

The “Ideal Type” Academic Advisor for Graduate Students in Education Programs

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Abstract: Academic advisors are crucial in higher education institutions, particularly at the graduate level. They provide students with guidance and support, helping them to navigate complex academic requirements and to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their field. This proposal explores the concept of the *Ideal Type* advisor, and these interviews refer to an advisor with the qualities and characteristics most effectively supporting and guiding graduate students in education programs. We interviewed four graduate students in education programs; these interviews provided valuable insights into their experiences and perceptions of advisors and their expectations and needs. Thematic analysis will analyze interview data and identify common response themes and patterns.

Keywords: academic advisor; graduate students; education programs; thematic analysis

Graduate-level academic advisors guide and advise their students to foster their success (McConnell, 2018). They support graduate students in learning about the academic discipline, the university environment, the research approach, ethics, and other significant facets of being an academic professional (Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004). Previous studies discussed that good academic advisors positively impact students’ academic and personal growth. For instance, they can potentially improve graduate students’ academic outcomes, self-efficacy, and overall satisfaction with graduate school experience (Miller, 2010; Razinkina et al., 2018; Tessema et al., 2012). The existing research mainly focuses on studying the characteristics of good advisors in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) departments (Welde & Laursen, 2008). However, fewer studies have explored the “Ideal type” of academic advisors in the education department. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the qualities and characteristics of an excellent academic advisor in education programs.

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the qualities and characteristics of the “ideal advisor” for graduate students in education programs. We interviewed four doctoral students in Adult Education, Music Education, and Education Psychology. Participants were asked to describe their relationship with their advisors and their expectations for their advisors. Their narratives provide diverse traits and characteristics of ideal-type advisors. We gathered those features that were important to graduate students’ success and distilled them into essential traits of strong professional capability and humanitarian concern.

Literature review

The definition of university academic advisors varies across research, reflecting the role's development. In academic settings, academic advisors take on multiple responsibilities that are considered important to students' progress (Petress, 1996). Their responsibilities include academic advising, career guidance, graduation checks, and other issues affecting students’ academic and emotional well-being. Scholars describe academic advisors as resource people who should be familiar with the department and university’s rules and policies. They should also be aware of current job demands and labor market trends (Khalil & Williamson, 2014). Graduate students gain from formal and informal procedures that help them integrate into their departmental and disciplinary cultures. According to Lovitts (2022), graduate students

will have a positive and satisfying graduate school experience if their academic advisors help them construct cognitive maps of the program, the discipline, and the profession. As the program goes on, career guidance assumes an increasingly vital role. Academic advisors can help their students navigate the often-challenging transition from students to professionals by providing advice on job search strategies or assisting with networking.

Academic advisors are mentors supporting students through their academic journey and meeting their degree requirements (Lonn et al., 2012). For instance, academic advisors can guide course selection and help students learn the degree planning and program requirements. Although most programs offer a structured or suggested curriculum to develop professional skills and knowledge for graduate students, each student’s needs are unique based on their career routes. A previous study shows that students perceived the most satisfaction from course-related information provided by their academic advisors (Sutton & Sankar, 2011).

Numerous existing studies show that a helpful academic advisor or a good advisor-advisee relationship benefits a student’s academic success and personal growth (Barnes, 2009). For instance, Welde and Laursen (2008) discovered that an academic advisor who sets high standards, fosters independent work, and can ask for help with advising will help STEM graduate students find their “scientific feet.” However, most previous studies focus on the characteristics of “ideal type” academic advisors in STEM departments. This proceeding aims to fill the gap by interviewing graduate students in education departments and exploring the characteristics and qualities of “ideal type” academic advisors from their perspectives.

