northeast region of the United States

and the role of advising. Since this study captured the unique experience of students in one type of institution (i.e. large, public, research university), exploring second-year students at different types of institutions might be the focus of future research. Additionally, based on this study, further examination of the experience of second-year students pursuing the science and pre-medical tracks may also need to be studied. Other research may also want to be conducted on comparing the role of advising at private and public institutions, as well as a longitudinal study following a group of second-year students from the summer prior to their second year through the spring semester of their second year to examine differences in issues and attitudes during the second year. Finally, while nine of the 14 participants were students of color, only two were from underrepresented groups. The experience of Black and Latino students may differ dramatically. Future research might explore the influence of type and demographics of the institution on the second-year experience of Black and Latino students.

In general, however, the following are suggestions to help strengthen the role of advising for second-year students based on the findings from this study.

1. Advisors need to be aware that the majority of second-year students are arriving back to campus with a desire to finalize their academic plans, which they connect to a successful future.
2. While the majority of second-year students are aware that advising is an available resource, advisors should consider that for some students this may be the first time in their academic career that they are meeting with an advisor. Students may be unfamiliar with the advising process, and how to make the best use of an advising session. Therefore, it may be helpful for students to be guided through the advising process and any referrals made to campus resources should be thoroughly explained.

3. For students who have decided on a major, advisors should be familiar with different opportunities that are available for these students to pursue in their related field.
4. For students who have not decided on a major, advisors should attempt to help uncover the student's interests and strengths and plan to be patient as the student takes his or her time reconciling their plans, which for most may be tied into goals that they have had before arriving to college.
5. Whether students have decided or are undecided on a major, advisors should do their best to personalize and individualize their advisement.

Although students are familiar that advising is an available resource, they may feel unfamiliar or intimidated with how to approach it. Outreach to special populations, such as undecided students, may help to direct students towards advising as a resource and help them to feel that, as large as it may be, the university is attempting to support their individual success. Proactively reaching out to second-year pre-medical students who are beginning the fall semester with low science grades or earning unsatisfactory midterm grades could be made by professional advisors in the University advising centers and Career Services staff to gently provide alternative paths in the pre-health field. This could offer students possible alternate career options to explore and may expedite their decision to change their plans.

Improving the advisor to student ratio would be an obvious recommendation, however, based on budget and the size of the institution, this may be unrealistic. Therefore, in order to help students who meet with a professional advisor in the University's advising center maximize their 15-minute advising appointment, the center may want to consider assigning advisors student caseloads. This would allow students to potentially schedule an advising meeting with a familiar face and to possibly develop a deeper and more long-term relationship. Training upper-class

students to serve as peer advisors to help with the overflow of advising or assist with quick questions might also create an additional layer of help and support for second-year students.

The findings of this study may provide colleges and universities with a better understanding of the unique advising needs during this year of a student's academic career. It may help institutions consider effective ways to support second-year students and address issues of attrition that currently exists between the second and third year. The findings may also be informative to various stakeholders at the university from across departments and divisions, and particularly in providing additional advising resources and improving student attrition through advising. The findings of this study may extend understanding of students' perceptions of the second year beyond Freedman's (1956) coined term, "sophomore slump," which has frequently been used to describe the emotional struggle second-year students face, and Schaller's (2005) four-stage model, which provides an alternate developmental framework for understanding how second-year students exist and make transitions in college. These findings may also reinforce the impact of effective advising on satisfaction and success contributing to a student's personal and academic development, particularly in their second year of college.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Schaller's (2005) Four-Stage Model

