

# Remote Academic Advising with a Synchronous Communication Technology: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most face-to-face instructions and services in higher education, universities struggled to continue teaching and serving students. In particular, student services like academic advising were significantly impacted, as most advising is conducted in person. The use of synchronous communication technology was suddenly increased to continue advising students, employing Remote Academic Advising (RAA). Three researchers at a state university in the southeast USA conducted a case study to understand the experiences of using RAA by academic advisors. The study included 11 academic advisors from different academic colleges and areas who were engaged in RAA to provide advising service to students during the 2020–2021 academic year. Four themes emerged after a reiterative process of coding and analysing the interview responses. The four themes were a slow transition to using RAA, RAA can also be relational, RAA can promote more awareness of mental health and RAA should be part of regular advising practice. The discussion section includes recommendations for advancing RAA as regular practice through a concerted effort of promotion, leadership and effective use of RAA with synchronous communication technology among the advising community on campus.*

**Keywords:** Remote Academic Advising (RAA); synchronous communication technology; case study; COVID-19; higher education

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## Introduction

With the onset of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in 2020, higher education had to extensively shift teaching, learning and advising to remote or online formats. This included essential and regular services to students, such as academic advising. As academic advising has primarily existed in a face-to-face or in-person format, there were challenges adjusting to a remote or virtual environment. Academic advisors were seen as crucial connections or touchpoints for students, who were now learning and connecting with their institutions in an entirely online environment. By April 2020, 98% of 3,278 institutions in the USA impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic had moved the majority of all classes to an online format ([educationdata.org](https://educationdata.org), 2020). As the pandemic continued, academic advisors began using synchronous communication technology (e.g. MS Teams, Zoom, Canvas Conference/Big Blue Button, Google Meets, GoToMeeting, Cisco WebEx, RingCentral, Adobe Connect, etc.) to conduct advising remotely as Remote Academic Advising (RAA). For this study, academic advising was viewed as a student support service where an institutional representative (in this case, an academic advisor) dispenses guidance and information to a college student, concerning matters related to academics, social or personal issues (Kuhn, 2008). The content discussed during an advising appointment can range from major or degree requirements, course selections, career direction or, at times, mental and physical well-being of a student (Champlin-Scharff, 2010; Flatley et al., 2013; Smith & Allen, 2014; Williams, 2007). In addition, academic advisors have a unique position in the lives of students based on their positions and regular interactions with them (Egan, 2015). This is even more so for students being advised online or in a completely online programme (Mueller & Meyer, 2017; Ohrablo, 2016). With the impact of COVID-19 on advising and specifically academic advisors, it is necessary to understand how academic advisors used RAA with synchronous communication technology to continue advising students. To achieve this research purpose,

the researchers sought to interview those academic advisors to reveal and understand their perceptions and experiences in the past academic year as they used RAA to continue serving students through synchronous communication technology.

The researchers interviewed 11 academic advisors working at a state university in the southeastern USA. The researchers used 20 semi-structured questions for the interviews during the spring 2021 term (March–May timeframe) to understand the experience of how academic advisors used RAA with synchronous communication technology from March 2020 to May 2020 in advising students. Beginning in 2017, academic advising was moved under a new university division, Student Success and Enrolment Management, with a focus on increasing 4-year graduation rates. Three years later, the 4-year graduation rate had increased by 19 percentage points, with an 81% retention rate during that time (Board of Trustees, 2021, p. 2). The study hopes to reveal the essence and characteristics of this less-used advising format by academic advisors and to promote effective RAA using synchronous communication technology to enhance academic advising services and student success at universities.

