

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MARKETPLACE  
IDENTITIES AND SATISFACTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH  
STUDY

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By

Derek Daniel Jansante

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Dion and Lori Jansante, thank you for demonstrating a lifelong work ethic second to none. You helped open doors that led to this academic achievement, and I owe so much of my success to your love, encouragement, and support. To my fiancé, Aaron Teskey, thank you for loving me, listening to me incessantly talk about my dissertation, lifting me up when I was down, and doing more than your fair share at home the past three and a half years. I am so very grateful for your support (and for ensuring Keanue and Dalia came to lift my spirits while I was working). To my maternal grandparents, J. Barry and Lenore Stout, and my paternal grandparents, Valerio and Germaine Jansante, although you are no longer with us, I think of you, your tenacity, generosity, and love every single day. Thank you all for believing in me and believing in the power of education.

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## **Abstract**

As the higher education landscape becomes increasingly competitive due to financial constraints exacerbated by the impending enrollment cliff, institutions must focus on student recruitment and retention (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Guilbault, 2016). The marketization of higher education requires institutions to adapt to the desires and needs of students; however, these efforts may come at the expense of student outcomes within the educational environment. This mixed-methods action research study explored the extent to which undergraduate business students at a private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution characterized their student marketplace identities on a continuum from learners within higher education to customers of higher education. The root causes and environmental factors of student marketplace identity formation and the relationship between student marketplace identities, overall satisfaction, and satisfaction with academic advising were also explored. Dissemination of the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), an amended version of the Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), and three semi-structured focus group interviews provided data to answer the research questions. The results of the study confirmed there were no statistically significant connections between student marketplace identities and satisfaction. Additionally, most students in the sample exhibited moderate perspectives aligned with a mixed marketplace identity. Focus group interview responses established that dissatisfaction was primarily rooted in the difference between expectations and experiences at the institution under study. A discussion of these results informed recommendations that encouraged the institution to prioritize expectation-setting with students upon their initial engagement while maintaining high educational and service quality standards.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

Many American higher education institutions find themselves in a uniquely challenging operational and financial position as the most damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic wane and the traditional college-going population decreases. Due to inconsistent federal and state funding support, increased costs associated with inflation, a shrinking pool of domestic high school graduates, institutional inefficiencies, and other factors, the fiscal state of a growing number of institutions can be described as precarious (Bhagat & Kim, 2020; Laderman & Kunkle, 2022). While many of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities attract academically advanced students, provide generous financial aid, and build lavish facilities, numerous other higher education institutions face considerable operational uncertainty (Butrymowicz & D'Amato, 2020). A precipitous drop in the number of babies born in the United States, decline in the historic college-going population (i.e., non-Hispanic White students), migration changes within the country, immigration trends, decreased international student enrollments, and college attendance rates all contribute to an uncertain future for higher education (Grawe, 2021). In addition to the impending enrollment cliff estimated to begin in the middle of the current decade, institutions annually raise tuition and fees to historic highs even when adjusted for inflation (Grawe, 2021; Ma & Pender, 2022). Although such increases are implemented out of fiscal necessity, the cost of a 4-year college degree continues to exceed wage growth (Carnevale et al., 2021). As the pool of traditional prospective college students begins to

stagnate and shrink, the economic landscape will require institutions to compete with one another more heavily than ever before (Brule, 2004; Kimball & Iler, 2023; Musselin, 2018; Newson, 2004). Consequently, institutions will increasingly market and contrast their academic programs, scholarship offerings, student life, campus buildings and infrastructure, internship and job placement rates, alumni connections, and more.

Due to funding challenges, elevated costs, questions of value, and the impending enrollment cliff, these efforts are an attempt to bolster fiscal health through the recruitment and retention of students. In a survey of Chief Financial Officers in higher education, nearly 90% of respondents cited student retention as an opportunity to substantively improve fiscal sustainability (Jaschik & Lederman, 2017). Additionally, a study commissioned by higher education enrollment management and fundraising firm, Noel-Levitz, directly connected student satisfaction and retention based on data from 27,816 students who completed the Student Satisfaction Inventory. Among the three primary findings, the author wrote:

student satisfaction is indeed connected to student persistence, as well as to the word-of-mouth reputation of an institution. Above and beyond what can be predicted by students' characteristics or features of the institution, increasing student satisfaction—particularly with the campus climate—can increase the odds of persisting, as well as significantly influence students' opinion that if they had the chance to do it all again, they would choose this same institution. (Schreiner, 2009, p. 8)

To remain financially viable and enact their respective missions, colleges and universities must prioritize student academic success, satisfaction, and retention (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2005).

While a focus on retention benefits both students and institutions, it has also led to unintended consequences. Mounting external pressures resulted in systemic adoption of a

customer-centric culture within higher education in recent years (Mark, 2013). A shift towards the student-as-customer approach may temporarily improve institutional fiscal health and sustainability, but neoliberalism and the marketization of higher education influences how students make meaning within, learn, and experience higher education. Morgan (2022) posited that corporatized higher education negatively affects academic freedom, tuition costs, and socioeconomic inequalities. More specifically, he wrote that neoliberalism diminishes academic rigor via a focus on student preferences, narrows higher education's focus to job training in place of altruistic learning, and encourages students to view higher education as purely an economic mechanism rather than an opportunity for enhanced critical thinking (Morgan, 2022). The more students perceive they are customers within higher education, the more they may feel entitled to various desired outcomes (Finney & Finney, 2010). For example, due to the personal financial burden of higher education, students may demand exceptions to academic rules and regulations, treat staff members as customer service representatives, expect high grades from faculty members regardless of their performance, and more. In their purest form, these results ultimately harm students, institutions, and society. Instead, an opportunity exists to reframe the higher education experience and ensure students are held to high personal and academic standards and develop lifelong skills. Ultimately, institutions must prioritize delivery of undeniable value over satisfaction alone. Despite the inherent economic risks and practical challenges, institutions and students should approach education as a partnership in which knowledge is learned, co-created, and disseminated. During expectation-setting conversations, institutions must dissuade students from the treatment of education as a product or commodity but instead as a vehicle for the development of intellectual skills that will yield personal, national, and global benefits. The

financial risk is high to both students and institutions, so the focus must be on the educational value.

It is essential to understand how students perceive themselves within higher education and how those perceptions affect their expectations, satisfaction, and interactions within the learning environment. Given the decisions made by institutions to exacerbate a customer-centric culture, institutions must be willing to change their practices, as well. Armed with knowledge of student marketplace identities that range from learners within higher education to customers of higher education, institutions will have appropriate data to inform adjustments to their admissions communications, on-campus support, student development initiatives, orientation content, and first-year experience curriculum. Any such changes will ensure students understand the history and context of American higher education and generate alignment between student expectations, service offerings, and long-term educational benefits. Similarly, these data might also inform significant structural modifications to institutional financial plans, recruitment strategies, and more. Overall, institutions must delicately balance student development, support, learning, and satisfaction since increased student satisfaction is correlated to increased retention rates (DeShields et al., 2005).

### **Statement of the Action Research Problem**

In part due to mounting financial pressures and questions of value, colleges and universities continue to prioritize student recruitment and retention, and in turn, further regard students as customers (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Emery et al., 2001; Guilbault, 2016; Mark, 2013; Mulnix, 1990). The increased treatment of students as customers may impact their expectations of higher education, engagement in the educational environment, and learning outcomes. This action research study further defined the problem through an examination of the

extent to which undergraduate business students at a selected private college identify their student marketplace identities on a continuum from learners within higher education to customers of higher education. Additionally, this study explored the relationship between student marketplace identities, overall satisfaction in higher education, and specific satisfaction with academic advising. Investigation of this problem yielded data that can be used to inform future programmatic, curricular, and student development interventions at the university and within the School of Business. The data from the student may also catalyze structural changes to the institutional or school-specific financial model, faculty and staff training, and admissions practices.

Notably, academic advising satisfaction was measured and analyzed due to my former professional proximity to the School of Business advising operation, its importance to undergraduate student development and success, and its connection to retention. Tinto (1999) posited the following five conditions support retention:

- High personal and academic expectations
- Clear and consistent communication about institutional requirements
- Academic, social, and personal support
- Student involvement
- A focus on learning

Academic advising is directly connected to all these dimensions and studies by Young-Jones et al. (2013) and Tippetts et al. (2022) confirmed student academic advising use is positively correlated to persistence and retention. Similarly, Blau et al. (2019) found a positive relationship between advising ease and quality and student satisfaction.

### *Evidence Supporting the Existence of the Problem*

Based on the financial constraints, institutions have engaged in practices that led students to believe they are customers of a higher education institution. Some college and university students therefore associate the high cost of tuition to a good or service that must be rendered. As a result, they may demand logistical problems be solved by professional staff, complain about policies or requirements, and feel entitled to receive high grades (Brule, 2004; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Titus, 2008). This customer orientation can be damaging to student outcomes, student satisfaction, and the cultural environment of an institution. Examples of these negative effects are well-documented in the academic literature. In a UK study, Bunce et al. (2017) found that a customer marketplace identity was associated with lower academic performance. Additionally, Finney and Finney's (2010) research confirmed that students who perceived themselves as customers are "more likely to hold attitudes and to engage in behaviors that are not conducive to success" (p. 276) such as a higher likelihood of complaints and entitlement to positive educational and experiential outcomes. Finney and Finney (2010) also determined the same subpopulation within the sample did not believe themselves to be co-producers of knowledge, which is a philosophy aligned with the traditional learning objectives of higher education. Research from Saunders and Kolek (2017) found that students increasingly identify as customers of higher education as they continue to engage with their institution.

This trend has been experienced by administrators, student support staff, and faculty at the School of Business centered in this action research study. For example, when an undergraduate student's preferred section of a required course is full during the registration period or a student enrolls in a course that does not fulfill a degree requirement, a student who believes themselves to be a customer may immediately blame staff members for the error rather

than accept responsibility. They are likely to cite the cost of tuition as justification for their desired result, and when their request is not met, they express dissatisfaction. Similarly, should a student misunderstand advising guidance, they may be more likely to demand priority registration, a seat in a course that is already full, or a partial tuition refund. These examples are not meant to absolve the institution, academic unit, or employees from wrongdoing, but are anecdotal evidence of an increasingly customer-like approach by students and examples of dissatisfaction. Based on documented negative outcomes associated with a customer orientation, an increase in consumer identity by students, and limited research on the connection between student marketplace identities and satisfaction, further research is warranted.

