Confronting Conundrums of Care in College Student Advising

Roy Schwartzman[1], Jenni M. Simon[2] and Cynthia Zuckerman Hyman
[1]North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA
[2]University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

docroy_com@ncsu.edu
jmsimon@uncg.edu
cezucker@ncsu.edu

Abstract: At colleges and universities throughout the United States, academic advisors play a central role in stemming the tide of declining student enrollment and academic underachievement—especially in the wake of academic, physical, emotional, and interpersonal setbacks incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. For many undergraduates, the mentoring relationship with their academic advisor provides the longest lasting and deepest connection with a faculty or staff member throughout their college experience. Increasingly, the expectations that institutions and students place on academic advisors have escalated far beyond simply guiding course selection and checking fulfillment of graduation requirements. While this more holistic approach to advising can cultivate a greater sense of belonging, it also places the advisors in a precarious position as the parameters of their responsibilities and the extent of caregiving continue to broaden. The ever-expanding expectations of caregiving placed on college academic advisors exemplify how pandemic-informed labor practices across many workplaces inadequately acknowledge caregivers while the care recipients may become overly dependent. This study investigates how advising evolves to become an extrapolation of the caregiving demands socially placed upon women in traditional, patriarchally structured families and workplaces. Using methods derived from critical incident theory that identify systemic crisis points and opportunities for intervention, the authors examine narratives of two women who serve as the lead advisors for their departments in southeastern United States universities. Their narratives delineate two double binds. First, the presumably bottomless reservoir of care demanded from women places nurturance of students in tension with career advancement and other care responsibilities (e.g., self and family). Second, setting boundaries to caregiving may generate accusations of insensitivity, but boundless care can accommodate and encourage learned helplessness among students. The investigation concludes with suggestions to reform institutional policies and build student resilience that equips them to learn independently.

Keywords: Academic Advising, Women in Higher Education, Learned Helplessness, Self-Efficacy, Resilience, Higher Education Reform

1. Introduction and Context

Despite some signs of increasing equity in particular academic disciplines, academia often remains a gender-biased professional space in higher education across the United States (Fox 2020). Even when women do achieve numerical parity with men across faculty ranks or in salary, notable differences persist in job performance expectations and in the type of labor women perform. Nationwide data show that women faculty on average perform much higher levels of internal institutional service measured in time spent and number of activities compared to men, even when controlling for rank, discipline, and race (Guarino and Borden 2017). The same study notes that higher service loads reduce time available for research and teaching, both of which generally play more crucial roles in promotion, awards, and salary increases.

One particularly demanding service role that many women in higher education occupy is academic advisor. The 99,400 academic advisors working at all types of U.S. colleges and universities typically "help students plan and achieve their academic goals" (EdTech.com 2023). Increasingly, advisor duties extend far beyond aiding in course selection and checking progress toward a degree. Advisors provide empathy, emotional support, and advocacy for students—advisory functions that have magnified importance for a pandemic-traumatized generation (Lisiecka, Chimicz and Lewicka-Zelent 2023).

Among academic advisors at all educational institutions nationwide, 64.7 percent identify as female (Zippia 2023). As recently as 2022, Solon, McGill, and Jensen "identified no literature on the career management of female primary-role advisors" in publications of the largest professional organization of academic advisors or in the major academic journal databases (p. 19). The same researchers interviewed 17 women academic advisors in higher education. While the subject pool was entirely female, the study included no research questions or findings that addressed gender issues.

For many undergraduates, the mentoring relationship with their academic advisor constitutes their most extensive connection with a faculty or staff member throughout college. Academic advisors play a crucial role in college student retention, satisfaction, and academic performance (Drake 2011; Holland, Westwood and Hanif

2020). Improving the capacity of women faculty to advise effectively carries important gender-relevant consequences. Women especially thrive when mentored by capable women advisors. Pairing female students with female advisors can yield several beneficial effects unique to this gender pairing. Multi-year data analysis of advisor/advisee matched gender pairings shows significant benefits to women students' cumulative grade point average at graduation, retention rates in the first two years of college, post-graduation employment rates, and likelihood to attend graduate school (Kato and Song 2022). These female gender match effects persist independently of other potentially confounding variables, such as the advisor's age, whether the advisor graduated from the same type of institution that the students attend, or whether students were introduced to the field by a female instructor.