## **1. Literature Review**

Academic advisors are not only seen as essential for student academic success, but their interactions with students also help identify the interventions for students struggling with a myriad of issues in and out of the classroom (Steele & White, 2019). Additional research has shown how student interactions with academic advisors have become critical to not just academic success, but also retention and graduation (Braxton et al., 2014; Campbell & Nutt, 2010; Nutt, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987; Young-Jones et al., 2013). The typical student interaction with an academic advisor has been primarily face to face, using technology to augment this interaction, which has been largely in a supportive role. Advising conducted using asynchronous communication technology (e.g. email, cell phone, Facebook, etc.) does not occur in real time (Amador & Amador, 2013). However, more recently, the use of synchronous communication technology (happening in real time) has become increasingly useful for maintaining the student–advisor interaction, especially after COVID-19 necessitated a move to almost entirely remote teaching, learning and service in higher education (Argüello & Méndez, 2019; Gaines, 2014; Henderson & Goodridge, 2015; Junco et al., 2016). This includes using platforms like Zoom, MS Teams and Google Meets as examples of synchronous communication technology for advising. RAA uses synchronous communication technology to maintain the essential role academic advisors have in interacting and supporting students. Unfortunately, because RAA has been viewed as a companion and not a replacement for the face-to-face interactions that advisors have with students, the use of the technology for advisors has not kept pace (Argüello & Méndez, 2019; Gaines, 2014; Shroeder & Terras, 2015). Many of the web platforms mentioned earlier (Zoom, MS Teams, etc.) used by the educators for synchronous multimodal communication opportunities (Wang et al., 2013) could also be utilised by academic advisors, especially after something as disruptive as COVID-19 happened to higher education, for the advisor–student interaction.

The opportunities afforded by synchronous communication technology for RAA have increased; however, the effectiveness is still uncertain. A study in 2016 about students' preferred method of communicating with their advisor still favoured email (asynchronous communication) (Junco et al., 2016). In 2018, Menke et al. reported advising administrators still rated skill competencies like technology for advisors, not as essential as communication, for entry-level advisors. Employing the same study today might produce results that view communication and technology (e.g. synchronous communication technology) as essential skills for entry-level academic advisors. Menke et al.'s (2020) study examining core competencies for advisors, as seen by chief academic officers, focused on areas related to either conceptual, informational or relational competencies with no mention of technology. Another issue facing academic advisors in utilising the full potential of RAA was the sudden transition to remote teaching, learning and advising around spring 2020, throughout higher education, not just in the USA.

### *1.1 Remote Academic Advising*

The use of RAA before COVID-19 was not well supported in the literature. Only a few studies tried to address how synchronous communication technology is used for something like RAA and how it might be beneficial when advising students. In 2014, Jones and Hansen suggested using Blackboard Collaborate to conduct advising when working with community college students, in a more purposeful, intentional and holistic way. The researchers based this suggestion on the tools that were available at that time on the Blackboard platform to advisors when working with students. In the literature, Paul et al. (2012) term this type of work with students as a form of intrusive advising. To practise this type of advising using technology, Jones and Hansen (2014) argue, you need 'things to happen in real-time' (p. 90), which is the essence of advisors using synchronous communication technology. Studying students at a large suburban community college as part of a dissertation, Madi-McCarthy (2018) found online students reported higher levels of satisfaction of the advising experience and rated the effectiveness, outcomes and benefits of virtual advising favourably using a Likert scale to measure levels of satisfaction. Another study of academic advisors at a Malaysian university (UTM) in 2020 found the quick move to online advising and students' readiness to shift to online learning as significant challenges to how advisors were able to implement RAA when COVID-19 struck (Van et al., 2020). Finally, the most recent study of RAA explored students' knowledge, experiences and perceptions at a state university (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). Through the survey and focus group interviews, the researchers found no significant differences in students' knowledge or experiences with

RAA according to their demographic independent variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, major and RAA experiences. However, significant differences in student opinions on RAA were found among different age and gender groups. Their paper identifies the barriers to implementing RAA and gives suggestions to overcome these barriers when advising students, which complements and supports the research in this study discussing about RAA with academic advisors.