### ***Probable Causes Related to the Problem***

A shift toward students-as-customers is rooted in higher education's swing towards neoliberalism and academic capitalism in the 1970s that "replaced an emphasis on collectivism and the public good with an emphasis on individual competition and entrepreneurialism" (Scott & Kezar, 2019, p. 110). Institutions were forced to compete for limited dollars, and because of shrinking state and federal funding, costs were eventually passed along to students through elevated tuition (Smith, 2019). Higher education was quickly transformed from a public good to a private good (Mintz, 2021). Brule (2004) and Newson (2004) explained that policymakers and practitioners consistently reaffirmed higher education's customer service focus through the conceptualization of institutions as service providers and students as customers. Marketization will further commodify higher education and exacerbate the idea that a degree is something that can be purchased. More broadly, marketing theory and strategy suggests consumers believe higher-priced items require superior customer service (Kurz et al., 2023; Parasuraman et al., 1991). The mounting net cost of attendance supports the idea that value and economic mobility

are of increasing concern to students and the American public as evidenced by a July 2023 Gallup survey that noted a sharp decline in public confidence in higher education since 2015 (Brenan, 2023).

### **Context of the Action Research Study**

The private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution at the center of this action research study is a 4-year, non-profit institution with an R2 Carnegie Classification of “Doctoral: Higher Research Activity.” The institution is consistently ranked as a top 75 institution within the United States and currently serves approximately 13,000 students, of whom 7,500 are undergraduates. The full-time tuition sticker price is nearly \$29,000 per semester, and the average total attendance is just under \$40,000 per semester. Students can choose from among 80 bachelor’s degree options within six schools or colleges. This study took place within the School of Business where just over 1,000 undergraduate students are declared as business majors.

### ***Information Related to the Organization***

The School of Business offers five undergraduate degree programs, which include accounting; business administration; business, language, and culture studies; business and entertainment; and finance. Demographic data provided directly by the School of Business for the purposes of this study confirmed 47% of business major students are women, 10% are first-generation college students, and 7% are student-athletes. White students represent 58.3% of the business school major population while 12% identify as Asian, 8% identify as Black, and 5% identify as multiracial. International students comprise 21.4% of student majors.

### ***Information Related to the Intended Stakeholders***

The key stakeholders in this action research study include institutional administrators, staff, faculty, and undergraduate students within the School of Business. Through a review of the

results, the stakeholders learned the extent to which undergraduate business students identify on a continuum from learners within to customers of the institution in addition to how those perceptions impact overall satisfaction and satisfaction with academic advising. This study allowed for a more holistic understanding of the student population's expectations and experiences at a particular point in their undergraduate career. Quantitative and qualitative data points will inform future conversations about student onboarding and expectations, adjustments to existing campus service offerings, and new programmatic opportunities. The institution and School of Business may consider changes to recruitment tactics and their financial priorities stemming from this research. Ideally, increases in both student retention and satisfaction will enhance university life for faculty, staff, and students, improve student learning outcomes, and bolster institutional finances. While student perspectives are the main purpose of this study, future research would benefit from administrator, faculty, and staff involvement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This action research study was conducted from a constructivist perspective in which participants “develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meaning directed toward certain objectives or things” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). I aimed to understand the extent to which students perceive themselves to be learners within higher education to customers of higher education, environmental factors and other roots of those marketplace identities, congruence or incongruence between expectations and experiences (reality), and the impact on overall and academic advising satisfaction. The conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 posits environmental factors and other root causes lead to student marketplace identity development. A student's marketplace identity is likely correlated with their expectations within higher education, and the extent to which those expectations align with their experiences (or reality)

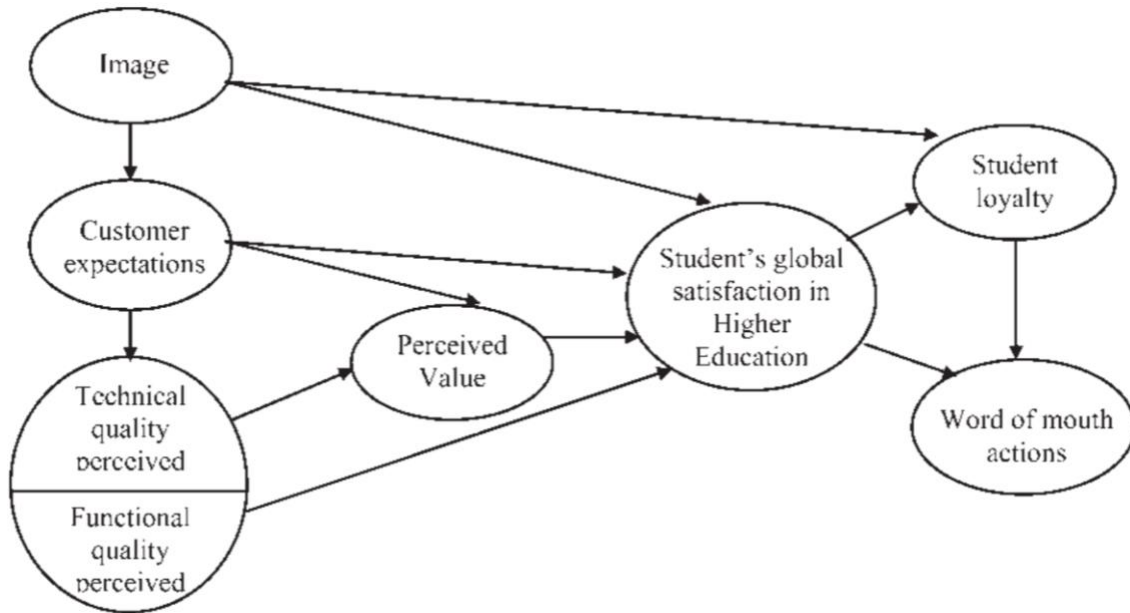
ultimately affects levels of overall and academic advising satisfaction. This model was applied for both overall and academic advising satisfaction. This research study will attempt to identify whether and to which extent student marketplace identities correlate to expectations, reality, and overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction.

### ***Initial Conceptual Model of Student Satisfaction***

The initial conceptual model of student satisfaction developed by Alves and Raposo (2007) in Figure 1 informed the development of this study's conceptual framework. Their work aimed to demonstrate the interconnectedness of student perceptions and both positive and negative satisfaction outcomes. A visual representation of the initial dimensions of their model included student image, customer expectations, and technical and functional perceptions of quality. Those items were expected to influence perceived value as well as students' overall satisfaction in higher education. Consequences or outcomes of the satisfaction components then led to the degree of student loyalty and their word-of-mouth actions. Since the marketization of higher education is largely an economic phenomenon, it is vital to understand how students respond to those market forces as customers.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model of Student Satisfaction*



*Note.* Illustration from “Conceptual Model of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education,” by H. Alves and M. Raposo, 2007, *Total Quality Management*, 18(5), p. 575 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14783360601074315>). Copyright 2007 by Routledge.

***Conceptual Framework for the Action Research Study***

Adapted from the Alves and Raposo (2007) framework, the conceptual framework created for this study (Figure 2) argues that environmental factors and root causes influence student marketplace identity development. Those factors and causes could develop prior to enrollment in higher education and/or early in their academic tenure. Student marketplace identities exist on a spectrum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education. A student’s marketplace identity ultimately influences their expectations, and the difference between those expectations and their experience (reality) determines their overall

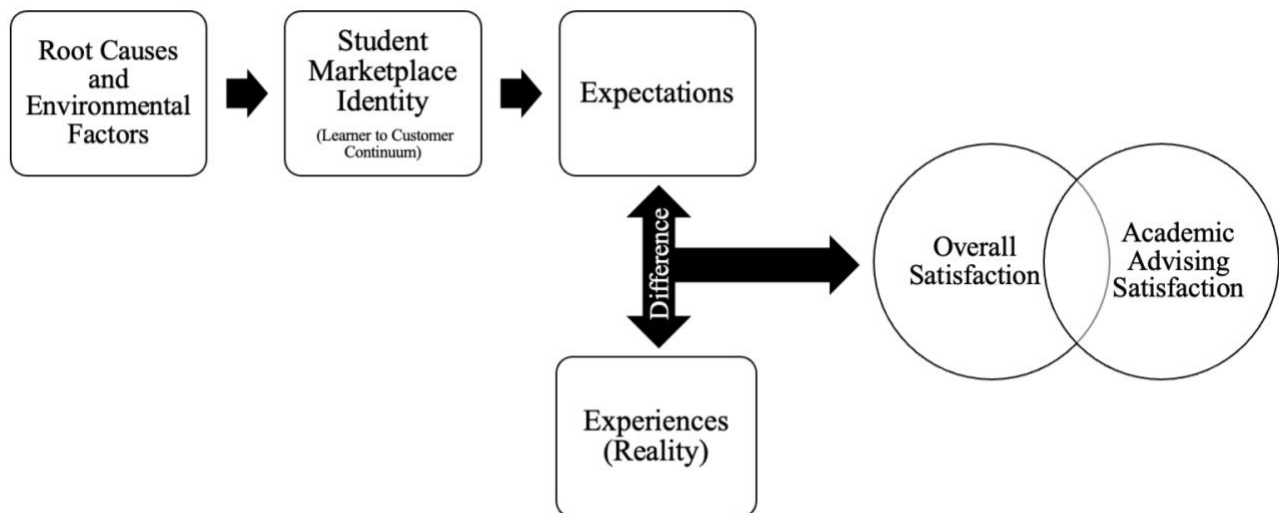
satisfaction within higher education as well as satisfaction with academic advising services.

Those two dimensions of satisfaction may or may not align.

While I do not define higher education as a traditional product or service, consumer behavior will serve as a frame for investigation. According to the American Marketing Association (2023), consumer behavior “refers to the study of how customers, both individuals and organizations, satisfy their needs and wants by choosing, purchasing, using, and disposing of goods, ideas, and services” (para. 1). The field’s origins in economics, sociology, psychology, and marketing are connected to the exploration of student marketplace identities and beliefs in higher education.

## Figure 2

### *Conceptual Framework*



*Note.* Model adapted from “Conceptual Model of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education,” by H. Alves and M. Raposo, 2007, *Total Quality Management*, 18(5), p. 575 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14783360601074315>). Copyright 2007 by Routledge.

