

Nontraditional Women Students' Experiences of Identity Recognition and Marginalization During Advising

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Nontraditional women students, defined as older than 24 years, parents, or veterans, compose a fast-growing higher education population. Many face identity-related challenges when interacting with advisors. From 2 northeastern U.S. women's colleges, 42 nontraditional women students participated in phenomenological interviews focused on their advising experiences, including the way advisors engaged with their identities. We classified 6 themes, 3 positive (guidance, identity recognition, advocacy) and 3 negative (indifference, identity marginalization, gatekeeping), that underscored the centrality of advisor engagement with identity for advisee-defined experiences. Advisors encouraged nontraditional women when recognizing intersectional identities as assets but also marginalized students through stereotyping or communicating low expectations. We highlight implications for future research and practice in this domain.

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Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students make up a fast-growing population of students in the U.S. higher education system, accounting for nearly 40% of all college students (Choy, 2002; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Typically defined as students aged 24 years and older, many nontraditional students start their postsecondary pathways within community colleges and as first-generation college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Austin, 2007). Many nontraditional students balance work and parenting with their studies, and proportionally, more nontraditional students identify as women (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), African American (Rawlston-Wilson, Saavedra, & Chauhan, 2014), or Latino/a (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).

Despite growth nationwide, the nontraditional student population makes up a small minority on many 4-year campuses (Kasworm, 2010); within private colleges, it often consists of less than 5% of the student body (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008). Nontraditional students may feel behind schedule in their career trajectory, particularly when traditional students represent the majority population and the norm associated with the undergraduate path (Neugarten, 1979). Adults return to college for many reasons, whether to reclaim an identity previously left behind, begin higher education for the first time, or advance a career (Babineau & Packard, 2006).

With a synthesis of research from the past 30 years, Lin (2016) described nontraditional women students as an important population within the larger nontraditional student population. Many women face pressures as primary caretakers for children or extended family, and as a result, often require an especially strong network of support to persist in their studies. We chose to focus on nontraditional women students because of their importance in the higher education landscape and to add to the understanding of the way particular support structures can be leveraged to improve the success of this important undergraduate population.

Advising is recognized as a most important support process that colleges and universities offer to help students navigate and persist in higher education. NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (2006) described academic advising as

a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes. (para. 6)

Proactive, or intrusive, advising has been found especially beneficial because, using this strategy, advisors approach students to offer insights and options before problematic issues arise (Varney, 2012). Proactive advising is associated with help-seeking behavior and confidence building among students (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016) and improved retention (Rodgers, Blunt, & Tribble, 2014).

Potential for Negative Advising Experiences: Advisor Engagement With Identity

Advising involves complexity with inherently interpersonal interactions that can create interpersonal or intergroup challenges. Not all advisors understand nontraditional women students' identities and strengths or the challenges that they may face in college, and the ways that advisors engage with the identities of these students can shape the nature of the advising experience. For example, advisors may communicate negative messages about nontraditional women through microaggressions, defined as subtle, everyday instances of discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are placed in two primary categories: a microinsult, which conveys insensitivity or demeans a person's identity (e.g., a White person asking a person of color a question that implies that special treatment must have factored into the person's success, such as "How did you get that job?"), and a microinvalidation excludes or negates the experience of an individual in a minority population (e.g., a White person responding to a story of racial discrimination with overgeneralized statements, "Well, we are all part of the human race"). In the supervisory realm, Constantine and Sue (2007) recounted microaggressions experienced by Black clinicians in training with White supervisors who dismissed racial issues or communicated stereotypes about people of color. Whether insulting or invalidating, negative interactions leave individuals with a sense of being marginalized, discounted, or rejected.

Classroom research has shown the negative experiences of nontraditional students. Rather than as microaggressions, these experiences were described as *condescending* or *underestimating* such that students perceived the need to prove their abilities or worth to instructors (Kasworm, 2010; Reyes, 2011). The way nontraditional women students, as a social identity group, experience negative advising interactions remains an area for further study. Specifically, we looked at advisor engagement with student identities to determine

ways that it may have contributed to students' feelings of marginalization.

We approached this study with an awareness of identity intersectionality, which speaks to the unique experiences of those in multifaceted groups with layered or nuanced personal histories. Crenshaw (1989) explained the intersectionality framework by describing Black women's experiences of discrimination:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet, often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effect of practices that discriminate on the base of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes they experience discrimination as Black women—not as the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (p. 44)

An intersectionality framework of social identity theory has been applied to areas where social identities overlap, such as gender and race (Ro & Loya, 2015) or class, race, and gender (Penner & Saperstein, 2013). Nontraditional students may find themselves at the intersection of multiple identities that include nontraditional age, veteran, or parent; students may also identify, among other social identities, as a female or racial minority or of low socioeconomic status. Thus, nontraditional women students may perceive negative treatment at a juncture of their multiple identities. In this study, we aimed to learn more about advisors' engagement with nontraditional women's intersectional identities and the ways advisors may contribute to feelings of marginalization because of the student's status as a nontraditional undergraduate or as a woman or of the intersectionality of these or other group memberships (e.g., racial-ethnic minority, low socioeconomic standing).