The present study focuses on the experiences of two women who coordinate advising at two public universities in the southeastern United States. Their firsthand narrations and reflections regarding advising throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic provide insights on the tensions women advisors face. These gender-infused tensions take the form of feminist double binds, or conflicting professional expectations and aspirations that have no clear resolution and where every option poses risks or penalties (Frechette 2009).

2. Method

The analytical approach combines critical incident theory with autoethnography. As a qualitative method, critical incident theory (CIT) identifies and assesses specific key experiences that constitute potential turning points for some aspect of an educator's professional practice (Tripp 1993). The decisions and actions taken in these circumstances constitute defining moments wherein the choices among available reactions can transform the nature of an educator's professional role (Senel 2021). CIT has proven especially useful in identifying opportunities to improve faculty performance (Khandelwal 2009). On a larger scale, CIT can diagnose problems with and suggest improvements in systemic institutional practices within higher education. CIT elaborates on specific instances to elicit richer details about events and their implications than surveys can yield (Cunningham, De Brún and McAuliffe 2020).

Previous research that applied CIT to academic advising in higher education addressed student satisfaction with advising and recommended that advisors build closer relationships with students (Vianden 2016). Diane Reay (1997) laments the paucity of research centring on women's labour in academic culture. By contrast, this study foregrounds the perspectives of women engaged in performing the labour of academic advising. Firsthand narratives from these women themselves comprise autoethnographies that capture the authentic *praxis* of advising as a lived experience in academia, revealing a more vivid, detailed description than quantitative analyses can provide (Sang 2018; Schwartzman and Simon 2023).

To address the issues confronting women in professional track (i.e., non-tenure track) positions who balance instructional, familial, and advising responsibilities, two women in such positions reflect on critical incidents in their advising experiences from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 in the United States) to the present. The advisors independently constructed narratives describing examples of occasions when they faced advising experiences that redefined the kinds of care they were expected to provide for students or that challenged their definitions of an academic advisor's role and duties.

Both faculty members (designated JS and CZH) serve as the lead academic advisor for departments of communication in southeastern U.S. universities. JS works as a senior lecturer (professional track) at a mid-size (enrolment = 17,743) research- and teaching-focused public university. She oversees approximately 300 student advisees per term, sharing advising responsibilities with one other departmental advisor (also a woman in a professional track). CZH coordinates advising for 750 students per semester, supervising a team of three other advisors (all professional track, two of them women) at a national top-30 ranked public research university with 38,873 students. She occupies a senior lecturer (professional track) position.

Both advisors are white, cisgender, married, and earn upper-middle class incomes. The findings, therefore, reflect gender issues as they affect this limited demographic. Additional research should compare this study with various demographics such as LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and others often marginalized in academia. Especially informative insights may arise by focusing on intersectional challenges facing members of these marginalized groups. Because the advisors in this study operate from positions of relative privilege, their narratives probably understate gender-related imbalances that women confront more generally in higher education.

The following sections highlight thematic convergences between the narratives of the advisors. The most extensive, detailed incidents revealed two sets of conflicting tensions. The first tension centres on the escalating

and disproportionate demands to nurture and care for students. Constant care escalation, however, competes with time and energy devoted to research, teaching, personal, and familial caretaking responsibilities. The second tension focuses on conflicts between obeying the university's imperative to serve students in every possible way and the advisor's "bottom, non-negotiable line" of duty to equip students to make sound decisions for themselves (Bloom, Hutson and He 2008). The final section suggests productive ways to manage these conflicting pressures.

3. Bound by Boundless Care

The first double bind arises in the tension between growing expectations to extend care to advisees and the simultaneous expectations to devote sufficient attention to teaching and other professional activities—including families and self-care. In their discourse analysis of personal narratives told by black faculty, Griffin, Bennett, and Harris (2013) observed a clear gender difference regarding the perceived obligation to perform academic service such as advising. Although they recognized such student-facing service as encroaching on time that could be devoted to research that would be highly prized for promotion, mid-career black women felt a much stronger obligation than black men. While the men more readily said "no" to service, the women felt more obligations to perform service and were more reluctant to "say no" (Griffin, Bennett and Harris 2013, p. 503).