## **Action Research Questions**

The action research study addressed the following central research questions that attempt to connect student marketplace identities and overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction in higher education:

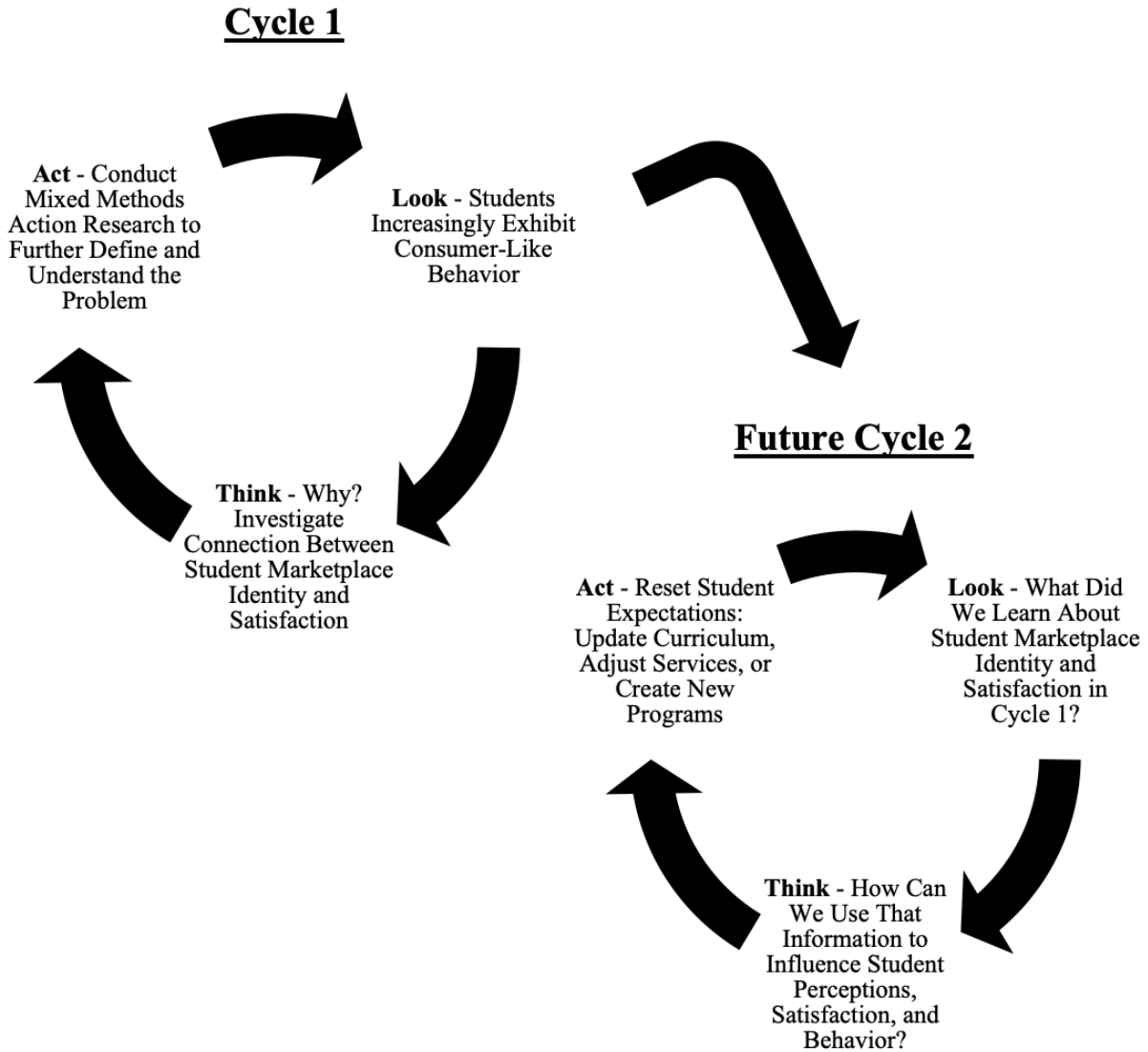
1. To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education?
2. What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?
3. How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?
4. How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?

## **Action Research Model**

I used the Look-Think-Act action research model detailed by Stringer and Ortiz Aragón (2021). The authors defined action research as a systematic and adaptive process of participative inquiry in which researchers observe, interpret, plan, and act. Since the action research process is cyclical, it requires continuous observation, reflection, and action through multiple research phrases. The first Look-Think-Act cycle will inform a second cycle of more direct action. Specifically, the first cycle will further define and explain the problem, and the second cycle will involve the implementation of a programmatic intervention and/or institutional or school-based practices, structures, and priorities aligned with those initial results. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the two action research model cycles.

**Figure 3**

*Action Research Cycles*



*Note.* Model adapted from *Action Research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 10), by E. T. Stringer and A. Ortiz Aragón, 2021, SAGE Publications, Inc. Copyright 2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

**Brief Description of the Action Research Intervention**

The purpose of this action research intervention was to further define the problem of practice and investigate the extent to which students identify themselves on a spectrum from

learners within to customers of higher education and how those perceptions correlate to overall satisfaction at the institution and satisfaction with academic advising services. Additionally, the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development were explored. The sources from which those marketplace identities form was also investigated. Students were administered a survey that included questions from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and an amended version of the Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). The instruments contained both quantitative and qualitative components. A small subset of survey respondents was invited to participate in one of three semi-structured focus group interviews based on their responses and demographic markers such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, class year, and socioeconomic status. Due to variations in social capital by student identity or status, responses included variable root causes or environmental factors that aided in student marketplace identity development. Participants expanded upon their survey responses and discussed their marketplace identities and satisfaction with a small group of peers. This exploratory intervention will inform changes by administrators, faculty, and staff within the institution and the School of Business.

### ***First Cycle***

The first cycle of this action research study was exploratory and aimed to further identify and understand the problem of practice. While the literature identifies institutional practices and student behaviors that align with customer centricity, context-specific data regarding student marketplace identities, expectations, experiences (reality), and satisfaction will inform future institutional changes. A survey instrument and semi-structured focus group interview yielded quantitative and qualitative data to inform a future second action research cycle.

### ***Future Second Cycle***

A theoretical second cycle of action research would involve potential revisions to student orientation or onboarding, first-year seminar curriculum, student service offerings, student development strategies, and cocurricular programs based on the data and outcomes from cycle one. In addition to the student marketplace identities described by students, congruence or incongruence between those identities and expectations, experiences (reality), and satisfaction will provide informative context. Importantly, any curricular or programmatic intervention should not explicitly instruct students to adjust their marketplace identities toward the learner/partner side of the continuum. Instead, information about the history, challenges, opportunities, and current state of American higher education should be shared and discussed with students. Students must remain free to determine their marketplace identities but will be encouraged to consider a learner/partner perspective that is proven to yield personal, institutional, and societal benefits. These conversations should also acknowledge the enormous and growing financial investment in education by students and their families. Administrative leaders at the institution and within the School of Business may also consider adjustments to admissions strategy and communications, academic policies and procedures, financial structures, and more.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Action research* – “a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systemic action to generate the knowledge needed to resolved specific problems” (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021, p. 7)

*Customer* – a marketplace identity in which a student believes they should receive high grades, unique services, specialized support, a credential, and/or other positive outcomes in exchange for tuition payment

*Commodification* – the shift from higher education as a learning experience to one that provides degrees to those who pay; closely tied to neoliberalism and marketization

*Environmental factors* – ongoing experiences in higher education that influence student marketplace identity development, including tuition cost, personal debt level, personal knowledge of higher education systems and structure, initial degrees of satisfaction, and more

*Marketization* – the influence of free-market competition and economics on the higher education system that requires institutions to vie for students (Williams, 1995)

*Neoliberalism* – a political, social, and economic philosophy that emphasizes “individualism over collectivism, governmental restraint over governmental intervention, and personal wealth over communal wealth” (Schraedley et al., 2021, p. 3) through entrepreneurial free market capitalism (Steger & Roy, 2010)

*Root causes* – experiences and beliefs prior to or immediately upon enrollment in higher education that influence student marketplace identity development, including family attitudes and experiences related to education, media consumption, political affiliation, and more

*Social capital* – “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248)

*Student satisfaction* – an “attitude resulting from an evaluation of a student’s educational experience” that “results when actual performance meets or exceeds the student’s expectations” (Elliott & Healy, 2001, p. 2)

*Student marketplace identity* – the extent to which students identify themselves on a spectrum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education

*Traditional learner* – a student marketplace identity in which students participate in higher education primarily for the purpose of altruistic learning; “a broad set of attitudes and behaviours associated with intellectual engagement, approach to learning and identification with the social category, ‘learner’” (Bunce et al., 2017, p. 1961).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This study is designed to better understand the correlation between student marketplace identities and satisfaction both overall and with academic advising services. As such, the purpose of this literature review is twofold. First, literature related to the economic and sociocultural landscape of higher education and its influence on student marketplace identity formation will be explored. A brief overview of neoliberalism and marketization of higher education as well as the state of the student learner-or-customer debate will serve as a foundation for further discussion. Additionally, the importance, components, and impact of satisfaction in higher education will be examined. In tandem with the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development, a discussion on overall satisfaction in higher education will include the impact on individual and institutional success as well as the components of satisfaction. Similar themes will be explored specific to academic advising. This literature analysis will funnel from a broad review of neoliberalism and marketization trends that influence student marketplace identities to the direct effects of consumerism (i.e., expectations and satisfaction) on individual students and institutions.

#### **American Neoliberalism and the Marketization of Higher Education**

The focus of higher education in the United States has experienced significant shifts since Harvard College was founded in 1636. Historically, the federal government and state governments strongly supported higher education funding due to the collective benefits of an educated populace (Mintz, 2021). Within the past 50 years, however, this framework and higher

education's financial model reflected a changing economic and sociopolitical landscape. Due to the stagnant economy of the 1970s, political leaders began to challenge the legitimacy of social institutions like higher education and refocus the country's economic priorities on individualism, entrepreneurship, limited regulations, and free-market capitalism (Harvey, 2007; Saunders, 2014a; Schraedley et al., 2021; Steger & Roy, 2010). Neoliberalism expanded in the 1980s and government leaders, including President Ronald Reagan, successfully convinced many Americans that a large government could not improve their lives (Steger & Roy, 2010). Alongside Congress, President Reagan advocated for drastic cuts to federal social spending, including public service employment, subsidized housing, job training, food assistance, higher education support, and more (Morgan, 2022). These neoliberal policies seeped into state legislative priorities, as well (Saunders, 2007). Due to the lack of funding, higher education institutions raised tuition to make up for the lost revenue and attempt to sustain themselves with limited governmental support (Morgan, 2022). Once the financial obligation of higher education swung from federal and state governments to colleges and universities, institutions passed along the financial burden to individual students and families (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). While this funding shift reflected the zeitgeist, it also solidified the idea that higher education is a private good rather than a public one. Many leaders felt individuals should be responsible for the cost, as they alone would reap the benefits of increased lifetime salary earnings (Mintz, 2021). For those who prescribed a neoliberal ideology, the country would still economically benefit from those individual educational investments. These market pressures forced institutions to be more competitive with their peers and require differentiation and specialization, with the goal of yielding superior outcomes (Schraedley et al., 2021; Wellen, 2005).

Importantly, neoliberalism has affected American higher education broadly, but public institutions have been affected disproportionately. Although public institutions were founded to advance the public good by increasing access to higher education at an affordable price, the financial responsibility of a college degree continues to shift to students. According to Mitchell et al. (2019), state funding for public colleges and universities shrank by an inflation-adjusted \$6.6 billion between 2008 and 2018. The net tuition increases needed to replace government funding cuts ultimately fall to students and make higher education less accessible and affordable. In contrast, private higher education is generally more expensive than public education (Ma & Pender, 2022), and although private institutions also receive less government funding, their revenue remains dependent on tuition. Since the action research study was conducted at a private institution, the proportionally higher cost of attendance may have influenced the results.