Appendix B: Electronic Advertisement for Subject/Volunteers

Appendix C: Participant Consent

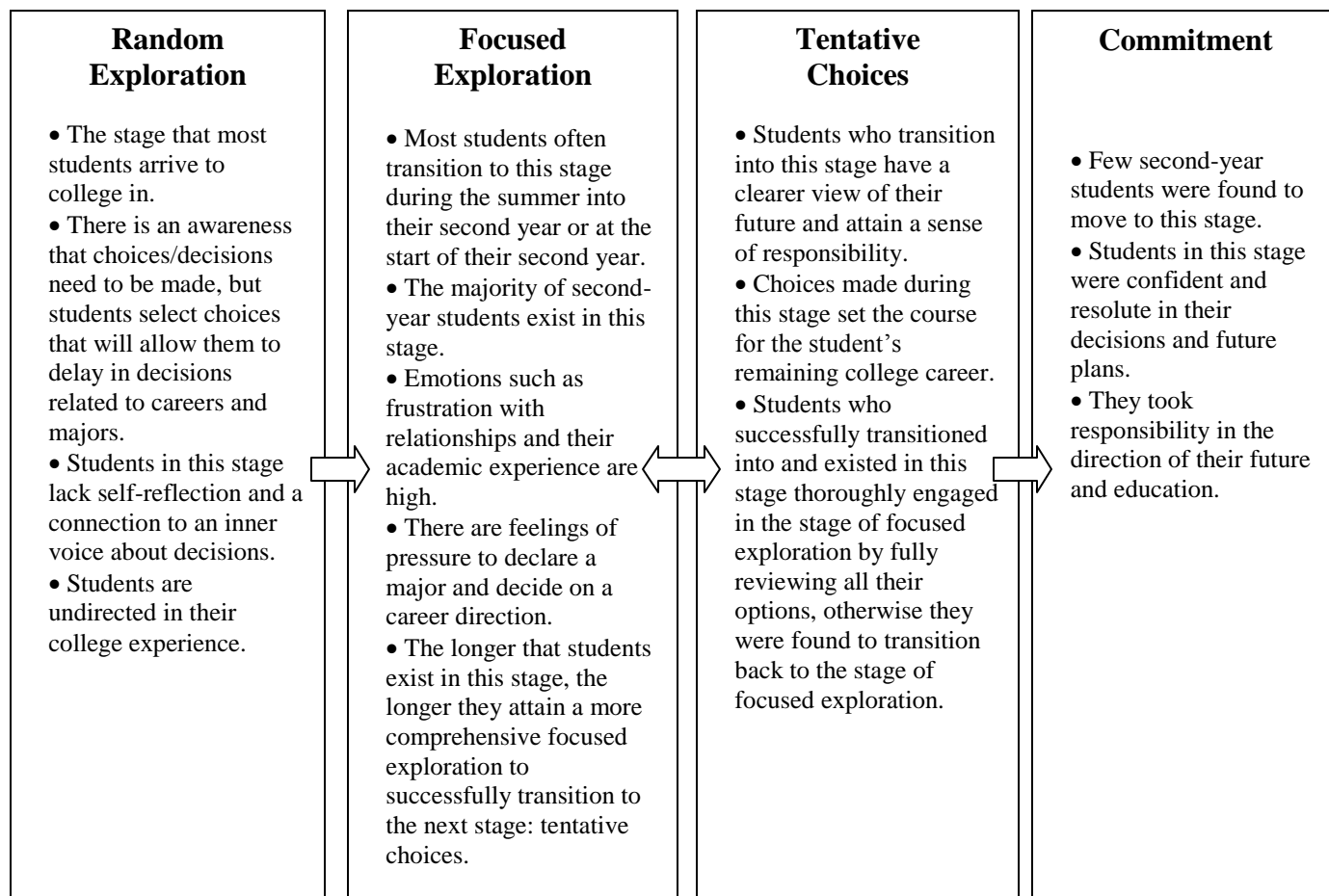
Appendix D: Audio Addendum to Consent Form

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Table 1: Data of Participants from Demographic Questionnaire

## Appendix A

## Schaller's (2005) Four-Stage Model



## Appendix B

## Electronic Advertisement for Subject/Volunteers

Did you know that during the second-year of college, students are increasingly uncertain and confused, yet there has been little empirical research conducted to examine students' perceptions of their experiences?

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a 60 minute focus group and to learn more about your experiences and what the role of advising has played in supporting this critical year.