Such findings illustrate a fundamental double bind for women faculty. To demonstrate their commitment to the university and to students as well as to build relationships, women become more likely to perform labour-intensive service such as advising. When they do, however, they tend to attenuate time devoted to research or teaching, thus placing themselves in a more vulnerable position when they seek promotion (Misra, Lundquist and Templer 2012). On the other horn of the dilemma, deliberate refusal or reduction of advising and other service duties may be interpreted as selfishness—a doubly damaging perception given its violation of social expectations that women shoulder the primary responsibility for caregiving.

CZH notices that, in practice even when not explicitly articulated, the expectations of students, their parents, and the institution differ depending on the advisor's gender. The male advisors "don't have to be as nurturing." She adds: "There's nothing that's written in terms of those expectations. But I think there are more and more of those expectations—like, a lot." Throughout the national conferences on advising, "it's kind of a thing" throughout the professional community to discuss the disproportionate expectations of nurturance placed on women advisors from all directions (colleagues, administrators, students, and parents). "There's much more expectation—a lot more—nurturing and taking care of" the students.

The increasingly comprehensive ways that advisors are expected to monitor, encourage, guide, and serve students takes a toll on the women who put this model of advising into practice. "So, it's that idea, like we are in your [the student's] business," according to CZH. She continues:

> Female advisors really do kind of feel that expectation, more of them…[to] find everything that you can to be supportive. And there's a lot of exhaustion, a lot of burnout, a lot of just feeling institutionally underappreciated for the amount of emotional work that's gone on.

Pressure also arises from beyond the institution. CZH observes gender-related demands that parents of students place upon her

> as a female in that role [of advisor]. They expect me to be the parent when they are not here to do so. Those parenting components [are] kind of an expectation to be the mother of their child when they [parents] are not here on campus. Very much that *in loco parentis* model.

For example, CZH regularly encounters parents who ask her to find out how their (adult) children are performing in classes although federal privacy regulations (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, known as FERPA) prohibit disclosing this information without a student's explicit written permission.

JS finds that virtual advising via videoconferencing introduces new forms of parental intrusiveness.

> Virtual meetings, while convenient for both students and advisors, create spaces where private information is discussed in very public settings. It is not uncommon for parents to be sitting next to students when the camera turns on, or for students to share the meeting link with a parent who joins the call. Some are guided by parents who are "off camera," but still in the room. While most of these situations are easily remedied by refusing to speak with the third party, advisors are put in a position that forces them into contentious conversations.

Rejection of parental involvement may alter perceptions of the advisor, casting her as competing with rather than extending the sphere of parental caregiving. Women advisors confront a classic feminist double bind wherein they face conflicting demands or expectations with no guidance for resolution and negative consequences attached to every option (Jenkins 2014). In this case, enforcing boundaries between parental and advisor roles invites accusations that the advisor is uncaring although legal regulations require setting such limits.

Women advisors feel pressure to meet these escalating demands, which CZH calls "the hidden messaging that's present as written in the job description: the 'other duties as assigned.'" Specifically, women bear the brunt of "those emotional labour, nurturing pieces, and if you're saying no to those, then you're saying no to the other duties as assigned, which means you're saying no to continued employment."

JS encountered her professional precarity more directly. Throughout the pandemic, her university continuously told students that they should take all their problems and questions about pandemic-related academic policy changes to their advisors. Advisors had to guide students through a brand new, complicated, voluminous Academic Relief Package that articulated all the special academic policies instituted during the pandemic. Although advisors had no more knowledge of the new policies than the students, those students looked to the advisors to fix any problems. As JS explains, the mantra was: "Talk with your academic advisor to help you make an informed decision." Amid the frantic fervour to prevent further student attrition, advisors were explicitly identified as the key bulwark against enrolment declines. JS continues:

> The implication—and the result—was that students believed advisors could do almost anything within the university. In reality, we could only see what students themselves could see—their degree progression and the semester's list of scheduled classes. We could not help, but we could be blamed for not helping.

As recently as August 2023, JS expressed these concerns to the provost during an Undergraduate Studies Council meeting. Advisors were feeling overwhelmed, understaffed, under-supported, and undercompensated. JS mentioned that the university messaging around advising suggested that advising was crucial to the continued existence of the university. Thus, as essential personnel, advisors should receive some sort of economic or professional recognition for their work. At the very least, the university should probably invest in additional professional advisors.