### ***Impact of Neoliberalism and Marketization***

Due to shrinking governmental funding sources and a declining population of prospective students, the increasingly competitive higher education landscape forces institutions to compete for students through consumer-based strategies like marketing, tuition discounts, value propositions, and return on investment (Mulnix, 1990). Much of the literature on the conceptual transformation from students-as-learners to students-as-customers cites neoliberalism as a primary cause (Chaffee, 1998; Morgan, 2022; Saunders, 2007; Saunders, 2014a; Saunders & Kolek, 2017; Wellen, 2005). Relatedly, the commodification and marketization of higher education is deeply rooted in neoliberalism. Such ideas include “a customer-oriented attitude, uncertainty and ambiguity, an external relations focus, quality assurance and performance accountability, competition, and marketing-led management” (Oplatka et al., 2002, p. 421). The marketization of higher education is demonstrated by extravagant buildings, swelling student

support services, promotional materials related to job and salary outcomes, the celebration of institutional rankings, and more (Mintz, 2021).

Ultimately, the marketing-centric approach to recruitment and retention substantively alters the expectations of students. Students desire a high return on investment and search for competitive tuition cost, supportive and effective faculty, academic prestige, posh living arrangements, high-quality food options, and access to internship and job opportunities, among others (Mintz, 2021). Accordingly, institutions must consistently invest in their campuses to attract and retain students. This cycle continues to drive up the cost of attendance and institutional expenses year-over-year. As the pool of prospective students shrinks further in the mid-2020s due to the enrollment cliff, the higher education marketplace will become even more competitive (Grawe, 2021). To remain competitive, institutions must impress students upon their initial engagement with the institution, deliver on their marketing-based promises during their educational experience, and prove their value once students leave the institution. The need to satisfy “customers,” however, may alter the educational environment and student learning. The literature confirms many students view themselves as customers of higher education that have substantial buying power in the marketplace (Mintz, 2021). Additionally, Mintz (2021) argued the swing toward neoliberalism in higher education influences who can afford and attend college, the racial and socioeconomic makeup of college campuses, and the amount of debt students accrue. Mintz’s (2021) argument is directly connected to the concept of social capital, which is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Those with the access to people and power are often more likely to succeed. As such, higher education administrative leaders are faced with the challenge

of delivering the education and experiences that students need for a successful future in parallel with the education and experiences they desire. These facts contextualize the broad educational environment in which the action research study will occur.

### **Framing the Student vs. Customer Debate**

The question of whether students are customers has been extensively deliberated in research, on college campuses, and in the media (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Guilbault, 2016; Mintz, 2021; Wellen, 2005). This dispute continues to intensify as the cost of education increases, the value of an undergraduate degree is scrutinized, and the higher education marketplace becomes more competitive. Although some scholars and administrative leaders reject the student-as-customer approach, others posit that as the primary stakeholders served by higher education, students are customers (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Cuthbert, 2010; Mark, 2013; Motwani & Kumar, 1997; Saunders, 2014a). The complexity of the debate is encapsulated by a discussion of higher education funding. While student tuition dollars account for a significant portion of institutional revenue, particularly for public and private non-profit institutions, tax dollars and donor contributions also support the bottom line (Bay & Daniel, 2001). Accordingly, it is challenging for institutions to prioritize the desires and demands of various stakeholder groups, from students to governmental entities to accrediting bodies. Other experts have recommended a moderated approach that balances the traditional mission of higher education as well as the marketplace and fiscal realities (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Cuthbert, 2010). In those instances, leaders prioritize academic rigor and prescribe learning outcomes with student feedback and support (Guilbault, 2016). Much of the literature focused on academic outcomes versus students' approaches to higher education that included both classroom and extracurricular

learning. The paradox of students' positionality and roles in higher education highlight a system under stress.

### ***Student-as-Customer Approach***

Marketization and the conceptualization of students as customers influences student expectations, institutional operations, and financial health. While marketization can generally improve institutional efficiency and effectiveness due to the competitive higher education environment in which students choose the best institution for them, it also has noteworthy disadvantages. Conditional upon their status as the primary stakeholders and the individuals who exchange money for the service of education, some believe students meet the technical definition of customers (Mark, 2013, Motwani & Kumar, 1997; Redding, 2005). Brule (2004) and Titus (2008) argued that a customer service focus negatively affects students, as thought-provoking and uncomfortable activities are avoided at the expense of satisfaction. Students forego opportunities to challenge their beliefs, engage with new areas of knowledge, and explore other academic ambiguities. Clayson and Haley (2005) suggested that students who identify as customers may blame the institution or request a refund if the product, service, or anticipated outcomes do not match expectations. Similarly, Bay and Daniel (2001) posited that if students are encouraged to view themselves as customers, it would "give greater credence to the attitude that it is the universities' responsibility to provide an education to the students, and that students have little responsibility in the process" (p. 6). Bunce et al. (2017) also encouraged institutions to cautiously implement changes based on feedback from students who believe themselves to be customers. The authors feared it would "further risk academic standards because these students may have a propensity to see their degree as something that can be bought, and not something that requires effort and engagement" (Bunce et al., 2017, p. 1973). Calma and Dickson-Deane

(2020) summarized these notions when they expressed the danger of conflating satisfaction with excellence or high academic quality.

As institutions prioritize student satisfaction, institutional resources may be reallocated to popular programs or resources, and opportunities for students to problem solve through intellectual or logistical discomfort may wane (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Emery et al., 2001). For example, Stroebe (2020) contended that student evaluations of faculty are not valid measures of effective teaching and learning, and instead, contribute to poor instruction and grade inflation in the name of student satisfaction. According to Svensson and Wood (2007), feedback mechanisms such as teaching evaluations reinforce a customer mindset, and students may be more inclined to complain when their expectations have not been met. Feedback is useful, yet in an ultra-competitive higher education marketplace, the prioritization of satisfaction and marketization can degrade outcomes. Another example includes the elimination of humanities or language departments as a response to job placement rates and post-graduation salaries considered by prospective students (Mintz, 2021). Institutions may cut valuable programs or courses that allow students to develop critical thinking, argumentation, creativity, and other skills in place of options that yield the most advantageous outcomes.

Conversely, colleges and universities that experience enrollment and financial pressures may employ a student-as-customer approach to recruit and retain students (DeShields et al., 2005; Schreiner, 2009). Since higher education is often perceived as bureaucratic, rigid, and sluggish to change, a customer-focused approach may encourage institutional leaders to revise organizational structures, improve academic program offerings, better meet the social and emotional needs of students, and refocus on post-graduation employment or educational outcomes (Ostrom et al., 2011).

The fear of student disengagement and reduced academic standards in the name of satisfaction, especially in a time of financial challenge, underscores the argument that students should not be viewed or treated as customers. Although limited research has been conducted to unite student marketplace identities to post-graduation or economic outcomes, the student-as-customer perspective is perceived by some as damaging to the traditional goals of education in which knowledge is disseminated and created for the benefit of individuals and society. The collection and implementation of student feedback; however, may improve responsiveness to student concerns and desires, and thereby increase satisfaction and retention.

### ***Student-as-Learner Approach***

A core motivation to classify and treat students as learners is expertise of academic faculty and higher education administrators who ensure students learn the knowledge and skills needed to lead successful lives. The student-as-learner approach contends that students enroll in higher education to learn critical and lifelong skills rather than simply acquire a degree. Bunce et al. (2017) defined this student identity as “a broad set of attitudes and behaviours associated with intellectual engagement, approach to learning and identification with the social category, ‘learner’” (p. 1961). Those behaviors include but are not limited to adequate preparation for class, regular class attendance, critical and deep engagement with academic content, and a sincere desire to learn (Bunce et al., 2017). Their analysis of student survey data concluded that students with a learner identity achieved higher academic performance than their peers with a customer mentality.

When students are treated primarily as learners in the classroom, their influence is limited to involvement and engagement in classroom activities. This traditional mentality ensures power remains with faculty and administrators, and those individuals impart knowledge, wisdom, and

learning onto the student via their active participation. Student feedback mechanisms such as faculty evaluations can encourage faculty performance accountability and improvements to teaching but would not be used purely to improve student satisfaction at the expense of academic outcomes (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). Specific to purposes of higher education and the business education environment, Emery et al. (2001) suggested that students be considered “products” and recommended the following:

The product approach demands that business schools treat students as their products; they assume the responsibility to train students to become qualified products that can meet the criteria of various industries. With this approach, students must adhere to the regulations and the criteria of the education programs in which they are enrolled and allow the instructors to model and reshape them according to the society's needs. The measure of a program's success will be the extent to which it prepares them to be more employable in terms of knowledge and skills. Administrators must help students understand that only by doing rigorous assignments can students be well prepared to face the challenge later. (p. 113)

Remarkably, much of the literature discussed the inherent issues associated with a student-as-customer approach rather than the positive attributes of a student-as-learner framework. It also did not discuss the repercussions on students' approaches and expectations outside the classroom.

### ***Student-as-Partner Approach***

Although the learner-or-customer debate is often framed as a dichotomy, some researchers, administrators, and faculty ascribe to a centrist perspective in which the student is considered a partner through the co-creation of value. Clayson and Haley (2005) proposed a

model in which students are treated as collaborative educational partners and the interests and goals of stakeholders are equalized. The authors recommended a faculty-focused mindset, emphasis on experiential learning, changes to governance structures, and expanded evaluation and feedback mechanisms to redefine the role of campus stakeholders (Clayson & Haley, 2005). Similarly, Ng and Forbes (2009) argued for the cocreation of learning that combines the perspectives of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Guilbault (2016) also detailed a nuanced recommendation that encouraged leaders to identify how to treat students as customers and maintain standards of academic rigor and integrity through the cocreation of the learning environment.

While the student-as-partner approach balances the altruistic goals of higher education with the effects of a marketized environment, it would require substantial resources to implement and sustain. Bay and Daniel (2001) suggested this new partnership paradigm would require targeted recruitment tactics, small group and personalized engagement, highly trained academic advisors, and a general balance of power. The research did not discern how this approach would influence student marketplace identities, expectations, and satisfaction. Notably, the term “student-as-partner” or “partner” is not used in this action research study, but it encapsulates those who do not see themselves purely as learners within or customers of higher education. This perspective will be captured within the middle third of the student marketplace identity continuum.

Through their discussion of the student-as-partner model and gaps in the literature, Ng and Forbes (2009), Guilbault (2016), and Bunce et al. (2017) justified the utility of this action research study. Ng and Forbes (2009) wrote that researchers must identify the “gap between students’ expectations and the institution’s view of what students should experience at

university” (p. 59) while Guilbault (2016) wrote that more research is needed to understand “how students view their roles as customers and where students feel they should be treated as a customer and where they feel they are not” (p. 138). Bunce et al. (2017) stated, “Further research is now needed that examines the learning approach and motivations of students (e.g. surface versus deep learning, personal development versus employability) and how these are related to one’s identity as a learner versus consumer” (p. 1970).