Facilitators of Positive Advising: Recognition of Identity

We acknowledge that advisors can effectively navigate the complex identities of nontraditional women undergraduates in ways that recognize these students' assets. To determine whether advisors recognize nontraditional women's identities and whether students perceive this recognition (or not), we hypothesized that students positively perceive advisors who convey understanding about the complexity within and across nontraditional

student identities. We also expected students to describe advising from identity-engaged advisors as constructive. For example, Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) analyzed veterans as a specific group of nontraditional students and suggested that advisors who ask meaningful questions, rather than make assumptions about students (e.g., reasons for military discharge, motivation to return to school), develop positive relationships with students transitioning into civilian life. In this study, we expected that advisors who demonstrate knowledge of identity complexity by asking meaningful questions are perceived positively by students.

For a second hypothesis, we expected advisors who affirm confidence in the abilities of nontraditional women students, particularly when providing difficult feedback or approaching other challenging discussions, to be perceived as being constructive by students. In their study involving Black students who received critical feedback from a White instructor, Cohen, Steele, and Ross (1999) found that students undertook the revision process when instructors coupled their critical remarks with an affirmation of the students' potential to reach a higher standard of excellence. In addition, Carlone and Johnson (2007) emphasized the positive impact of instructor recognition, particularly for supporting students in minority populations, such as when an instructor notices a student's progress or contribution. In our study, we expected to find that advisors who communicate high expectations or affirmations of student belonging are perceived as relatively more constructive by students recounting positive advising experiences.

Research Questions

Because the advising experiences of nontraditional women students have not been well studied, particularly in private colleges where they represent a small minority, we sought to explore advising of these students with an eye toward the level of advisor engagement with student identity during their interactions. Therefore, we developed the following overarching research question for this study: How do students at two private women's colleges describe their positive and negative academic advising experiences as they related to intersectional identities? In particular, we asked:

RQ1. Which elements do nontraditional women students feature in their descriptions of negative advising experiences?

RQ2. What role did the advisor's engagement with the identities of nontraditional women students play in these descriptions, if any?

RQ3. Which elements do nontraditional women students feature in their descriptions of positive advising experiences?

RQ4. What role did the advisor's recognition of identities of nontraditional women students play in this description, if any?

Method

Participants

Forty-two nontraditional women college students participated in this study. Each identified as at least 24 years old, a parent, or a veteran as defined by the nontraditional women's programs at each institution. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 62 years with a median age of 37 years. Most were in their senior year ($n = 20$) and 3 had graduated within the previous 3 months of the interviews. The others were juniors ($n = 13$) and sophomores ($n = 7$). Students pursued majors and minors in 33 different academic disciplines across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. All participants had transferred from a community college to their current institution, except for 2 who transferred from another 4-year college. In addition, 28 participants were first-generation students, defined as those with parents who had not earned a bachelor's or higher degree. Approximately one half ($n = 22$) were employed while attending school. In terms of racial-ethnic identification, 8 were African American/Black, 7 were Latina, 1 was Pan-Asian, and 1 was of Middle Eastern descent with the others identifying as White. Nearly three quarters ($n = 30$) lived off campus, one half ($n = 22$) were parents, and 2 were military veterans.

All participants attended one of two women's colleges in the northeastern United States. Most were assigned faculty advisors, rather than primary-role advisors, and some had undertaken research projects with these advisors. The nontraditional student community on each campus was contacted via electronic mailing list. In addition, flyers were posted in commuter lounges, academic buildings, and nontraditional student residence halls. Participants received a \$5 gift card to a local café to defray the cost of their time. Eight participants enrolled in a psychology course requested research credit participation in lieu of the gift card. Because nontraditional students represent a small proportion of students at each of

the colleges (10% or less), and women of color and veterans represent an even smaller minority, we took additional steps to protect participant confidentiality; for example, we did not link the participant list pseudonyms to demographic information.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' responses to their advising experience (as per Moustakas, 1994). We asked participants to share their perspectives on advising, with a focus on the ways advisors engaged with their identities as nontraditional women students. To develop a qualitative interview protocol, we used our understanding of the literature and aligned the interview questions with our research questions (as per Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009). In our literature review, we confirmed that positive experiences in advising were influenced by advisor behavior, such as when advisors asked meaningful questions (Ryan et al., 2011) or recognized student potential for success, even when delivering critical feedback (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Cohen et al., 1999). Negative experiences in advising were found to result from microaggressions, such as through stereotyping or communicating low expectations (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Reyes, 2011). Thus, we conceptualized the interview protocol as a discussion of positive and negative advising experiences outlined by the research questions and grounded in our review of the literature.