You can potentially be a part of cutting edge research in the field and to help shape academic advising at Rutgers!

Contact Jennifer Kim-Lee at [jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu) today to learn more and sign up!

## Appendix C

## Participant Consent Form

**Principal Investigator:** Jennifer M. Kim-Lee, Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, [jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu), 201-362-1180

**Project Title:** Students' Perceptions of Their Second-Year and the Role of Advising

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Jennifer Kim-Lee, a graduate student at Rutgers University and Assistant Dean in the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program. The purpose of this research is to understand how students experience their second-year and perceive the role of advising.

**What the study is about:** This study is designed to gain a better understanding of how students at a large, public university experience their second-year and the role of advising. This will entail interviewing second-year students through a semi-structured focus group and understanding the issues they experience during this year, as well as how they view the role of advising and their advisor in supporting them through these issues. A maximum of 40 students from the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 60 minutes. The work done as a part of this study fulfills the dissertation requirements as part of my enrollment in an education doctoral program at Rutgers University.

**What the students will be asked to do:** As a participant in this study you will be asked to participate in one focus group held at Rutgers – New Brunswick campus and potentially be contacted with follow up questions. You will be asked approximately 12 questions that you will take turns answering. The questions will ask you to reflect on your academic and personal

experiences during your second-year and the role of advising. The focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed.

**Your answers will be confidential:** The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be kept for five years.

**Risks and Benefits:** There is less than minimum foreseeable risk in participating in this study. While the volunteers in the focus groups will see each other and hear each others' opinions about their perceptions of advising during their sophomore year, this may be an opportunity for students to develop relationships with other peers in their classes who may be experiencing similar difficulties or realize that they are not alone. The results from this study will be used to further develop the literature and knowledge of the sophomore year experience and may help to improve the advising program at Rutgers University.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

**Your answers will be confidential:** The records of this study will be kept private. Data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Every effort will be made to ensure the highest levels of confidentiality for participants. Any report of this research that is made public will not include your name or any other individual information which could be used for identification. If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact myself at



[jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:jennifer.kim@gse.rutgers.edu) or 848-445-3795. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Sandra Tomlinson-Clarke, at [saundra.tomlinson-clarke@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:saundra.tomlinson-clarke@gse.rutgers.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Institutional Review Board  
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey  
Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200  
335 George Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)  
(732)235-9806

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information and have received answers to my questions. I consent to take part in the research study regarding how students perceive the role of advising in the sophomore year as they participate in the focus group interviews. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. Explanation of the results will be provided upon request.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

**Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:**

**Student Participant (Print)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Participant Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal Investigator Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Initials** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

## Audio Addendum to Consent Form

You have already agreed to participate in a research entitled: Students' Perceptions of Their Second-Year and the Role of Advising conducted by Jennifer Kim-Lee. I am asking for your permission to allow me to audiotape (sound only), or digitally record, the focus group as part of the research study.

The recordings will be used solely for the transcription and analysis by the principal researcher.

The recordings will be confidential and, therefore, will not include any identifying markers, such as your name, address, phone number, date of birth, etc.

The recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer with no link to subjects' identity and will be destroyed after completion of research study process.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record your child as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recordings for any other reason than those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

**Student Participant (Print)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Student Participant Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal Investigator Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Initials** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

## Demographic Questionnaire

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_**Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply):**

\_\_\_\_\_ African American

\_\_\_\_\_ American Indian

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian

\_\_\_\_\_ Hawaiian

\_\_\_\_\_ Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ White

\_\_\_\_\_ Two or more

\_\_\_\_\_ Foreign

\_\_\_\_\_ Unknown

**Major(s):** \_\_\_\_\_**GPA:** \_\_\_\_\_**# of credits earned:** \_\_\_\_\_**# of credit currently registered in:** \_\_\_\_\_**Select all that apply:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Athlete

\_\_\_\_\_ Educational Opportunity Fund

\_\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> generation college student

\_\_\_\_\_ Honors Program

\_\_\_\_\_ Honors College

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

## Interview Protocol

## Opening statement:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am conducting focus group interviews to understand your sophomore year experience and how you perceive the role of advising at this University in supporting you during this time. As you read on the consent form you already signed, you are here today because you volunteered to take part in a focus group with other sophomores in order to understand your current advising experiences. This focus group is confidential. Your name will not be used in any way nor identified in this focus group. Based on your responses today, you may be contacted with follow up questions.