### **Who Believes Students are Customers?**

#### ***Faculty Perspective***

Some faculty members assert that students cannot be considered customers since higher education is not a traditional business, and education is not a traditional good or service (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Mark, 2013). Instead, they believe that education is a unique service or product offering that must reject standard business practices despite its operation as a non-profit organization (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Mark, 2013). Faculty generally contend a traditional customer-centric approach within the educational ecosystem would negatively impact the learning environment that is central to higher education’s purpose (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Obermiller, 2005). This change includes power dynamics that transfer responsibility from the student back to the faculty or the institution at-large in the name of student satisfaction (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Motwani & Kumar, 1997). This position is also referred to as a “product orientation” in the literature (Obermiller et al., 2005).

Parallel to frequent opinion pieces in higher education publications about the marketization of higher education and the dangers of the student-as-customer approach, research has confirmed the preferred approaches of faculty members. One such study by Obermiller et al. (2005) included faculty from various academic disciplines at three universities, including

institutions from the United States and France. Across the institution types and disciplines, faculty decisively preferred a product orientation that aligns most closely with the learner perspective discussed throughout this study. Those faculty also perceived high levels of student customer orientations. However, the convenience sample, insufficient instrument reliability and validity, and inconsistencies with data collection across the sample populations raise questions about the accuracy of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, due to the age and locations of the study, the conclusions may no longer be applicable in the current American economic landscape. Xu et al. (2018) also investigated the faculty perspectives of students' roles in a Hong Kong university's travel and tourism program. Although some faculty members agreed students could be fairly viewed as customers to some degree, most did not want them to exhibit customer-like behavior. The role of students as learners and partners in learning informed the belief of many faculty members that higher education is a venue for knowledge transfer. The countries and academic schools in which the studies took place may have shaped the results, but the broad themes are consistent with other results. Further research in the United States is needed to sufficiently detail the perceptions of faculty members.

### ***Administrative Perspective***

Given their immense responsibility to ensure institutional success considering the tightening marketplace, senior administrators are among the few stakeholders in higher education that must delicately balance the often-opposing expectations of faculty and students. A thorough review of the literature did not include the extent to which administrators believe students are learners within and/or customers of higher education. Since these leaders come from a variety of professional backgrounds, additional research is needed to understand how administrators such as university presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans view the role of students. This

information would provide context to decisions that may affect an organization's vision and strategy.

### *Student Perspective*

**Customer Identification.** Numerous research studies have examined the extent to which students view themselves as learners within or customers of higher education; however, they yield varying results based on the research methods. While the literature confirms at least some portion of students believe themselves to be customers of higher education, the extent varies considerably. Discussion of two studies within the United States and one from Hong Kong will exemplify the complexities of this phenomenon.

Finney and Finney (2010) surveyed over 1,000 students at a medium-sized institution in the southern United States and found that more than 52% of respondents held customer-like perceptions. Only one item on the survey instrument asked students to define their role at the institution on 7-point Likert scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, and it read, "As a student, I believe that my role is that of a customer of the university" (Finney & Finney, 2010). The authors did not discuss how the percentage of students who held customer perceptions was determined or calculated based on the Likert scale responses. The distribution and mode of responses was also not discussed. A detailed account of the data would allow readers to better understand the results and develop a baseline to inform future research.

In a second noteworthy study, Saunders (2014b) created and administered the 18-item Customer Orientation Scale Survey at a large public research institution in the northeastern United States during a proctored orientation session. Students in the convenience sample responded to statements on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from agree strongly to disagree strongly. Each statement in the survey was related to student expectations and perceptions of

their higher education experience, but only one question asked students to unambiguously confirm if they viewed themselves primarily as customers of their institution. Among the 2,674 respondents, 5.6% strongly agreed and 16% agreed with that statement. While only 21.6% of students believed themselves to be customers of their institution, a much higher percentage of students agreed strongly and agreed somewhat with items that indicate a marketized higher education environment. For example, 54.3% of students in the sample agreed strongly or somewhat that their college education was a product they were purchasing (Saunders, 2014b). Students may not describe themselves as customers, but the neoliberal and marketized higher education environment has shaped their expectations. That is, students may not believe they are customers of higher education but still set customer-like expectations and exhibit customer-like behaviors. When students within a Hong Kong university's travel and tourism program were provided eight response options that described a variety of roles within higher education, Xu et al. (2018) found that only 5% classified themselves predominately as customers. The study did not examine root causes or environmental factors, and such a small percentage of students who viewed themselves as customers may be related to venue and cultural context.

Students are likely to hold a customer perspective due to the immense investment in higher education that requires maximum value extraction from the experience (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Paricio Royo, 2017). Despite the positive outcomes associated with earning a higher education degree, it is still a financial risk. Across the related studies, variations in student beliefs suggest results could be affected by methods, instrumentation, institution location and type, primary academic discipline, socioeconomic status or financial aid package amount, accumulated debt, student demographics, governmental politics, institutional value proposition, or many other factors. Importantly, these studies did not ask students about the root

causes or environmental factors that influenced their marketplace identities. Irrespective of the precise percentage of students with a customer-centric orientation on a campus or within an academic unit, there may be implications for student expectations, service delivery, and campus culture.

**Customer Expectations.** Mintz (2021) argued that “the outcome of what undergraduates expect as part of the college experience has profound implications for the health of the academy” (p. 80). In addition to studies that characterized the extent to which students identified themselves as customers of higher education, other research confirmed students’ customer-like expectations. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) established that a sizable portion of undergraduate sociology majors from a public university in the Northeast held consumerist views. Within the sample, 40% of students believed that tuition payment entitled them to a college degree, nearly 25% expected faculty to consider personal and financial circumstances when grading, and 53% believed that faculty were responsible for holding the attention of students in their classes. Similarly, Finney and Finney (2010) learned that students who believed themselves to be customers of their institution felt entitled to receive high grades and other positive outcomes from their educational experience. As with similar studies, the age of these studies and convenience sample methodology weakens the power and relevance of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Despite those concerns, the conclusions align with the research findings of Bunce et al. (2017) that stated students with customer marketplace identities expected higher grades. Since much of the literature connects student-as-customer expectations with academic outcomes, more research is needed to understand students’ expectations of student service offerings such as those traditionally operated by student services, such as academic advising.

Remarkably, an examination of whether the United States business student population is more customer-oriented or approaches questions of value and expectations of higher education differently from peers in other academic disciplines is indeterminate. One such study conducted internationally included a sample population of second- and third-year Estonian undergraduate business students. Koris and Nokelainen (2015) identified that business student participants:

expect to be treated as customers in some, but not all categories of educational experiences (as some scholars suggest). Students expect to be treated as customers in terms of student feedback, classroom studies, and to some extent also in terms of communication with administrative staff, individual studies, course design and teaching methods. However, they do not view themselves as customers when it comes to curriculum design, rigour, classroom behaviour and graduation. Regarding the category of grading, students did not display specific expectations. (p. 128)

Given the unique context and student population studied, these results are not transferable to undergraduate business students within the United States. The same questionnaire would need to be distributed to institutions within the United States to draw statistically significant conclusions about undergraduate business students, undergraduate students overall, and subpopulations based on country of study, academic discipline of study, and student identity and culture.

While business students may be more customer-oriented due to their proximity to marketing and consumer behavior academic content, a review of the literature did not confirm this assertion. Future research should assess the extent to which undergraduate business students ascribe to a customer orientation in comparison to their peers in other academic disciplines. Additionally, some student behaviors may be at odds with their stated student marketplace identity. A student who identifies as a traditional learner may have some customer-like

expectations and a student who defines themselves as a customer of higher education may have altruistic learning goals. Students from across the marketplace identity continuum may believe themselves to be partners in learning although their behaviors do not reflect as such.

## **Student Satisfaction**

### ***Importance to Students and Institutions***

Elliott and Healy (2001) defined student satisfaction as an “attitude resulting from an evaluation of a student’s educational experience” that “results when actual performance meets or exceeds the student’s expectations” (p. 2). The literature on satisfaction within higher education has broadly confirmed its importance to both student and institutional success. Due to the economic benefits associated with the completion of a college degree (Ma & Pender, 2023), institutions have a moral obligation to prioritize student persistence. Additionally, administrative leaders are practically responsible for the fiscal health and sustainability of their institutions, and student retention and persistence contribute to those efforts (Jaschik & Lederman, 2017; Schreiner, 2009; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2005). A study commissioned by higher education fundraising firm Noel-Levitz analyzed nearly 28,000 student responses to the Student Satisfaction Inventory and identified a direct connection between satisfaction and retention (Schreiner, 2009). In a study by DeShields et al. (2005), students were administered a questionnaire to test a model linking faculty, advising staff, and classes with student satisfaction. The study confirmed students were more likely to remain enrolled at their respective institutions if they were satisfied with their experiences. While student satisfaction and retention are distinct ideas, they are inextricably linked.

### ***Conceptualizations***

Despite general agreement on potential consequences, the factors or dimensions of satisfaction vary considerably between studies (DeShields et al., 2005; Emery et al., 2001; Santini et al., 2017). Researchers use multiple constructs and terminology for satisfaction, including quality, service quality, and loyalty, among others. Some of these constructs and approaches originate from the for-profit business sector while others attempt to isolate the unique attributes of satisfaction within higher education. Despite the varying conceptualizations, studies have identified, paired, and decoupled factors connected to student satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016; DeShields et al., 2005; Santini et al., 2017). Distinctions in these conceptualizations result in inconsistent assessment of student satisfaction between individual institutions, institution types, and subsets of student populations. A universal measure of student satisfaction in higher education would result in more reliable trend data and capture differences between institutions, institution types, student populations, academic disciplines, and more. Conversely, methodological distinctions allow researchers and institutions to select the framework that aligns with the established needs and desires of their student population. To date, the literature confirms student satisfaction is highly contextual.