According to the guide from Kvale (1996) on semi-structured interviewing, the researcher initiates the session by asking participants to describe their experiences broadly in a domain, such as a specific context, followed by more specific and directive questions about the reasons for the experiences. In the case of our study, we focused the specific questions on the advisor behaviors that surfaced in their interactions with students.

The guide by Kvale (1996) also presented a table through which readers can appreciate the alignment between the research questions and the interview questions. With a similar table, the Appendix shows the way our research questions aligned with annotated general and specific probing questions. Before finalizing the protocol, we engaged in pilot (practice) interviews with participants similar to those in the target group to improve participant understanding of our questions and the overall flow of the interview. The pilot interviews demonstrated that the protocol

was understandable and led to smooth and logical interview discussions.

According to Moustakas (1994), the interviews should be long enough to capture the experiences of interest. We conducted most interviews by phone to accommodate the schedules of nontraditional students. Keeping in mind the busy schedules of the participants and the specific focus of the interview, we determined that 45 minutes would allow sufficient time for participants to express their experiences of positive and negative advising in reference to advisor engagement with their identities as nontraditional women students.

Although researchers conducting quantitative studies describe the reliability of the survey instrument used, those engaged in qualitative research describe efforts to improve the credibility and trustworthiness of the interview protocol, data collection process, and data analysis (Morrow, 2005). The credibility of the data is improved through transparency about the interview protocol employed and the questions asked. Two of us (Auguste and Keep), both nontraditional women students, underwent training on the interview protocol with guidance from the team's research supervisor (Packard). Through peer observation and pilot interviewing, the two interviewers established consistency in their presentation. Then, at the end of the interview, they used member checking as a strategy for reflecting the main ideas and ensuring that the experience communicated was accurately understood (as per Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One interviewer recounted to the participant, in a summary, the students' responses and asked clarifying questions as necessary. In addition, the first dozen participants were invited for follow-up interviews, during which they heard the interview questions, responses, and general storyline of their previous interview, as described by one interviewer, and were encouraged to discuss and revise the descriptions if necessary. The interviewers received feedback that the storylines had captured the students' sentiments accurately, and minimal clarification or revision was required.

Each interviewer remained reflexive and acknowledged her positionality as a means of strengthening the rigor of the qualitative research. Researcher bias can be found in all studies, and bringing it to the reader's attention helps to improve the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). One interviewer (Auguste) identifies as a multiracial/Black, first-generation

nontraditional student, and the other (Keep) identifies as a White nontraditional student. The faculty researcher (Packard), supervising the interviews and data analysis, identifies as a multiracial/Asian American and traditional-aged first-generation college graduate. All three of us identify as women.

Researchers can strive to bracket or suspend one's own lived experiences and understanding of the literature to listen to the stories of participants to hear new experiences, themes, and ideas (LeVasseur, 2003). We anticipated hearing about certain elements of support or encouragement and communication of low expectations or stereotyping, as noted in the literature. However, we strived to stay open to new understandings that might have emerged in the participants' narratives.

Finally, useful qualitative research is based on consequential validity or the potential for social change upon the completion of a study (Morrow, 2005). Because our study pertained to advising of nontraditional women students, we were interested in growing the knowledge base around advising and at the same time informing advisor practice in ways that could benefit nontraditional women and other groups of students who may experience marginalization on their campuses.

Data Analysis

The interviewers read all transcripts as a form of data immersion (as per Morrow, 2005), paying attention to statements that were repeated and to the choice of language used by participants to describe their experiences. Rather than coding each line of text, they coded segments of text that reflected an idea or experience; that is, they annotated a key phrase capturing the sentiment of the text and categorized each as reflecting a positive or negative experience. For example, a particular segment of text was coded as positive and coded with the attendant phrase "advocated for/elevated concern to the chair" to capture the gist of the segment.

The interviewers clustered the initial codes, capturing the essence of the participants' experiences of positive and negative advising, into themes. The process of identifying and naming themes was iterative; as per phenomenology, the themes reflected essential meanings conveyed by participants. For example, one student talked about an advisor merely going through the motions in an appointment, which was initially coded as *go through the motions*, while another student talked about an advisor who did not reply

to e-mails, which was initially coded as *did not reply to e-mail*. Later these initial codes were combined under the broader negative theme of *indifference* because it captured the meaning students conveyed when describing these advisor behaviors.

Finally, the interviewers reviewed all major themes, wrote explanatory descriptions of their meanings, and then re-read the transcripts to see whether any particular sentiments were missed. During these latter steps, the viewpoint of the supervising researcher, who trained the interviewers but did not conduct the interviews, was sought for theme refinement and naming. The use of multiple researchers added to the credibility of our research, particularly because one of us could debrief about the interviews with the others and ask probing questions about the experiences of nontraditional women students (as per Creswell & Miller, 2000).