## *1.2 Technology Acceptance Model*

In 1989, Davis developed the technology acceptance model (TAM) to understand how system design features influence and why end users accept or reject information. Davis examined several aspects of technology and systems adoption in an attempt to understand the causal interrelationships between different factors. As a conceptual framework used for this study, the researchers examined three parts of TAM as a theoretical lens to view the results: 1) perceived usefulness, 2) perceived ease of use and 3) attitude towards using RAA. The perceived usefulness as well as ease of use help the researchers understand how advisors view using RAA in their daily practice. Their attitude towards using RAA also helps the researchers begin to understand how RAA can become a permanent fixture and common practice in the advising profession. RAA is not a technology itself, but the use of synchronous communication technology should be an integral part of the everyday practice for academic advisors that facilitates their interactions with students. The technological tools and resources such as synchronous communication technology were widely available in higher education before COVID-19, but not utilised to the level seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. TAM can be used to help us understand the application of this technology adoption: using synchronous communication technology in RAA to provide advising services to students during COVID-19.

There is a gap in the literature to understanding how RAA can and should be utilised by academic advisors. After nearly a year and a half of dealing with COVID-19 in higher education, very little research has been completed on RAA with the use of synchronous communication technology by academic advisors. It was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic that most advisors have the tools, ability and interest in using synchronous communication technology for RAA. However, how to effectively engage in RAA using synchronous communication technology to successfully advise students is new to many academic advisors. Detailing the essence and characteristics of RAA using synchronous communication technology by academic advisors will not only help fill an existing gap in the literature, but also inform the readers about effectively using RAA in actual practice; this constitutes the rationale for this study.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Questions*

A qualitative approach with the case study method was used for this study. The three major research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- What are the responses of academic advisors when they were required to transition from in-person academic advising to RAA using synchronous communication technology during COVID-19?
- What are the experiences of academic advisors using synchronous communication technology to engage in RAA to advise students during COVID-19?
- What perspectives do academic advisors offer on the future uses of RAA with synchronous communication technology?

### *2.2 Case Study*

The researchers used a case study method to gather data and make sense of the data as reported, in this case, the interview transcripts. We chose to employ an instrumental group case study methodology to gain insights and understanding of how academic advisors describe their experiences while practising RAA using synchronous communication technology (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) posits the purpose of a case study is to understand human interaction within a social system, and an instrumental case study is conducted to promote understanding of specific issues; in this case, the specific issue is using synchronous communication technology for RAA. Elements from each transcript were member-checked, coded and eventually organised into themes. For collecting case study data, interviews and field notes are considered the best ways (Koopman, 2016). Through the interviews, participants are given an opportunity to divulge and describe lived experiences and an opportunity to reflect on their practice (Koopman, 2016). The essence of this case study is to describe the use of synchronous communication technology with RAA by academic advisors during COVID-19 and to present rich and thick descriptions for better and deeper understanding of the case under investigation.

### *2.3 Participants and Research Setting*

The study had 11 academic advisors participating in interviews over 2 months, March–April 2021. All 11 participants were academic advisors who had worked at the institution for at least 1 year, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study site was a comprehensive state university in the southeastern USA. The university has six colleges and offers 58 undergraduate degrees, 25 graduate degrees, three doctoral degrees and 13 professional certificate programmes. At the time of the study, nearly 15,000 students were enrolled. Academic advising is centralised under a unit called Academic Engagement at the university. However, each college houses its academic advisors, who have a dual-reporting structure, reporting to the college administration and the centralised Academic Engagement unit. The 11 participants represent two colleges, and a department focused on working with first-year and undeclared students.

The interview questions were developed to answer the three research questions and begin to understand RAA using synchronous communication technology by academic advisors during COVID-19 while working remotely with students. The interview questions were first piloted with a current academic advisor from the same university, who was not part of the study. This helped the researchers obtain feedback on interview questions before being used with the 11 study participants. As a result, several interview questions were refined and clarified for improvement. At the beginning of each interview, the practice of RAA using synchronous communication technology was defined and examples were presented. The interviews occurred in the context of the university having all teaching, learning and advising entirely online from March 2020 to May 2021.