### ***Components***

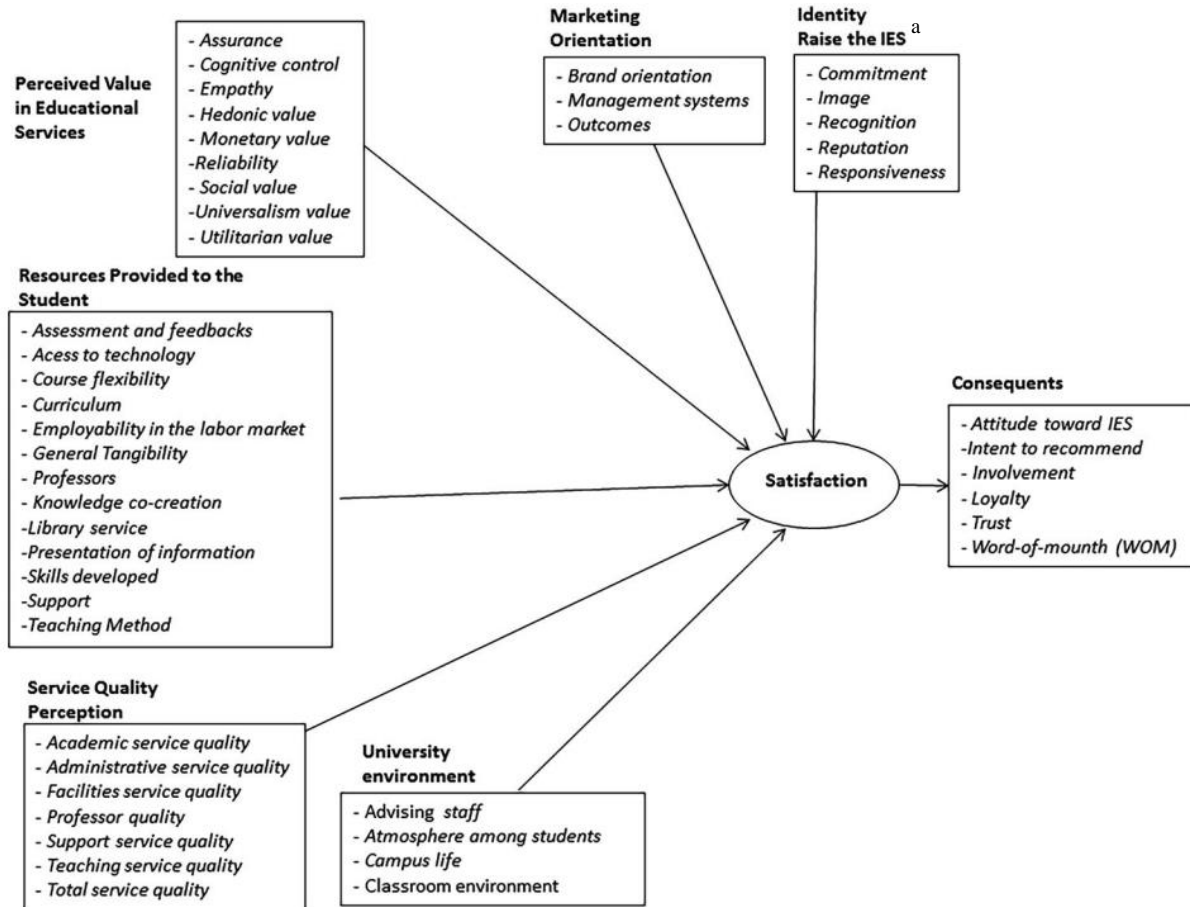
Due to the everchanging desires and needs of students in higher education, the isolation and confirmation of satisfaction components or constructs is complex. A meta-analytic study from Santini et al. (2017) reviewed 83 quantitative studies and confirmed 45 antecedent constructs as well as six consequent constructs that were positively related to student satisfaction. Santini et al. (2017) categorized each of the 45 antecedent constructs into six broad categories, which include:

- Perceived value of educational services
- Resources provided to the student
- Service quality perception
- Marketing orientation
- Identity of the higher education institution
- University environment

The constructs under each respective category that demonstrated the strongest relationship to student satisfaction were hedonic value, assessment and feedback, total service quality, management systems, commitment, and campus life. Figure 4 explains the empirical theoretical model generated through the meta-analysis (Santini et al., 2017). While these results confirm the numerous factors that influence student satisfaction, institutional leaders must understand the variety of ways students form their expectations within their specific context, which ultimately influences satisfaction. Despite a prioritization of student satisfaction, some of these constructs cannot be directly influenced by short-term institutional investments or initiatives.

**Figure 4**

*Empirical Theoretical Model of Student Satisfaction*



*Note.* This illustration details the meta-analysis from “Student Satisfaction in Higher Education: A Meta-Analytic Study,” by F. D. O. Santini, W. J. Ladeira, C. H. Sampaio, and G. D. S. Costa, 2017, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 27(1), p. 11

(<https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2017.1311980>). Copyright 2017 by Taylor & Francis Ltd.

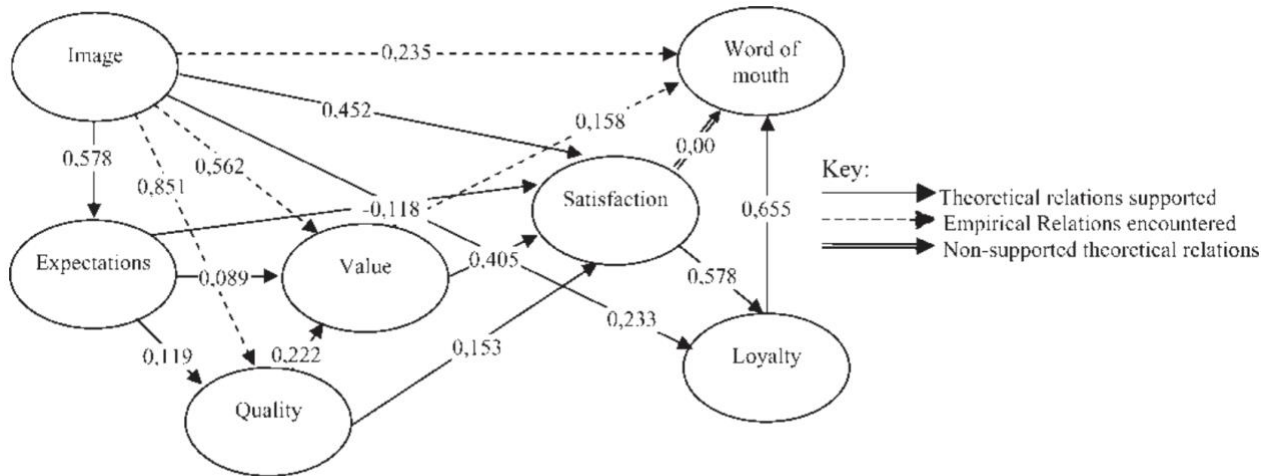
<sup>a</sup> IES is an abbreviation for higher education institution.

Alves and Raposo’s (2007) conceptual model of student satisfaction (see Figure 1) demonstrates the interconnectedness of student perceptions and how those led to both positive and negative outcomes. This model served as a framework for the action research study. The initial dimensions of Alves and Raposo’s (2007) model included student image, customer

expectations, and technical and functional perceptions of quality. The authors hypothesized these dimensions would influence perceived value as well as students' overall satisfaction in higher education, and the ultimate consequences or outcomes of satisfaction components would result in the degree of student loyalty and positive word-of-mouth actions. The authors measured the relationships between constructs, and except for satisfaction to word-of-mouth actions, all the theoretical relationships were confirmed in addition to some new relationships discovered empirically. Figure 5 illustrates the findings and relationships between dimensions. Despite the confirmed connections between these elements, the authors did not sufficiently discuss how the literature informed the creation of the seven dimensions in their model. Additionally, the authors' definition of loyalty was unclear, as it could be related to a personal feeling, such as contentment, and/or an action, such as persistence and continued enrollment at the institution.

**Figure 5**

*Theoretical and Empirical Connections Related to Student Satisfaction*



*Note.* Illustration from “Conceptual Model of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education,” by H. Alves and M. Raposo, 2007, *Total Quality Management*, 18(5) p. 584 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14783360601074315>). Copyright 2007 by Routledge.

Strikingly, two of these three constructs Alves and Raposo (2007) described align with the meta-analytic findings of Santini et al. (2017). While concepts related to student image and technical/functional perceptions of quality were included in both studies, Santini et al. (2017) found a non-significant correlational relationship between customer expectations and satisfaction. The authors attributed this result to “discrepancies observed in the findings of the six identified studies, reflecting the heterogeneity of the results” (Santini et al., 2017, p. 8).

**Academic Advising**

***Importance***

Academic advising is a vital service designed to ensure students make the most of their educational experience and complete their degree requirements. Advisors assist students with course registration; academic rules, regulations, and policies; and provide broad academic,

personal, developmental, and emotional support. As early academic advising scholars and authors, Winston et al. (1984) captured the importance of this offering when they defined developmental academic advising as:

a systematic process based on a close student-advisor relationship intended to aid students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of the full range of institutional and community resources. It both stimulates and supports students in their quest for an enriched quality of life. Developmental advising relationships focus on identifying and accomplishing life goals, acquiring skills and attitudes that promote intellectual and personal growth, and sharing concerns for each other and for the academic community. (pp. 18-19)

Theoretically, academic services are a benefit to individual students through individualized support as well as a benefit to the institution through increased retention. The overall value and impact of effective academic advising can be effectively highlighted in studies from Young-Jones et al. (2013) and Tippetts et al. (2022). Young-Jones et al. (2013) explored how academic advising use predicted student academic performance. Based on survey results from 611 undergraduate students registered for psychology courses, the researchers discovered that “the levels to which advisors are available to students, actually meet with them, and provide them with assistance and support are clearly linked to factors demonstrated to predict student success” (Young-Jones et al., 2013, p. 15). The authors also confirmed academic advising as a mechanism to improve student retention. Tippetts et al. (2022) analyzed Spring 2018 data from a large, public university, and found that students who met with an academic advisor at least one time during the semester were 9% more likely to register for the subsequent term. While Tippetts et al. (2022) underscored the important link between advising and retention, utilization of

academic advising could not be isolated as the primary enrollment variable due to the posttest-only research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This action research study will fill a gap in the literature through exploration of the connection between student marketplace identities and satisfaction with academic advising.

### ***Academic Advising and Satisfaction***

Several studies have confirmed the relationship between academic advising and student satisfaction. Santini et al. (2017) found a statistically significant and positive relationship between student satisfaction and advising staff in their meta-analysis. Upon examination of student responses to a questionnaire that aimed to link faculty, advising staff, and academic courses with satisfaction, DeShields et al. (2005) stated, “So while the absence of good advising staff performance may lead to dissatisfaction, their presence does not lead to satisfaction, since students may not see advising staff as being directly related to the expected outcomes from a college experience” (p. 138). That is to say, the authors found poor academic advisor performance had a negative effect on satisfaction, but the mere presence of the service offering did not automatically improve student satisfaction. Importantly, student opinions of academic advisor performance may be influenced by student marketplace identities and the associated expectations rather than only the performance of those staff members.

Specific to the business student population, Blau et al. (2019) asked all graduating seniors within the business school at a large, urban Mid-Atlantic institution in the United States to complete a satisfaction survey. Despite the convenience sample not being fully representative of the population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), analysis of the data confirmed advising ease and quality were positively related to student satisfaction (Blau et al., 2019). In the study, ease was used as a synonym for accessibility. Additional research is needed to conceptualize how students

set the expectations for advising they compare against their experiences. The gap between advising expectations and experiences influences student satisfaction, which affects student retention and ultimately institutional fiscal health.