According to interpretive phenomenology, the researcher strives to hold true to participant meanings and explanations but ultimately plays an interpretive, analytic role in the choices presented (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Therefore, researchers must invest in providing explanatory descriptions of the theme and offer multiple participant voices to illustrate the theme. When using a qualitative research paradigm, one does not typically report frequencies of particular themes; however, we saw quantitative representations of frequency as helpful to readers because repetition of findings helps in interpreting the nature of the findings (see Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Findings

Ultimately, we identified six themes that reflected the primary sentiments students expressed in their interviews about advising. We identified three negative themes by percent of respondents as follows: indifference (83%), identity marginalization (71%), and gatekeeping (40%) (Table 1). We also identified three positive themes by percent of respondents: guidance (98%), identity recognition (83%), and advocacy (70%) (Table 2). All participants described positive experiences of advising during their interviews.

Negative Experiences of Advising

Indifference. A prominent theme (83%), indifference, emerged from participant descriptions of negative advising experiences. An advisor signaled indifference by failing to take an active role to help,

Table 1. Negative examples by theme and number of respondents

Theme	Example	<i>n</i>	%
Indifference	50	35	83.3
Gatekeeping	17	17	40.5
Identity marginalization	42	30	71.4
Total negative examples ^a	32	41	97.6

Note. Percent based on number of participants who provided at least one example that fit each theme.

^aOne participant shared zero negative examples.

troubleshoot issues, or advocate for the student. For example, one participant described a “stand-offish feeling” from her advisor during a meeting. Another articulated the following impression: “He just pretty much goes through the motions.” In other cases, an advisor did not reply to e-mails even after the student made repeated attempts to connect.

Participants also shared examples of advisors who provided an inadequate amount of information and appeared unwilling to engage in finding answers. For example, one participant described: “[The advisor] was just: ‘What classes are you taking? Sounds good! Send me an e-mail, remind me to unblock you [from registering].’” One student reported that her advisor said, “I can’t help you,” in response to a question about her academic goals posed in their very first meeting. The student explained, “And I’m like, ‘do you know anybody that can?’ and they’re like, ‘No.’” Students left these exchanges frustrated because not only did they receive no guidance but they also sensed that the advisor did not care about them. In most of these cases, the student responded to an advisor’s indifference by discontinuing the advising relationship.

Identity marginalization. A second primary theme (71%), identity marginalization, characterized the negative advising experiences of participants. This theme referred to instances in which the advisor communicated low expectations of the students, acted dismissive, or behaved in a patronizing manner, and the student perceived that the marginalization was based on their nontraditional or intersectional identity (e.g., as a nontraditional student of low-socioeconomic status). For example, one respondent said of her advisor, “I didn’t feel like that person understood my situation,

Table 2. Positive examples by theme and number of respondents

Theme	Example	<i>n</i>	%
Guidance	108	41	97.6
Advocacy	23	20	47.6
Identity recognition	50	35	83.3
Total positive examples	202	42	100.0

Note. Percent based on number of participants who provided at least one example that fit each theme.

particularly as a [nontraditional student] who lives off-campus. [My advisor] just didn’t get it.”

In other cases, the nontraditional student experience intersected with marginalizing experiences, such as stereotypical treatment or insensitive comments, based on the student’s race or socioeconomic class. One student explained that she minimally engaged with her advisor because she perceived that the advisor had “zero faith that I can do anything.” After describing multiple instances of the advisor’s patronizing behavior, including one meeting during which her academic pursuits were questioned because of her socioeconomic status, the student summarized the message received from her advisor: “Oh, you’re so lucky to be here, but we don’t expect that you’re going to go to the UN or do anything like that.” The student inferred that comments like those uttered by her advisor were reserved for students of “a certain age and a certain class.” This frustrated student elaborated: “If that’s the case, why am I even here? You know, it just kind of makes you question the whole point of the program.”

Another respondent shared that her advisor “always asked where I’m from . . . , which makes me feel lonely, because I know even more that they don’t know about my culture.” Another student describes a situation in which she had to disclose her Section 8 housing status to her advisor to navigate an administrative matter on campus. The student described the way her advisor used condescending language toward her, and in particular, regarding an undergraduate research project. The advisor reportedly said, “People in your situation, you know, I mean, do you really want to take on this work?” The student added that she felt “instead of an advisor being a mentor, you know, someone to help you, the advisor is like, this oppressor on campus.” Thus, being marginalized was frustrating, and

students left the exchanges questioning their choice of the institution and chances of making progress there.

Gatekeeping. A third theme from descriptions of the negative advising experiences was reported by 40% of participants: Gatekeeping referred to instances when the advisor blocked, or discouraged, the student, thus acting as more of a gatekeeper to progress than an advocate. One student described having a “really elegant solution” to complete both a double major and a research project that was “dismissed out of hand” by her advisor. Another respondent described her numerous efforts to pursue research using critical race theory, to which the advisor replied: “I don’t do race.” She added:

I realized halfway through [my research proposal] that [the advisor] was just stalling my attempts. . . . [The advisor] didn’t want to work with me he kept sending it back for revisions, denying it, and after about 10 or 11 revisions, I just gave up.