The number of years as an academic advisor ranged from 2 to 17. Three participants identified their gender as male, and eight identified their gender as female. Their ages ranged from 25 to 50 years. The number of students advised during the time of the study was between 37 and 63 students per week. All 11 of the participants had earned a Master's degree (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Participants'	Number of years in advising	Number of students advised per week
Casey	8	45
Zoe	2	60
Elisa	8	50
Alexis	17	50
Janine	2.5	60
Quiniya	3	50
Michael	4	37
Greg	4	63
Jessica	4	40
Jerry	8	50
Ashley	2	60

'All participants' names are pseudonyms.

### 3. Findings

At the time of the interviews, all academic advisors were working on campus, although some were still maintaining remote advising hours. When all teachers and students went entirely online in March 2020, all 11 participants were working from home. Most returned to their on-campus advising offices by August 2020, even if part-time. The interviews either occurred in their on-campus or at a home office. The participants were eager to discuss their experiences of living and working as academic advisors during COVID-19. When the interviews occurred in spring 2021, all participants had been working remotely (at least partially) as advisors for at least 1 year; however, as the researchers discovered, their understanding and experience with RAA was not uniform across all participants. Four themes emerged after a reiterative process of coding and analysing the interview responses. The four themes were an uneven transition, RAA strengthens advisor–student connections, RAA promotes more awareness of mental health, and institutional efforts to promote and lead on RAA as regular practice.

#### 3.1 Theme 1: A Slow Transition to RAA (*RAA in the Beginning*)

The researchers presented RAA as a way to advise students using the various tools available to make the experience as close to the typical face-to-face method as possible. As discussed earlier, synchronous communication technology makes this possible using platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams, available to both the advisor and the student. However, as the researchers discovered through the interviews, when the university conducted all teaching, learning and advising online/remote in



March 2020, most of the 11 participants were engaging in a very basic form of RAA. The 11 participants were primarily using their cell phones and email to advise and communicate with students. Much of this was attributed to the quick transition the university made to move all teaching, learning and advising online. Zoe (pseudonyms are used for all participants in this article) described how when they first began practising RAA in March 2020, it was just using their cell phones and Google Voice: ‘...that was like a quick transition, I would say, so we did that for a while, but I don’t think it was the most effective because we couldn’t share screens’. Another participant had only talked to a particular student on the phone before COVID-19 and then continued to use her cell phone before starting to use synchronous communication technology. She remembers not even thinking how using RAA could change the experience that ‘...you can have a phone call with anyone, but you don’t necessarily know who you’re talking to’ (Janine). Even a year into the pandemic at the time of the interviews, one participant was still primarily conducting her advising appointments over the phone, because she said that is what students preferred ‘...but the majority of mine is over the phone’ (Elisa). Alexis also mentioned that many of her students were still choosing to meet over the phone, given the option. ‘We were doing, I would say, for us in the beginning, we were doing appointments pretty much phone appointments and then also a lot of email advising as well’ (Alexis). Jerry also described primarily using the phone to conduct advising appointments, even while back in his office on campus. ‘I use just the basic telephone or use cell phone. And, um, well, if you’re in the office, I use my extension. Like if I’m at home, I would have resorted to using my personal cell phone’ (Jerry). In conducting the interviews, the initial lived experiences of the participants were very similar, advising was conducted over the phone, in a remote location, typically a home office.

The transition to using RAA was uneven among advisors on campus. Some colleges and areas were already actively using synchronous communication technology to connect with students, even before COVID-19. However, once an initial couple of months passed during the beginning of the pandemic, using RAA to actively connect and support students helped advisors move beyond the traditional remote advising appointment using only the telephone.

### *3.2 Theme 2: RAA Can Also Be Relational*

As the participants described their experiences and began exploring synchronous communication technology, many began to see how using RAA could create opportunities to build/strengthen relationships with their students. Some participants noticed that they could create a personal space in their remote location, much like their offices on campus, that helped connect with students. Casey described how students would react to her cat when it would visit her home office during an advising meeting with a student or how she would notice things on the student’s wall.