### **Summary**

In summary, students slowly began to transform into customers of higher education largely due to the country's economic shift towards neoliberalism and marketization approximately 50 years ago. While the original intention was to create a marketplace in which students selected an institution based on its ability to improve personal and national wealth, neoliberalism and marketization resulted in unintended consequences for the student experience both inside and outside the classroom. As tuition costs continue to increase, a considerable population of students identify themselves as customers of higher education and elevate their expectations of service delivery and outcomes. Those ideas contrast dramatically with the original intentions of higher education. Despite the adverse impacts, student satisfaction and academic advising are tied to marketization expectations and remain important to student development and academic outcomes. This study attempted to connect student marketplace identities with overall satisfaction in higher education and satisfaction with academic advising services. The root causes and environmental factors that influenced those perceptions were also explored.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

I conducted this study among undergraduate students within the School of Business at a private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution. Primarily, I aimed to examine the relationship between student marketplace identities and both overall student satisfaction and satisfaction with academic advising services. The research findings will inform a future action research study in which a curricular or programmatic intervention will attempt to influence those student marketplace identities. Informed by literature that confirmed customer-centric attitudes and behaviors negatively affect student experiences and outcomes, such an intervention would aim to expose students to marketplace identities concepts and expectations toward the partner and learner side of the continuum. The institution and School of Business under study can use these data to adjust financial structures and investments, faculty and staff training, and admissions practices. A secondary goal of the study was to explore the root causes and environmental factors that influenced student marketplace identity development. This chapter details the study's methods; presents the research design; justifies the action research approach; reviews the role of the researcher and participants; discusses the data sources, data collection, and analysis; evaluates research delimitations, limitations, and assumptions; and examines ethical considerations.

At its core, this convergent mixed methods action research study used a social constructivist perspective in which participants were asked to make meaning of their subjective

and socially formed experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explicated the notion of social constructivism and the associated research design as follows:

Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meaning directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than the narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. (p. 8)

I collected initial quantitative data to clearly define the marketplace identities of students and quantify their levels of overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction. Student quantitative responses provided further insights and added richness, background, and context to responses. Since student marketplace identities are socially constructed rather than innate, a key goal of this study was to understand how personal, cultural, and historical experiences shaped participant perspectives. Specifically, the following research questions guided my approach:

1. To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education?
2. What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?
3. How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?
4. How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?

## **Justification for Action Research Approach**

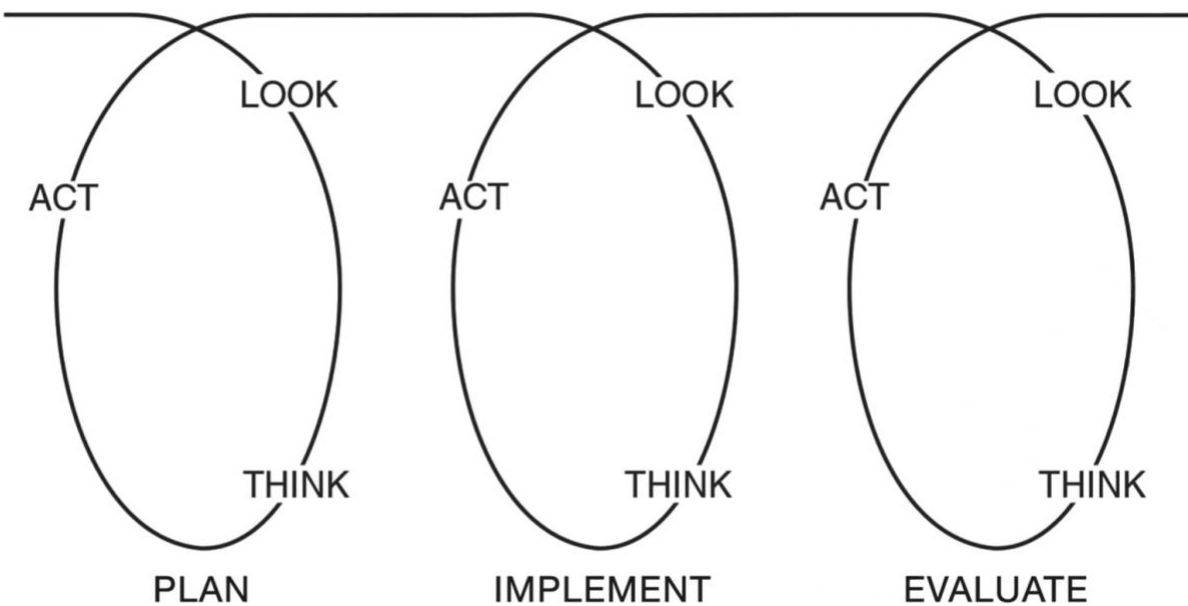
Although the treatment of students as customers within higher education has been confirmed to produce negative consequences (Bunce et al., 2017; Finney & Finney, 2010; Saunders & Kolek, 2017), limited research has linked student marketplace identities with overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction. Additionally, few studies have used student marketplace identity data to disrupt the trend toward marketization and consumerism at the campus-level. These gaps in the research require further exploration. As such, action research provides the ideal methodological framework to better understand this problem of practice and lay a foundation for future programmatic and curricular innovation. As illustrated in Figure 6, Stringer and Ortiz Aragón (2021) described action research as “an approach to investigation that uses continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action to reveal effective solutions to issues and problems experienced by people in their everyday lives or in times of crisis” (p. 4). This collaborative and participatory method of inquiry identified those closest to the problem of practice as local experts in the best position to explain their experiences and contribute to solutions (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021).

In the study, student marketplace identity classifications were determined through a series of survey questions. Once those marketplace identities were transferred onto a predetermined marketplace categorization scale, a small sample of students from each pole on the continuum and those in the middle were asked to participate in a semi-structured focus group interview. The action research method encourages the use of open-ended questions so participants are free to express ideas in their own words and researchers can follow-up immediately with clarifying questions or additional lines of inquiry (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). Such an approach allowed me to learn more from the students who have been affected by the systemic problems of

neoliberalism, marketization, and consumerism in higher education. The study consisted of one action research cycle, and the findings will inform a future second cycle in which curricular and programmatic changes are implemented and assessed.

**Figure 6**

*Look-Think-Act Action Research Model*



*Note.* Illustration from *Action Research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., p. 10), by E. T. Stringer and A. Ortiz Aragón, 2021, SAGE Publications, Inc. Copyright 2021 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

### ***Description of the Action Research Intervention***

The action research intervention focused on the planning loop of the Look-Think-Act action research model (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). In this stage, I intervened through the dissemination of a survey and follow-up semi-structured focus group interviews. The purpose of the intervention was to deeply understand the problem of practice from the perspective of current sophomore through senior undergraduate students within the School of Business. While

administrators, faculty, and staff may see the effects of marketization in their daily work, it was imperative to learn how students see themselves within higher education, how their expectations have been determined, and how those expectations aligned with their experiences on campus. The extent to which students identified their marketplace identities on a continuum from learner within higher education to customer of higher education informed invitations to one of three semi-structured focus group interviews. Through the survey and semi-structured focus group interviews, I identified root causes and environmental factors of student marketplace identities and correlated marketplace identities with overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction. Those results and implications will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Further insights on how students understood their role within the higher education environment will inform future curricular or programmatic interventions. Responses may encourage changes at the institution including how admissions professionals pitch to prospective students about life at the institution, first-year experience seminar course curriculum that encourages individual responsibility and accountability with support from university employees, or the content of academic advising workshops such as academic goal setting, reflection, and problem solving. The data collected from students was crucial to ensure alignment of initial student expectations, quality, value, and what they experienced on campus.

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

Based on the constructivist approach, I “look[ed] for the complexity of view of the situation being studied” and “ma[de] sense of (or interpret[ed]) the meaning others have about the world” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Throughout the study, I acted primarily as a facilitator. I disseminated the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) and closely monitored

responses. I also led the semi-structured focus group interviews, and during those meetings, I observed as a participant. Objectivity was a principal goal and consideration due to the direct involvement in data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Stringer and Ortiz Aragón (2021) urged researchers to consider how their status and relationships to the participants would influence the development and outcomes of the study. As a former staff member who led the School of Business academic advising function at the institution in which the study occurred, my positionality is noteworthy. In my previous role, conversations with students regarding their perceptions, experiences, and levels of satisfaction within the School of Business were common. I also collaborated with administrators, faculty, and staff regarding the challenges of customer-centric student marketplace identities and how corresponding student perceptions and behaviors affected our work. These conversations directly influenced student retention and satisfaction efforts. To prevent biased responses stemming from my former leadership within the School of Business, participants were reminded throughout the study that their participation and responses would not result in negative consequences, particularly with academic advising services. I also assured students that their responses would remain anonymous.

## **Participants**

All undergraduate students with a declared major within the School of Business at a private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution received a survey that includes both the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Although the number of declared business major students fluctuates throughout the academic year, the survey was sent to 1,005 students. Since an academic advising satisfaction survey sent to undergraduate majors by the School of Business in early 2023 only resulted in a

12% student response rate, the entire undergraduate business student population was included in the survey component of the study. Students who completed the survey in its entirety were eligible to enter a drawing for one of three \$20 Amazon gift cards. At the end of the survey, students were invited to fill out a unique drawing form at a separate link to ensure their responses were disaggregated. This approach was designed to yield a robust number of responses and a stronger data set. No academic or geographic subgroup was excluded from receiving the survey. Additionally, the end of the survey included an invitation for students to express their interest in participating in a semi-structured focus group interview. Those who typed in their email address were added to the focus group recruitment pool.

A total of 12 student participants who completed the survey were recruited to participate in three semi-structured focus group interviews based on their responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) questions as well as self-identified demographic markers. Among the 12 students selected to participate, four were categorized as learners within higher education, four were considered customers, and four were placed in the center of the student marketplace identity continuum. Given variations in social capital by race, ethnicity, citizenship, socioeconomic status, and class year, responses highlighted root causes or environmental factors that influenced student marketplace identity development. At the conclusion of the four focus group interviews, the 12 student participants each received a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time. Students who changed their major or no longer study within the School of Business between the initial dissemination of the survey and completion of the semi-structured focus group interviews were excluded from further participation. Additionally, those who discontinued their studies or voluntarily separated from the institution were also not invited to the focus groups.

## **Data Sources**

Data for this study came from a combination of the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) as well as a semi-structured focus group interviews. Questions from both original survey instruments were aggregated into a single survey. The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) contained both quantitative and qualitative data while the semi-structured interviews provided only qualitative data. The combined survey was created in Qualtrics, and the link was disseminated through an email that outlined the scope of the study. Before students were prompted to complete the survey, they were required to review and sign an informed consent statement. Once signed, participants were asked to provide demographic information including race, ethnicity, citizenship, socioeconomic status, and class year.