The provost responded: "It is going to take dedicated advisors like yourself to keep this university running." Conversely, therefore, any advisor who did not silently endure ever-expanding workload expectations and additional uncompensated labour lacked dedication and betrayed the university. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, JS's university has made no effort to increase the number of professional advisors on campus. To the contrary, the College of Arts and Sciences eliminated stipends and release time for faculty serving as advisors. Yet, advisors are still considered, according to the provost, "the first line of defence" against enrolment loss. Extending the military metaphor, advisors who resist or limit their role as perpetual problem-solvers qualify as derelict in their duties and possibly traitors.

4.   Bound by Learned Helplessness

Women advisors face another precarious double bind that pits the imperative to do things for students against the need to build student capacity for self-direction. The boundless expectations for student support can play out in detrimental ways for students. When advisors, eager to satisfy students and avoid complaints, unconditionally continue to accommodate requests that advisors complete tasks the students ordinarily should perform, they foster learned helplessness that impedes resilience when faced with difficulties. Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which one feels powerless to change or escape a negative situation because of a history of repeated failures or a perceived lack of control (Maier and Seligman 1976). "Learned helplessness may be the underlying cause of poor mental health status among college students during the COVID-19 lockdown" (Xue *et al*. 2023, p. 285). Reverberations of pandemic-induced stress and trauma manifest in college students as learned helplessness that

> can lead to passivity, reduced problem-solving abilities, deficits in new learning capabilities in college students, and can cause a lack of motivation or hope for academics, leading to inaction and not attempting new learning situations, and resulting in a loss of direction for the future and decreased interest and engagement in overall life. (Park and Han 2023, p. 7)

CZH and JS often encounter these conditions.

Before the pandemic, CZH found that students routinely selected their preferred courses and created their class schedules using the online registration platform. Although "the registration system hasn't changed at all" since the COVID-19 disruptions in education, student approaches to registration differ. "But now there is so much more anxiety about registering, and students not registering at all when they needed to." Amidst plentiful course offerings, even seniors "are coming and saying, 'Well, I just didn't know what I needed to do, and I need you to sit down with me and explain it to me…How can I find classes?' I'm like, 'You're a senior. You've been registering for seven semesters.'"

JS observes that when students defer to advisors to perform tasks the students themselves should complete, the boundaries between advisor and advisee erode. The advisor then is expected to take on the role of decision-maker on behalf of the student. Four years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, JS finds that students frequently no longer understand how to read their degree progress reports or follow registration procedures. They are unaware of how their plan of study works, how to progress through their major, and most importantly, plan for their futures only after their degree completion. Instead, they place this responsibility on their advisors.

One of JS's advisees epitomizes this transfer of responsibility. The student admitted not having looked at upcoming course offerings, not even knowing how to find next semester's schedule despite having registered previously, and had no course preferences or career goals.

> JS: "So, take a look at those directions, look up the classes, and then let's talk about what you think you want to take."

> Student: "Can't you just pick my classes for me?"

The last line is often where advisors and students end up. Students just want their classes picked for them, and because advisors are increasingly accommodating and often know so much about their students' lives, the students feel comfortable asking advisors to determine the course of their college careers.

> Another student interaction shows how JS also confronts expectations to assume gendered parental roles by doing tasks for students rather than equipping them to act independently.

> Student: "Dr. S, I wish you were my mom."

> JS: "I assure you, I'm not like this with my own children."

> Student: "I bet you're a cool mom."

> JS: "I'd like to think so, but I think your parents are doing a good job, too."

> Student: "They expect a lot of me."

> JS: "I know it feels that way, but I bet they just know you have so much potential, and they want you to recognize that and to try difficult things."

> Student: "It's just so overwhelming. Can't you just enroll me in my classes?"

> JS: "If I enroll you, I'm going to put you in an 8:00 AM history classes because I'm a morning person and I love history. That would be my ideal schedule. Can you see why you need to pick your own classes and set your own schedule? It has to work for you, not me."

> Student: "Yeah, but I just wish you could just do it for me."