I found out some of my students have the same you know breed of cat or you know it would just funnel into other conversations you know I found out people were fostering animals and doing all sorts of things which is incredible we would never have talked about and I set up kind of my Home Office.

I said I love the dolphin, the picture of you is that you in the dolphin (picture), tell me about that and then he went into how his past experience created where he wants to be which just be this this incredibly rich conversation that we wouldn’t have had in my office.

RAA has the ability to enrich the experience or relationship an advisor has with a student. Participants commented how their home offices could create a similar kind of open and welcoming environment as their offices on campus. Sometimes, this was in the form of pictures or art; at other times, it resulted from having family pets enter or engage during an RAA appointment. Regardless of how the home office environment was decorated or set up, participants noticed that students often responded positively to what they saw on video. The participant mentioned having more stuff now because she noticed students sometimes responded to it. ‘Even today I kind of have stuff showing but I didn’t have this much stuff shown in the back during that time’ (Alexis).

As participants were using RAA more frequently to meet with their students, some noticed how more students were prepared for their advising appointments than they were when meeting face to face. Casey described how more students had programmes pulled up and other items; so, when they did engage in RAA, it was a more rewarding experience for both. ‘I mean I just was so proud I think pride, would be the best thing is because so many of them, really were prepared to talk to me, more so than ever coming into my office’ (Casey). Alexis mentioned how she felt her students were more engaged in their advising appointments during RAA. ‘I felt like the students, we were a little bit more actively engaged’ (Alexis).

Through physical space, RAA has the potential to build and strengthen the relationships advisors have with their students. Whether through home office décor, pictures on the wall or personal pets, participants created welcoming spaces that were an extension of their on-campus offices. This also extended to how students engaged with their advisors during RAA appointments. The virtual aspect of RAA did not hinder or lessen the impact of the advisor–student relationship, and in some cases strengthened it.

### *3.3 Theme 3: RAA Can Promote More Awareness of Mental Health*

The impacts of COVID-19 over the past 2 years, in large part, drove the experiences and use of RAA by academic advisors in the study. One result of the move to remote and online teaching, learning and advising was an increased focus

on the mental health of faculty, staff and students. The researchers explored the topic of mental health with academic advisors and their students. Almost all of the participants noticed an increase in the mention of mental health by students, and in some cases, students asking for more assistance with their mental health. One participant grouped her student conversations into three themes. One of those themes was related to mental health. '...Mental health, that was a really big one' (Casey). Zoe described an increase in the number of students talking with her about their own mental health saying, 'I've noticed an increase in like mental health reports to myself, I feel like I have done so many care and concern forms. I have had a lot of students share like some mental health challenges'. Some participants also noticed when the topic of mental health came up, many students were already receiving assistance either on campus or with their own provider. When mental health comes up, they actually already are connected with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on the campus.

So that's refreshing because I feel like when I go to talk about that resource, the response that I've been getting a lot is yes, I have an appointment with them or I've just had an appointment with them, or if it's not through CAPS, then their own private preferred healthcare professional, so I feel like they're doing better at recognizing some of that and know to seek out those resources, so our conversations, it's very comfortable with that because they're already taking advantage of some of the resources to help. (Alexis)

Students could discuss their own mental health and well-being with various campus individuals before COVID-19. In the absence of any face-to-face interactions, RAA was crucial in helping advisors stay aware of how their students were doing during the pandemic. RAA helped advisors continue to provide important information about the mental health and well-being resources available to students on campus, while also helping those students deal with mental health issues.