Participants reported that gatekeeping by advisors was particularly hurtful because advisors had the opportunity to act constructively and, in the view of these students, chose not to do so.

In summary, when describing their negative advising experiences, students spoke of indifference, identity marginalization, and gatekeeping. Identity marginalization was identified by nearly three quarters of participants, and included stereotypical treatment, communication of low expectations, and insensitive comments. In these cases, nontraditional women students saw their advisors as engaging with their identities but in a negative manner. They did not speak of being marginalized specifically as women students. Instead, they related additional intersectional identities of nontraditional age, as a person of color, or of low-income status. Whether the advisor intended to communicate a negative message or not, the nontraditional women students emerged from their meetings with the sense that the advisor did not believe in their potential.

Participants also pointed to advisor indifference, which could be viewed as a lack of interest, no proactive investment, or gatekeeping; all failed to advance or specifically blocked a student’s progress. After facing marginalization or indifference, students felt less likely to return to their advisors, so they could not utilize any positive

advisor input, such as information on resources or advocacy, to negotiate the institutional landscape.

Positive Experiences of Advising

Guidance. A primary theme of positive advising experiences, guidance was described by nearly all (98%) the students. Participants described guidance as taking the form of helping them to choose classes, learn school policies, or acquire referrals to resources. One student shared that she was “given great advice on what courses to take” by her advisor. Another student spoke of receiving advice “about what you can do and what you can’t.” When advisors provided course, policy, and resource information, students felt a sense of support. In addition, when advisors discussed future goals with them and proactively took steps to help them make connections to reach those goals, students described advising as positive. One student explained: “[My advisor] was very encouraging of me starting research so that I could go to grad school.” Another student emphasized the way her advisor helped to brainstorm options when she struggled with her career plan.

Students saw the exchange positively when the advisor engaged in active listening. One student outlined the way her advisor would “take out a piece of paper and take notes while you are talking so as not to interrupt you, but to kind of create a thought map for *you*.” Another student reported that the advisor took additional time for her. She explained, “If I happened to see [my advisor when I was] running to another class . . . she’d stop and take a moment with me, and I really appreciated that.” When advisors made time for students, whether through active listening or otherwise attending to them, students saw the advisors signaling that they cared for students and their progress.

Participants also emphasized the importance of critical feedback. As a student explained: “She just gives me tough love. She tells me how it is, and I just really like that.” At the same time, students appreciated when their ideas were validated by advisors. One student shared that the advisor told her, “It’s okay if you want to set the bar high for yourself, provided that you’re taking care of yourself, and that you feel able to see the big picture.” Ultimately, whether critical or encouraging in nature, guidance was more eagerly incorporated when the student could sense the advisor was proactively working on her behalf and with her interests at heart.

Identity recognition. A second prominent theme (83%) for the positive advising experiences involved identity recognition, which respondents described as an advisor seeing, connecting with, appreciating, or valuing their identity as a nontraditional student. This recognition came through spoken words in conversation or as an action taken to advance the advisee. One student shared: “We have the same interests. We like to write. We like to read. We like to travel.” In some cases, the connection was facilitated by a shared identity. A veteran shared, “One of [my advisors is] a veteran, so we connect on that a lot.”

Possessing a similar social identity was not necessary to feel an advisor valued or appreciated the student’s identity. One student of color shared a time when she told her advisor about race-based challenges she faced during a study abroad experience. The advisor established a personal connection by first owning her position “as a White woman.” The student reported that “even though I am of color, we still were able to bridge that gap where she’s like ‘I know it’s not the same. I know that I have privileges that you don’t have and experiences that you don’t have.’” The student concluded it was “a big deal in just knowing that she cared enough to even make that . . . connection.”

Furthermore, participants described the helpfulness of advisors who took time to consider and understand their multiple, intersecting social identities, including as parents. One student described feeling supported by her advisor: “He recognized where I was at in my life. . . . He knows I have older children, and so, he understands where I’m at.” Another student also reported advisor support of her intersectional identity as a parent and nontraditional student: “She’s able to grasp that I am one person within multiple spheres, and not the same person every day or every moment of the day, but I have other responsibilities and identities beyond what she witnesses on campus.” Ultimately, having one’s intersectional identity recognized, whether as a parent, a veteran, or a person of color, made a difference within the advising context. Students came away from advising interactions feeling more positive about the advisor and the institution when their intersectional identities were acknowledged.