I am going to audio record the focus group. There will be twelve questions and potentially some follow up questions based on your responses. To ensure that your response is clearly recorded, please speak clearly towards the recorder. When you are responding, please be mindful of others who may also need time to respond. You do not have to answer all of the questions. Do you have any questions?

**We're going to begin by talking about your sophomore year and understanding a little bit about your current experience.**

1. When you think about your sophomore year, what are some words and/or feelings that come up?  
What do you like most about your second year? What has been challenging?  
What did you hope to accomplish before you started your second semester sophomore year?
2. Tell me about the different majors/careers you had been considering up until the point you decided on a major/career? What influenced you to consider or reject a major/career?
3. Who did you talk with about major/career questions? Who have you turned to for support? Where do you get most of your advising information, i.e. students, faculty, families, etc...  
Have you talked with an advisor about your plans to major in the field? Was it helpful or useful to you?

**Next, we're going to talk about your view of academic advising at this University.**

4. What do you believe is the role of advising at this University? What has been your experience with pre-college advising?
5. What factors affect how comfortable or not you are with an advisor?  
Gender, familiarity with issue, type of questions asked, knowledgeable about course requirements, policy, campus resources, non-major related stuff etc...

6. Tell me about an advising session that stands out to you most; it can be a positive or negative experience.
7. Think back to the last time you met with your advisor, what were you hoping to accomplish and were your questions answered to your satisfaction?
8. What topics are you most comfortable asking your advisor about? What topics are you least comfortable asking your advisor about?  
Academic related issues vs. non-academic related issues, discussing current personal issues; career advice; choosing a major; relationship advice
9. If you could plan the most effective, helpful academic advising session, what would it look like?

**Now, I'd like to talk to you about your experience with academic advising during your second year with an advisor.**

10. Who are the different advisors you worked with? Why did you choose to meet with a particular advisor and/or continue meeting with him/her? What were your expectations of them? Has your advisor met your expectations and if not, what changes would you suggest?
11. If I was a fly on the wall during the advising session, what kinds of topics would I have heard you and your advisor discuss?
12. Do you see this year's advising process differently than during your first-year in terms of what you need or expect?

Is there anything else you want to share that hasn't been discussed?

Table 1  
*Data of Participants from Demographic Questionnaire*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Reported GPA</b>	<b># of credits earned &amp; attempted</b>	<b>Member of additional program</b>
“Hope”	Female	White	Psychology	4.0	78	Honors
“Heather”	Female	White	Health Administration & Classics	3.732	69	Honors
“Ellen”	Female	White	Psychology	4.0	83	Honors
“Steve”	Male	Asian	Mathematics & Economics	3.8	93	Honors
“Albert”	Male	Latino	English	3.926	67.5	Honors; 1 <sup>st</sup> generation college student
“Evelyn”	Female	Asian	Public Health	3.3	77	Honors
“David”	Male	Asian	Psychology	1.98	44	
“Jabin”	Male	White	Astrophysics & Computer Science	3.9	79	Honors
“Grant”	Male	White	Undecided	3.431	68	Honors
“Yeong”	Female	Foreign (Asian – not indicated)	Environment & Business Economics	3.1	46.5	International Student
“Kelly”	Female	Asian	Actuarial Specialization/Spanish Minor	Not indicated	45	
“Amie”	Female	Asian	Human Resources	2.567	48.5	
“Lisa”	Female	White	Genetics/Public Health minor	2.64	44.5	Greek Organization (1 <sup>st</sup> generation college student not indicated)
“Carla”	Female	African-American	Public Health	2.8	37.5	