### *3.4 Theme 4: RAA as Regular Practice*

The researchers were interested in learning how RAA could and did become part of the regular practice for academic advisors. As discussed earlier, when the university first pushed all teaching, learning and advising online, RAA using synchronous communication technology was not something many practiced. Some participants knew the benefits of using RAA for their practice, in particular, the flexibility that using RAA offered. '...I think we should embrace it more and we should be more flexible in how we deliver academic advising' (Alexis). A few participants recognised how RAA impacts students differently, even before COVID-19, including how older or commuting students could benefit from RAA. 'I think reaching nontraditional students through RAA, like after hours would be helpful. Just because people have families and work full time and you know they can't come to an appointment at 9am because they have to be at work at 8am' (Elisa). Still, a few participants regarded the face-to-face practice of advising should still be the main method. 'I mean, I, I personally feel as though that it is, it's important to have the face-to-face contact with students. Um, I do feel that more gets accomplished in face-to-face meetings' (Greg).

However, most participants saw RAA as an essential piece of their regular practice. Several of the more experienced advisors were also most vocal about the regular use of RAA going forward. They expressed how RAA can benefit both students and advisors alike in how academic advising is delivered. '...I hope that we wouldn't go back to just doing things the way we always have done them, I think it gives us an opportunity now to do things differently' (Alexis). Finally, Michael recognised how in some ways, academic advising was returning to the traditional face-to-face method of advising, but RAA can and should be just as beneficial.

Look, we're not just gonna, you know, this is an option, but we're, we're pretty much just moving back to our, our status quo or our normal, but also looking at these at these, these new ways of serving students and, you know, investing and investing in them. So, um, that means investing time, investing, training, investing, uh, funds, uh, you know, uh, money into these types of things. Um, and again, just recognizing, like I said, for, you know, an institution like ours, where we do serve a lot of, um, first generation underserved students, uh, underrepresented students, um, looking at how can we, um, assist these students in the best ways possible, uh, you know, to make their experience just as fruitful as if they were in person in our, in, in our offices.

Participants viewed RAA as essential to the regular practice, either as a result of COVID-19 or, in some cases, as expanded practice in already serving students who are not able to visit campus for a face-to-face advising appointment. Many advisors looked at RAA as a way forward for academic advising that should become part of best practices, in serving all students, regardless of their circumstances.

### *3.5 Subtheme: Institutional Leadership*

The researchers were curious how the experience of participants and the use of RAA was influenced or supported by the university. As discussed earlier, when the university first went entirely online, many individuals on campus were not prepared. However, as COVID-19 progressed, faculty, students and staff became more comfortable with remote work. Participants were mixed on how the university supported their work using RAA.

I think it needs to be promoted a little bit more. Um, I enjoy it, I enjoy using it. I think we could, um, promote, do a little bit of promotion and marketing a little bit more in that. Um, because of the pandemic, it gives us another way in which to reach or meet or reach our students. (Jerry)

This sentiment was echoed by other participants. Ashley described the issue of communication related to using RAA. In ‘just communicating with what different offices are doing, communicating, um, to students too. So, students know in general, this is how, um, this procedure is working now. So, communication is always important’. Casey mentioned, ‘I think that was the frustrating part for some time, is that our guidance was skewed’. Related to the idea of communication was trying to find one common platform and way to use RAA.

...that is one area that students knew and that’s something that we all use as a university, so instead of having three different things you have one and it might be make life a little easier for everyone, especially as soon so they’re not confused of what platform.

Participants also reported about adequate technology resources for advisors. Some had adequate technology to engage in RAA, while others did not.

Just giving us the right resources, I know, like my camera is in a couple of my coworkers like have the same issue, or like a glitches and stuff so maybe like having more accessible, like technology to fix those things, I know, cameras are hard to buy nowadays. (Zoe)

While participants offered suggestions about the future of RAA, without support across all areas of the institution, the future of RAA as a regular practice in advising is uncertain. Ultimately, while RAA can be become a regular practice of academic advisors, without support and resources for advisors and encouragement and outreach to students, this becomes difficult. It is hoped that institutional leadership would help address the issues mentioned above by academic advisors.