Methodology

This proceeding is based on four interviews with graduate students from the Education Department at Auburn University. The demographic information for participants is in Table 1. The semi-structured interview lasted 30 to 50 minutes in duration. Respondents were assured confidentiality, and their identities were anonymized in this proceeding paper. Online interviews were conducted, and audio recorded through Zoom, which is a video-conferencing application. Participants would receive transcripts to check the whole interview within three workdays after interviewing. Once all interviews were transcribed verbatim, emerging themes were identified by the primary researcher. Then, the research group gathered to discuss the themes that each researcher had generated. The research group determined which central themes were recurring in each interview.

Table 1
Participants’ information

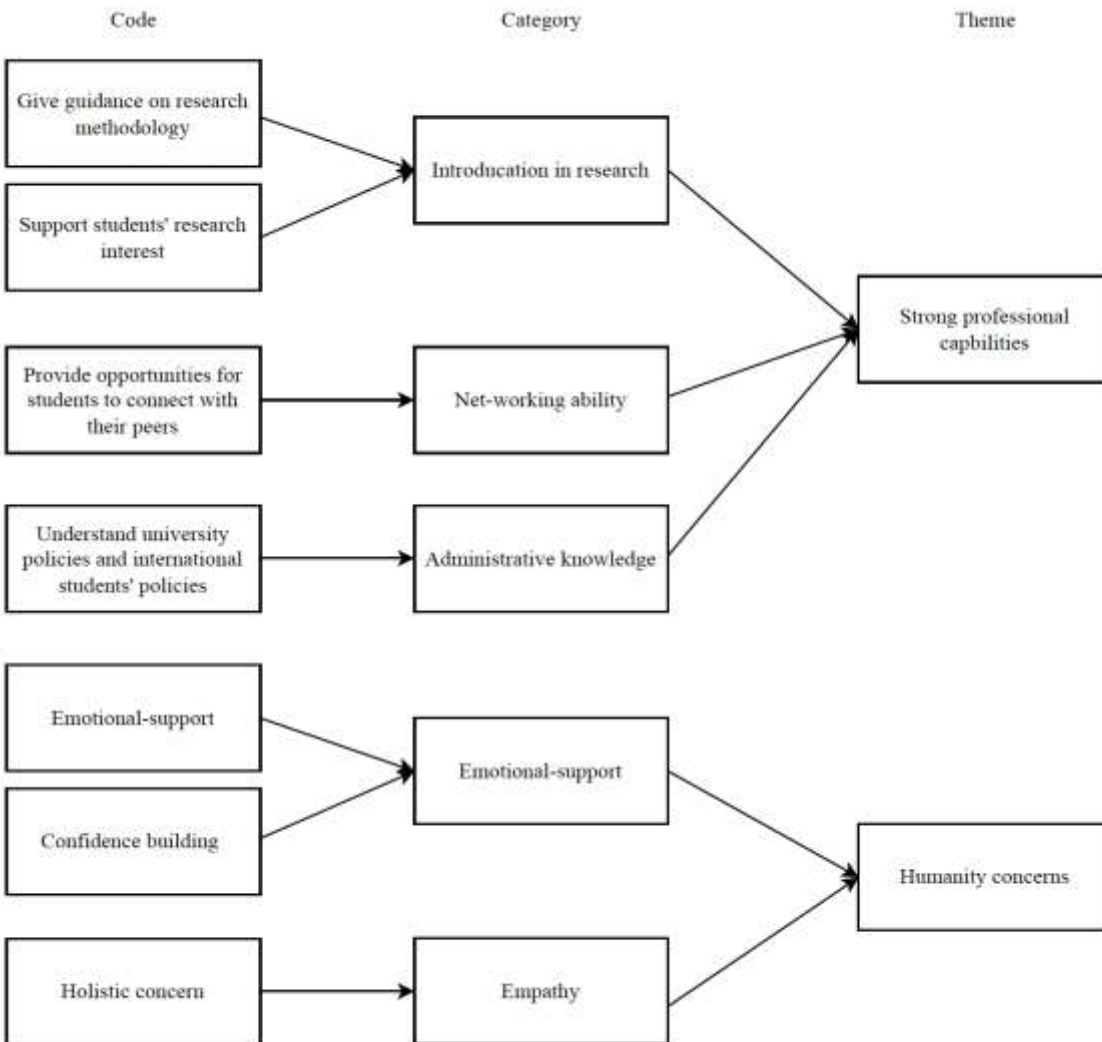
Participants	Gender	Age	Program	Years Spent in the Program
A	Female	29	Adult Education	3
B	Female	44	Education Psychology	4
C	Female	48	Education Psychology	4
D	Female	27	Music Education	2