Advocacy. A third prominent theme in positive advising reflected advocacy, which was described by nearly one half of the students (47%). Advocacy was described as instances in which the advisor

proactively intervened, “ran interference,” or helped to troubleshoot a problem. One student shared about presenting her academic goals to her advisor, and they discussed that the institution did not have an appropriate program to meet her needs: “We sat down and wrote a curriculum. . . then presented [it] to the department to get it approved.” Advisors also demonstrated advocacy when they reached out to extend an invitation or offer opportunities. A student reported that her advisor offered to work with her “because we had connected within my job [in the department]. So, she already knew me and had an idea of what I did.” In these cases, advisors leveraged their own reputations. Students reported feeling buoyed in the face of a potentially negative experience and saw the advisors as caring for them and their progress in college.

In summary, students described their positive advising experiences in terms of guidance, identity recognition, and advocacy. Identity recognition was described by more than three quarters of the participants and included advisors communicating the placement of value or appreciation for the identities and strengths of participants, particularly in seeing these characteristics of nontraditional women students as assets. In these cases, nontraditional women students saw their advisors as engaging with their identities in a constructive manner. While some students connected to their advisors through shared identities (e.g., as veterans), others explained that their shared affinity was based on advisor interest in learning more about the students’ experiences of navigating the campus as students of color or parents.

The two positive themes of guidance and advocacy each underscored active listening and a collaborative, sounding-board style of communication. Participants explained these experiences with a sense that an advisor was helpful in navigating potential roadblocks at the institution. In these cases, students felt they could return to their advisors for discussions and were also apt to describe the institution as invested in their success.

Discussion

In this study, the advising experiences of nontraditional women students were examined on two college campuses where they represented a small percentage of the student body. We were especially interested in the ways advisors engaged with nontraditional women students’ identities

during advising. When recounting negative and positive advising experiences, respondents underscored the importance of the way advisors marginalized their identities or recognized their identities as assets. For example, nearly three quarters of participants recounted an experience with an advisor who used stereotypical or insensitive remarks to communicate low expectations. However, rather than targeting their identities as nontraditional women students, the advisors reportedly engaged with their intersectional identities, for example, as a low-income student or a person of color. On the positive side, participants also recounted experiences in which their nontraditional women identities, including as low-income students or parents, were recognized as assets by advisors. When advisors talked with them about their identities and communicated a strong belief in their potential, students described a strong sense of confidence and belief that the institution was invested in their success.

In addition to knowledge about identity engagement, we also learned about ways advisors can play a positive role in the success of nontraditional women students. When advisors actively listened, provided suggestions, or advocated on behalf of students, the participants reported positive interactions and a strong sense of support. Consistent with past literature on advising (Broadbridge, 1996; Christian & Sprinkle, 2013), guidance was the most commonly reported theme of positive advising experiences in our study. Prior research also showed that students prefer developmental advising, in which the advisor gets to know each advisee's needs and collaborates with the student in the advising process (e.g., Hollis, 2009), and that students appreciate advisors who actively listen and offer relevant referrals (Packard & Jeffers, 2013). These themes underscore the importance of student-focused communication strategies rather than the provision of information alone. The study participants related stories about advisors taking notes or introducing suggestions to overcome possible roadblocks. When coupled with affirmation that nontraditional women student identities are recognized assets, advisors proactively used identity engagement in a reinforcing and positive way.

Nontraditional women students also appreciated advising that included constructive criticism. Similar to a previous study based on instructional context (Cohen et al., 1999), our research suggests that students perceived constructive feedback as supportive when advisors also affirmed students'

potential and valued their identities. The findings suggest that constructive criticism, offered by advisors who take time to get to know nontraditional students, was perceived as a symbol of investment rather than a rejection. Students in our study sensed whether advisors recognized their identities as assets and interpreted the advisor feedback accordingly.

Nontraditional women students also shared negative experiences of advisors that did not directly relate to identity. When advisors appeared uninterested, did not listen, or failed to engage in troubleshooting, students felt abandoned and preferred to avoid their advisors completely. In some situations, the advisors acted as gatekeepers, rather than advocates, leaving students feeling frustrated and betrayed. Students who felt judged or marginalized on the basis of their identities may have easily recognized indifference or hindrance to progress because of their collective prior experiences.

Advising interactions represent one type of college situation in which students emerged feeling marginalized. Although in-depth analysis fell outside of the scope our research, the data revealed that 76% of participants talked about marginalization that they had experienced from institutional-level representatives. Students explained that traditional, residential students stand at the center of the academic landscape, and as an example, one respondent explained that classes were not cancelled during inclement weather because traditional, residential students could likely attend even if commuters could not. They also cited faculty members referring to high school experiences of students in class or mistaking adult students for staff members. As one participant shared, "I can say this: Across the board, the professors talk to the traditional students first and the nontraditional students second." Another observed, "There's three classes [of students]. There's traditional, there's nontraditional young, and then there's nontraditional older." Nontraditional students expressed keen awareness of their location in the campus hierarchy, and this knowledge influenced their feelings of value on both campuses studied.