To sum up the findings and to answer the research questions, at the beginning of the pandemic, academic advisors transitioned to using RAA to provide student advising services first by using cell phones and then moving into using synchronous communication technology such as Zoom and MS Teams. Their experiences with RAA using synchronous communication technology strengthened their connections with students, promoted more awareness of the mental health of their students and eventually evolved into an increased sense of how RAA should be a regular and future part of the practice of academic advising. The academic advisors interviewed believed, under the institutional leadership and support, RAA with synchronous communication technology will be an integral part of academic advising practice in the future.

## **4. Discussion**

From the outset of this study, the researchers were interested in hearing and understanding the experiences of academic advisors using synchronous communication technology to engage in RAA. While COVID-19 sometimes created feelings of confusion and isolation for advisors, especially while working remotely, as a whole, the participants were eager to continue supporting the success of their students while using RAA.

As a group, the participants were able to reflect on the past, present and future of RAA, in ways that helped the researchers answer the research questions, and more importantly, tell the stories of academic advisors. As described in the literature review, there is very little research detailing the experiences of academic advisors using RAA during COVID-19. Unlike a survey, the interview setting allowed the participants to engage with the researchers and tell their stories of living and working through COVID-19 as academic advisors. While no one issue or theme represented the feelings of all participants, it was clear to the researchers that all participants conducted RAA during the last 2 years to assist their students. They described an advising method (RAA) that was unevenly used in the initial transition to online teaching, learning and advising to meet the needs of their students, regardless of location, health or motive.

### *4.1 A Slow Transition*

While participants had varying levels of experience using RAA, they did understand that it could be used to help any student be successful, not just adult learners or graduate students, as the literature has shown in the past (Argüello & Méndez, 2019; Gaines, 2014; Jones & Hansen, 2014; Madi-McCarthy, 2018; Shroeder & Terras, 2015). As the researchers propose, RAA is and should be a companion to the more typical face-to-face method of academic advising, and participants expressed this during their interviews. However, as witnessed during this study, the transition to using RAA as a regular practice was slow and sometimes uneven among the participants. Some were more skilled and familiar with using RAA to advise their students, while others were less so. When utilised, RAA allowed both advisors and students to view a more human side of each other that might not be present in an on-campus office environment, even when an advisor/student had only ever talked on the phone. As RAA became more of a regular practice for participants, the increased level of comfort and personalisation helped students be more engaged and prepared for their advising appointments. While it was slow to catch on, it was as if both parties, advisors and students felt like RAA created more open and important oppor-

tunities for supporting student success. This also suggests that institutions need to better prepare individuals on campus and students for significant disruptions to instruction, learning and services by utilising practices like RAA.

#### *4.2 Health and Well-being*

The issue of mental health of college students has become an increasingly difficult and more complex problem in higher education. The American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment survey (2017) indicated 21.6% of college students reported having anxiety and 17.9% reported having depression. This was not lost on participants engaging in RAA with their students. Many participants reported hearing more from their students about their mental health during COVID-19 when using RAA. As discussed in the preceding paragraph, both advisors and students, at times, were more comfortable using RAA and shared about their health and well-being during a challenging and confusing time. Research has shown that a mental health condition or issue is one that can negatively impact academic performance, social interactions or overall general well-being while attending college (Pedrelli et al., 2015). At a time when most teaching, learning and advising were being done remotely, RAA strengthened the social connection between academic advisors and their students. It was the very connection both academic advisors and students needed to help continue supporting student success during COVID-19. Participants also noticed higher levels of students already actively engaged in improving their mental health either through increased mentions of visiting CAPS or participants completing care and concern forms for students. Because of the social connections, RAA strengthened, and under particular conditions of COVID-19, engaging in RAA with synchronous communication technology enhanced the awareness of health and well-being for both academic advisors and students. This is both important and concerning to learn. Students being proactive about their mental health is a positive indicator of increased awareness about how their mental health can impact their academic success. However, the literature indicates an alarming rise in the inability to even access existing mental health services on campus because of increasing wait times. A 2016–2017 survey released by the Association for University and College Counselors Center Directors reported 34% of centres had to place students on a waitlist to receive mental health services (Burwell, 2018). Using RAA helped students continue, and in some cases increase, discussing their concerns about their mental health during COVID-19 and its impact on student success. Advisors are key individuals on campus to assist students in navigating important mental health resources and ensure students do not miss out on accessing these important services. In the absence of contact with faculty and staff, and regardless of the modality, students rely even more on individuals like academic advisors to assist them with increasing mental health needs and services.