Findings

We categorized two themes from participants’ perceptions of the characteristics of “Ideal Type” academic advisors: strong professional capability and humanitarian concern. The coding process for themes is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Coding Process for Themes



Strong Professional Capabilities

All participants in this study believe that the “ideal type” academic advisor should possess strong professional capabilities. Some indicate that matching research interests with their academic advisor is not the main point when evaluating an advisor. However, their academic advisor should have a solid knowledge of the research methodology and master the theories or frameworks in their field. A graduate student told us about her opinion on research guidance, which she got from her advisor (see below).

I said I have a very good relationship with her. I did not mention she is very knowledgeable in the field, but of course, she is very knowledgeable. She is very productive and fruitful. This character may not be important for a teacher or an instructor, but as an academic advisor, I think this quality is on top of that.

Most participants present that their academic advisor gave them more freedom to choose the research topic they are interested in, unlike other graduate students in STEM programs.

I do not think that the match of research interests is a necessary point for an ideal type of advisor. My research interest is different from my advisor's. For instance, I am interested in exploring the influence of ChatGPT on students' learning outcomes, and this is a popular and novel research trend. Although my advisor is not interested in this topic, she still guides and supports my research design or methodology.

Two participants mentioned that they would feel satisfied and pleased if their academic advisor was familiar with the university policies. An academic advisor who knows policies well will provide more information for their students. An international student pointed out:

As an international student, I must register for at least nine credits each semester to keep my full-time student status. My academic advisor knows these policies and helps me plan my coursework and my workflow for proposal defense. She helps me to save my time and money. I really appreciate her.

Humanitarian Concern

Emotional support and confidence building from academic advisors increase graduate students' confidence and satisfaction. An international student said that she got a lot of power from her advisor's encouragement (e.g., "My advisor told me he admires me (laugh) for I study alone in a strange country. He said he could not imagine he could complete assignments in another language. I know he is joking, and he just encourages me. But I am still very happy to receive his affirmation").

Academic advisors' emotional support or encouragement will also make their students feel satisfaction and increase their self-esteem. A participant told us about her experience:

(My advisor) always provides emotional support to me, and she wants to me feel calm, feel better. I remember one thing; I asked her to write a recommendation letter for me. I read her recommendation letter; I feel like I am not as good as she praised me that much. She remembers every contribution and every hard work I had. It is not a general recommendation that can apply to every student. I feel so impressed by that.

Discussion

In this pilot study, graduate students in education programs believe that "Ideal Type" academic advisors should possess strong professional capabilities and have humanitarian concerns for their students for their students to communicate with their peers or other scholars. Existing studies explored the role of the academic advisor as the mentor in academic, research, and career fields. From this study, the perspectives of the ideal type of advisor among graduate students from education programs are consistent with the former study. The personal stories shared by participants illuminate the profound impact of humanitarian concerns. For instance, one participant's reaction to her advisor's praise of a recommendation impressed her with its personalized nature. Graduate students' expectations of academic advisors are more than getting academic guidance but also affirmation and inspiration.

Implications and Limitations

This pilot study discovered two themes for "Ideal Type" academic advisors from the perspectives of graduate students in education programs, and the findings for this study will provide recommendations and benefits for academic institutions and policy development. For instance, academic institutions may consider implementing in their advisory practices to meet student expectations.

However, this study has some limitations. The interview sample needed to be larger and involve more voices from male graduate students in the education program. Based on the current findings and limitations, future research will expand the variety of the populations with graduate students who have enrolled in their programs in different years.

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