The broader campus experiences shared by students aligned with descriptions of environmental microaggressions identified by Sue et al. (2007), particularly in reference to campus policies. The negative interpersonal narratives of participants echoed those from previous research that documented the many inputs into the campus climate (Hurtado, 1992). Advisors viewed as

advocates rather than gatekeepers and who convey sensitivity to the experiences of nontraditional students helped these advisees navigate potential roadblocks within the institution. As a result, our study supports the evidence that advisors play a powerful role for nontraditional students in a way that can affect students' broad perceptions about the campus climate.

Despite the study focus on women participants, the respondents did not emphasize their identities as women students; instead, they focused more on other aspects of their intersectional identities as older than traditional-aged peers, parents, people of color, or from a low-income background. The study drew participants from two women's colleges, so students may have felt that more visible or underrepresented identities affected their experiences more than gender did.

We observed that some nontraditional women students in our study also faced stress from juggling multiple roles, including parenting, which comports with previous research (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011); however, not all nontraditional women students faced similar challenges: Some students came from low-income backgrounds while others dealt with racism or re-entering civilian life. Future research needs to attend to these differences as advisors work to understand the experiences of a wide variety of nontraditional students in higher education.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that could be addressed in future research. Because the study was conducted at two selective colleges where the nontraditional student population on each campus makes up a minority, the participants may share specific characteristics not generalizable to other students who attend other types of institutions. Future studies could examine the differences between nontraditional student experiences at institutions with higher concentrations of nontraditional students enrolled because critical mass may influence the perception of the students' centrality and the preparation of the advisors (Schlossberg, 1989). Because gender did not emerge as a salient feature of student experiences in our study, looking at additional, nuanced features of the experiences of nontraditional women may yield interesting information. Specifically, comparisons of experiences of nontraditional women students and nontraditional men students, where they represent a sizeable population, or at private college campuses where they make up

a minority, may support our findings or provide new directions for advising. Through a multi-institution approach to this research or by leveraging national data sets on student engagement and persistence, researchers might better understand the experiences of nontraditional students across institutional types. In-depth inquiries at institutions with nontraditional women students who report particularly positive advising experiences may reveal specifically useful advisor practices and behaviors.

As expected, intersectional identity surfaced as salient in our study (see Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Indeed, the comment about the hierarchy among nontraditional students (older vs. younger) provides a reason to investigate the experiences of nontraditional students based on age, parental role, veteran status, and other social identities. Although we used an intersectional social identity framework to consider the participant identities, the small sample size did not allow us to infer enough about the specific intersectional identities to compare them. However, for a study of more than 5,000 engineering students, Ro and Loya (2015) compared particular intersections of race and gender. In the future, researchers employing large samples could also investigate student perceptions of support and advising. A particular useful thread into understanding more about the differences between students who commute, parent children at home, and come from low-economic backgrounds, and the unique challenges they face, may prove particularly timely as the enrollment trends away from traditional-aged residential, majority culture, and relatively affluent students.

Another limitation of this study stems from reporting solely the students' perspectives on advising. A study that reveals advisor practices, to determine the etiology of their intentional or subconscious signaling in communications, might lead to valuable actionable insights. Despite recent research on microaggressions, some of which have revealed the way students emerge from meetings feeling insulted and invalidated (Sue et al., 2007), additional investigation into the way advisors undertake intentionality is needed to increase instances of identity recognition, affirmation, and validation. Interesting findings could be found in response to the research question: How do advisors conceptualize the relationship between identity engagement and intentional developmental advising? Researchers could enlist both quantitative surveys to assess the prevalence of advisor

intentionality and qualitative inquiries to gain illustrations of these practices.

Implications for Practice

Despite these limitations, our study supports ideas for improving advising practices with nontraditional women students. Advising, as an inherently interpersonal relationship, requires intentionality to overcome social challenges. Therefore, advisors may benefit from engaging in metacognitive reflection about their processes and prior knowledge (Hollis, 2009) and deepening their knowledge of adult development (Vincent, Denson, & Ward, 2015). Toward this end, Ryan et al. (2011) emphasized that advisors need to learn about campus resources, citing that advisors working with veterans need to know whether the campus has a veteran's office, a licensed counselor to work with veterans, or specialized enrollment and financial services for veterans. This knowledge helps advisors who actively listen to make referrals to relevant resources such that students report feeling supported. Beyond primary role advisors, peer advisors can be enlisted to augment support networks (Diambra & Cole-Zakrzewski, 2002).