#### *4.3 The Practice and Promotion of RAA*

Participants understood that RAA, while perhaps not being part of regular or even all current practice, should be part of how advisors view supporting the success of their students, now and in the future. While some participants still viewed RAA as a particular method best suited to certain populations of students (e.g. non-traditional, commuter, etc.), many understood the practice of RAA should be supported by their colleges and the university, with the flexibility to practice and the resources to manage it. When the university moved all teaching, learning and advising entirely online after COVID-19 struck, participants felt the move to RAA was rushed and not fully supported. However, after a year and a half of using RAA, participants have seen success in using RAA, but the support provided by their colleges/units and the institution is still uneven. Elements of the TAM (Davis, 1989) could be part of the reason RAA has not been fully supported and embraced in the advising community. Whether a lack of resources for advisors to use RAA or communication to students on the availability of engaging in RAA, leadership at all levels must be present for RAA to become a viable and useful method for regular advising practice. The literature shows without a readiness, support and understanding of synchronous communication technology (Menke et al., 2020; Van et al., 2020), RAA to support student success is likely to be underutilised and less effective. The findings of this study and the literature indicate something as beneficial as RAA, to both students and advisors, can only be fully implemented and become successful in supporting student success if the necessary support and resources are in place.

#### *4.4 Limitations*

The researchers recognise that when participants were interviewed, they had been advising students remotely for a year because of COVID-19. This was sufficient time for some to have become more comfortable using RAA with synchronous communication technology. It also may have prevented some participants from remembering the challenges advisors and students faced when the university first went entirely online for teaching, learning and advising. While the researchers attempted to recruit representatives from all six colleges at the universities, ultimately only advisors from two colleges participated. Although the study did include several participants from the university advising unit focused exclusively on advising and supporting first-year students, the practice of RAA can be different in various colleges. Future studies should include academic advisors from all colleges to obtain a more accurate picture of RAA with synchronous communication technology.



#### *4.5 Recommendations and Conclusion*

This study helps understand how academic advisors experienced and practiced advising using RAA during COVID-19. Specifically, it helped answer the three research questions related to how advisors managed the transition to online advising when COVID-19 started, what their experiences were like serving students online during this period and their insights into future practice of RAA. From this data, the researchers offer a few recommendations regarding RAA for advisors, the advising community and institutions in higher education.

The use of RAA should be embraced as a method of advising that is considered regular and good practice, depending on the circumstance. Participants recognised the benefits of using RAA, not in place of or secondary to face to face, but rather as a best practice for the profession. RAA benefits advisors, students and the institutions that support both student access and success, not just when there is a major disruption like COVID-19. Using RAA can empower advisors and students to maintain communication and connection at all times. It helps advisors continue to meet students wherever they are, either due to circumstances or preference, and it creates additional opportunities to serve students.

The disruption of COVID-19 in higher education caught many institutions unaware and unprepared of how to move all teaching, learning and advising online/remote. Two years into dealing with a pandemic, COVID-19 has created opportunities to harness the power and access of technology for essential services like academic advising. To utilise the full potential of RAA, institutions need to put resources into use for both advisors and students. This includes training and providing resources for advisors, marketing and communicating the use and benefits of RAA to students and investing in the potential of RAA to be part of best practices in the academic advising community.

This study on RAA occurred during a time when COVID-19 had created major disruptions in higher education. One of those disruptions was to academic advising. The researchers wanted to understand this major disruption to academic advising, COVID-19, and the impact it had on how academic advising was practised, in this case, using RAA. As researchers, we believe that RAA, which embraces the intersection of technology and good advising practice with all the benefits seen, should continue to be used in the future for student success.

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