Increasingly, advisors struggle with a vexing double bind. They could complete tasks that students deem challenging and thus appear more caring, but at the cost of enabling helplessness. Or, advisors could build their students' sense of agency by (re)placing more responsibility on them to chart their own academic future. That assignment of responsibility, however, may set limits to the advisor's role that students will not accept. Then students could switch to an advisor who will enable their learned helplessness, stigmatizing their previous advisor as callous. Institutional pressures to retain students by whatever means necessary may raise concerns about the job performance of an advisor who draws complaints from students or loses advisees. When the university's mantra is to maximize enrolment at all costs, an advisor may seriously wonder whether her job is one of those costs.

5.   Recommendations

5.1 Policy Changes

Institutional policy changes can mitigate the strain to reconcile advising with women's other responsibilities. One straightforward measure would make the proportions of professional responsibilities negotiable to better reflect actual labour expended. The workload allocation for JS's position is unalterably set at 90 percent teaching and ten percent "other" although advising easily occupies two-thirds or more of her effort. A more flexible and accurate official workload would allow performance evaluations to focus on activities that constitute the largest portion of activity. CZH can do exactly that, as her proportional distribution of responsibilities is subject to renegotiation annually.

To relieve the advising overload, JS instituted a peer advisor program. Trained seniors in the major serve as the first advising contact. They can process the students who have fully planned their schedules, verified their progress toward degree attainment, and simply need their online passcode to complete registration. These students often do not need (or want) extended conversations with their advisor for routine tasks. Overall student satisfaction with this system has been strong, and the process has allowed faculty advisors to concentrate on students who face greater challenges.

Academic departments also can monitor the gender distribution of advisors and assure equitable distribution of advisees among all advisors. Although students may prefer to self-select an advisor, extant gender role assumptions may drive students disproportionately toward women, whom they consider more nurturing. Advising might become a more rotational service role to reduce long-term clustering of women in the most intensive but rarely rewarded academic labour.

5.2 Addressing Learned Helplessness

Although repeatedly performing tasks for students may yield instant gratification, it can prove detrimental to student success. Park and Han (2023) contend that "reducing learned helplessness is a crucial health-related factor for college students to adjust well to college life" (p. 13). A detailed study of the features in advising that correlate with student success identifies students developing self-efficacy and a sense of responsibility as crucial (Young-Jones *et al*. 2013). The same study notes that women more often than men identify taking personal responsibility for their education as a key to academic success.

Self-efficacy intersects with resilience, as students who have developed high self-efficacy "will see challenges when faced with difficult decisions as opposed to threats" (Ibrahim, Fakhry and Khalaf 2020, p. 1176). Building student self-efficacy equips students to persevere through challenges, to explore rather than avoid the unknown. Developing more self-sufficient students also redistributes advisors' labour toward tasks that require their expertise.

Research on students who have overcome learned helplessness suggests how to restore student agency. Hayes, Doucet, and Bedi (2021) find that helplessness declines with experiences that provide a sense of control, positive perspective shifts, and self-development activities outside of just re-attempting the situations that led to learned helplessness. Building confidence through small successes can counteract helplessness. These findings imply that, rather than simply accommodating requests to "do it for me," advisors assign advisees small responsibilities that incrementally build toward taking greater ownership over their academic progress. For example, a student might begin by selecting only one course and gradually progress toward constructing their entire schedule. This incremental approach builds student confidence, shifting their perspective away from perceived incapacity.

6.   Conclusion

The experiences of women academic advisors in higher education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic illuminate significant challenges rooted in gender expectations and institutional structures. This study, through the personal narratives of two women academic advisors, highlights the complex dynamics of caregiving expectations and the implications these have on both student resilience and advisor well-being. The conundrums faced by these advisors underpin the critical need for institutional policy reforms that address and balance the expectations placed on academic advising roles, specifically regarding the disproportionate service burdens carried by women. Additionally, this study underscores the importance of fostering student self-efficacy and independence, challenging the perpetuation of learned helplessness facilitated by over-nurturing advising approaches.

To mitigate these issues, institutions should consider revising workload allocations to match actual advising efforts, promoting equitable distribution of advising duties across faculty regardless of gender, and implementing systems that encourage student self-reliance while providing necessary support. By addressing these points, higher education institutions can enhance the effectiveness of academic advising, support gender equity among faculty, and contribute to the holistic development of students. The insights gained from this study call for a concerted effort to redefine the boundaries of academic advising, ensuring it serves as a conduit for empowerment rather than dependency, thereby aligning more closely with educational goals of fostering lifelong, independent learners.

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