Even on campuses where nontraditional women students make up a minority and experience the campus as a place that marginalizes their presence, advisors can play an important role to buffer implicit and explicit negative messages. Advisors signal their investment by honing their active listening skills and by inviting students into particular opportunities. In classroom contexts, such invitations constitute important moments of identity reconnection that help minoritized students to feel a sense of belonging (Carlone & Johnson, 2007). Strategy development may require spaces where advisors can share and practice their craft. Following the lead of instructional learning communities, which feature long-term, regular interactions among peers, advising learning communities can be created to foster community building and positive changes in practice (Borrego & Henderson, 2014). Professionals who participate can learn to gain trust, ask difficult questions, and practice new ways of engagement. Moreover, practice through active learning with the goal of understanding another's perspective can be especially productive for fostering a sense of ally-ship (Alimo, 2012).

Conclusion

This research underscores the challenge of engaging in advising where one acknowledges

intersectional identities without stereotyping or reducing students to those identity categories. By establishing trust through active listening and signaling their investment in the student's goals, whether by proactively advocating or taking additional steps to brainstorm and troubleshoot, advisors may be seen as investing in student potential. Critical feedback can be challenging to interpret constructively when advisors have not yet laid a foundation for that form of engagement. Even if an advisor has valid critiques of a student plan, a student may come away from the appointment feeling shortchanged or believe that the advisor's criticism was based on the advisee's membership within a particular social identity category. The extensive work outlining the need for faculty members to improve their cultural competence in instructional situations (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), as demonstrated through the use of inclusive pedagogical strategies (Quaye & Harper, 2007; Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015), is also needed to improve advisor strategies.

Nontraditional students may be especially eager to take advantage of advising resources (Vincent et al., 2015). Complexities of advising exist for nontraditional students because on many college campuses, and in particular at the most selective campuses, they make up a small percentage of the student body. Despite the complicated nature of this advising, our study offers hope that strategies of action can be used to recognize and value the identities of nontraditional women students or to reduce instances of marginalization. When invested in student experiences, advisors contribute to the support structures for students striving to move toward their goals. In this way, advisors improve the vibrancy and effectiveness of college campuses and give hope to many students across the nation.

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Appendix. Alignment of interview questions with research questions

Rationale for Inclusion	Interview Question
Opening—Warm up.	This study is about students’ experiences of advising. Advising is the process by which students engage in discussion and receive information to guide them along their academic career. This person can be your major advisor, major chair, a professor, a staff member associated with a particular support service, or another staff member or peer advisor. Let’s start with the basics. Can you tell me the types of advisors you use (such as major chair, major advisor, professor, staff member)? Now I’d like to discuss your opinions of advising.
<p>RQ1: Which elements do nontraditional women students feature in their descriptions of negative advising experiences?</p> <p>Specific follow-up on the context of the advising experience and the reasons it was negative.</p>	<p>Going back to looking at advising in general, what do you see as trademarks or characteristics of unhelpful, discouraging, or unsupportive advising?</p> <p>Can you give an example of a situation in which you received feedback from an advisor that was unhelpful or discouraging or unsupportive? What about the <i>advisor</i> was unhelpful and unsupportive? What about their <i>feedback</i> was unhelpful and unsupportive?</p>
<p>RQ3: Which elements do nontraditional women students feature in their descriptions of positive advising experiences?</p> <p>Specific follow-up on the context of the advising experience and the reasons it was positive.</p>	<p>What do you see as the trademarks or characteristics of positive, helpful, or supportive advising?</p> <p>Looking at your own experience, can you give an example of a situation in which you received feedback from an advisor that was helpful or supportive? What about the <i>advisor</i> was helpful and supportive? What about their <i>feedback</i> was helpful and supportive?</p>
<p>RQ2 and RQ4: What role did the advisor’s engagement with the identities of nontraditional woman student play a role, if any, in their advising experiences?</p>	<p>I’m interested in learning more about your experience with being a nontraditional student. I recognize that people have many different identities and aspects of themselves, so you are definitely more than just a nontraditional student. In your advising experiences, have there been times where social identity seemed to be a factor in advising, whether positive or negative? Can you provide an example?</p>
<p>Follow-up probe on intersectionality.</p>	<p>Some people experience or have experienced subtle instances of bias or misunderstanding based on their identities. Have there been times when you have experienced this within an advising conversation based on your identity?</p>

Appendix. Alignment of interview questions with research questions (cont.)

Rationale for Inclusion	Interview Question
<p>Specific probe that examines critical feedback, as referenced in previous research (Cohen et al., 1999), in a particular context in which students experienced a constructive or negative exchange.</p>	<p>Now I'd like to discuss critical feedback in advising. Critical feedback can be described as a time at which you have gone to an advisor and presented them with an idea, plan, or piece of work, and the advisor told you that what you presented does not meet the mark, must be improved in some way, or needs to reach a higher standard. That's constructive criticism. Have there been times when you have received constructive criticism from an advisor? Did you hear this as encouraging or supportive? How about when this feedback was discouraging or unsupportive? Could you provide an example?</p>
<p>Closing—Final thoughts.</p>	<p>Are there any final thoughts you would like to add?</p>