### ***Customer Orientation Scale Survey***

The Customer Orientation Scale Survey instrument is a quantitative tool developed by Saunders (2014b) to investigate the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideologies within higher education. The original study in which the instrument was used aimed to note changes in student marketplace identities between orientation and second year course enrollment. The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) is comprised of 18 items related to student perceptions of their academic responsibilities, role in higher education, and long-term degree expectations. Importantly, all questions on the survey were framed from a customer-centric perspective and asked students to respond from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* on a 5-point Likert scale. In the action research study, no changes were made to this instrument. Examples of the statements to which students responded as part of the combined survey include:

- I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing.
- Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career.
- The main purpose of my college education should be maximizing my ability to earn money.
- For the most part, education is something I receive, not something I create.

Two years after Saunders' (2014b) initial study, Saunders and Kolek (2017) readministered the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) to the students who participated in the original study. Given the use of the instrument in a second peer reviewed study, a degree of construct and instrument reliability was established (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The complete Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) is listed in Appendix A. Note that additional context related to the research study and specific instructions for student participants were added in Qualtrics.

### ***Amended Student Satisfaction Survey***

Alves and Raposo (2009) developed the Student Satisfaction Survey to reliably measure student satisfaction, including the formation of satisfaction and its consequences. My study aimed to validate Alves and Raposo's (2007) conceptual model of student satisfaction, which noted seven dimensions of satisfaction: image, customer expectations, technical and functional quality perceived, perceived value, overall satisfaction, student loyalty, and word of mouth actions. That original conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1. Importantly, Alves and Raposo (2009) noted a 93% reliability coefficient to accurately measure satisfaction through the variables in the study.

The original survey instrument created by Alves and Raposo (2009) included six open-ended items to which students responded. For this action research study, however, Questions 1

and 6 were adjusted from open-ended format to a 5-point Likert scale. Likert scale responses included *extremely satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied*, *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*, *somewhat dissatisfied*, and *extremely dissatisfied*. Such a modification allowed for student marketplace identities and overall satisfaction to be examined quantitatively through a correlation analysis. Students also had an opportunity to type short-answer responses to Questions 2–5 via the Qualtrics survey link. Questions 2a, 3a, and 5a on this instrument were only asked to students who confirmed their expectations were not met. Students who answered in the affirmative to Questions 2, 3, and 5 were directed to the next primary item. Skip logic was applied to the Qualtrics survey to ensure respondents were correctly routed. The six primary questions and three secondary questions designed to assess overall satisfaction as amended were:

1. Considering your overall experience with this university, in general, what is your level of satisfaction?
2. Overall, has this university met your expectations?
  - a. Until what point has this university corresponded to your expectations?
3. Overall, has this university met your needs?
  - a. Until what point has this university corresponded to your needs?
4. Imagine a university, perfect in all aspects. At what distance would you place this university from the ideal one?
5. Do you believe it was a wise decision to choose to attend this university?
  - a. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to attend this university?
6. What is your level of happiness for having chosen this university?

In the second half of the amended Student Satisfaction Survey, the six primary questions were repeated; however, the topic was changed from overall satisfaction at the institution to satisfaction with academic advising services within the School of Business. Questions 7 and 12 were also amended from open-ended to a 5-point Likert scale. Again, this adjustment allowed for the direct quantitative comparison of overall satisfaction with academic advising satisfaction. Like the previous section, secondary questions ensured students whose expectations were not met were asked to specify the point at which their dissatisfaction occurred. The satisfaction data was also analyzed alongside student marketplace identity markers. The academic advising satisfaction questions include:

7. Considering your academic advising experience within the School of Business, in general, what is your level of satisfaction?
8. Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your expectations?
  - a. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your expectations?
9. Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your needs?
  - a. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your needs?
10. Imagine an academic advising office, perfect in all aspects. At what distance would you place academic advising services within the School of Business from the ideal one?

11. Do you believe it is wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?
  - a. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?
12. What is your level of happiness with academic advising services within the School of Business?

The complete amended Student Satisfaction Survey is included in Appendix A.

The original Student Satisfaction Survey questions Alves and Raposo (2009) developed asked students to detail the point at which their expectations were no longer met. Since the framing of that inquiry assumes students are or became dissatisfied, minor wording adjustments ensured the instrument did not lead students to a negative response. Additionally, since Alves and Raposo's original study was conducted in Portuguese, translation of the questions into English may have altered their meaning or understanding by students. Therefore, a small pilot study assessed the content validity and reliability of the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) questions. All students within the School of Business Honors Program were invited to complete a feedback survey on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey, and seven volunteers were selected to participate. Those students were sent a Qualtrics survey link and asked to describe their interpretation of each question and reframe it in their own words via open-ended responses. This approach assessed whether each question was understood as intended. Based on the responses to the pilot survey, adjustments to the questions were not necessary. The protocol for the pilot feedback survey can be found in Appendix B.

### *Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews*

Through an initial analysis of survey data, student respondents were categorized into three student marketplace identity groupings: learner, customer, and mixed marketplace identity. Although marketplace identities exist on a continuum, categorization allowed me to identify similarities and differences between participant groups. Four students from each cluster were recruited to participate in three unique semi-structured focus group interviews. The semi-structured focus group interview questions extrapolated on responses from the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). The focus group participants were asked nine pre-determined questions, not including the ice breaker and wrap-up items. I also asked additional follow-up questions stemming from the conversation, which included further explication of ideas, repetition and confirmation of earlier comments, and probing clarification. The open-ended focus group questions included:

1. What are your expectations of higher education overall?
2. What beliefs or experiences shaped those expectations?

For the remainder of our focus group, use the following brief scenario as a frame of reference for your responses: Suppose you registered for and passed a course at the university that does not apply toward your degree requirements. As a result, you learned you must complete another course and extend your graduation by one semester.

3. How would you react?
4. How do you think such an error could occur?
5. Generally, what are your expectations of student support at the university?

6. What beliefs or experiences shaped your student support expectations at the university?
7. What are your expectations of student support within academic advising, specifically?
8. Have your overall higher education experiences matched your expectations? How or how not?
9. Have your academic advising experiences matched your expectations? How or how not?

These questions were designed to loosely align with the survey instrument items and allowed students to describe their expectations, experiences, beliefs, and more in their own words (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). The full protocol for the semi-structured focus group interviews can be found in Appendix C.

### ***Validity of Data Sources***

Creswell and Creswell (2014) recommended “the use of multiple approaches, which should enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy” (p. 200). Multiple validity strategies were employed to ensure the accuracy, credibility, and quality of the data, including assessment of quantitative instrumentation, triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking.

**Assessment of Quantitative Instrumentation.** Given their prior use, the quantitative instruments used in this study, including the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), were assessed for validity. Saunders (2014b) wrote, “While attempts were made to ensure that the validity of [Customer Orientation Scale] survey items, they were not extensively pretested and are susceptible to a substantial amount of social desirability bias” (p. 24). I aimed to further validate

the survey items. In their paper, Alves and Raposo (2009) stated, “The scales used result in part from those already tested in various studies, despite the verbal context often being adapted to the reality of higher education” (p. 211). As such, a degree of validity was established prior to the instrument’s use in this action research study.

**Triangulation.** The convergence of multiple data sources allows for justification of central themes identified during analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the use of three data sources allowed for triangulation of the data. The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), and semi-structured focus group interview data were compared to identify whether student responses were consistent. This comparison was also useful about student marketplace identity categorization, root causes and environmental factors, and satisfaction with academic advising and higher education overall.

**Reflexivity.** Despite my bias toward students whose beliefs and behaviors aligned closer with those on the learner and mixed marketplace identity side of the continuum, it was imperative that those beliefs did not influence student survey or focus group responses. Experiences with students who exhibited customer-like behaviors such as demanding actions be taken on their behalf or unwillingness to accept responsibility for individual decisions should not influence the study and assessment of the data. This action research study was exploratory and aimed to better understand the problem, and therefore, the data collected must remain unaffected by the researcher. Reflexive journaling was used as a mechanism to mitigate the effects of those biases. Creswell and Creswell (2018) encouraged qualitative researchers to reflect on their experiences and how personal beliefs may influence the results of a study. The authors wrote, “qualitative researchers need to limit their discussions about personal experiences so that they do

not override the importance of the content or methods in a study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 184). As such, I reflected on student responses as they related to past professional experiences and how they shaped interpretations of the data.

**Member Checking.** Member checking following the study allowed for participants to validate their responses and ensure more quiet or introverted students had their voices heard (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). At the conclusion of each semi-structured focus group interview, student participants were invited to clarify or amend previous statements or share additional reflections. Once the data analysis was complete and the findings were drafted, those findings were aggregated by student marketplace identity (learner, mixed marketplace identity, and customer) and disseminated to the students who participated in each respective semi-structured focus group interviews. Students were provided one week to comment on the preliminary findings and share whether they felt the summary analysis was accurate based on their experiences and participation. Four of the 10 focus group interview participants responded to the outreach, and each of them confirmed the analysis matched their perspectives and recollection of the conversation.

### **Data Collection**

The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) data was distributed to all undergraduate student majors within the School of Business via email. The email invitation included a Qualtrics link for the survey instrument that first required students to review and sign an informed consent form. The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, a confidentiality and data security statement, consent/release items, and instructions. Student participants had 14 days to complete the survey, and reminder emails were sent 7 days, 4 days, and 1 day prior to its closure. Once

students completed the survey and expressed interest in participating in the focus group interviews, they were prompted to tentatively hold those dates and times in their calendars.

Next, 12 student participants were randomly selected and recruited to participate in a semi-structured focus group interview based on their marketplace identity grouping. The 75-minute focus group interviews were held approximately 2 weeks after the online survey instrument was closed and administered via Zoom. Zoom was selected for its convenience, familiarity to students, and so the conversation could be recorded, transcribed, and saved for future reference and use. I led the focus group conversations and observed as a participant, and both audio and video of the three sessions were saved. The audio was transcribed via Microsoft 365, corrected, and stored in Microsoft Word. Stringer and Ortiz Aragón (2021) stressed the importance of data privacy, confidentiality, access, and ownership consideration within action research planning. Although overarching results will be shared at the institutional level and within the School of Business, identifying information of participants will be kept confidential. Only I will have access to the raw data. The Qualtrics data from the survey instrument will remain stored within that system for future analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design in which quantitative data was collected and analyzed, results were identified for follow-up, qualitative data was collected and analyzed, and results were compared and interpreted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such a design permitted me to examine how qualitative responses explained or supported initial quantitative results. I used the six-step qualitative coding analysis process described by Creswell and Creswell (2018) for this study. Table 1 provides a summary of the data sources and data analysis for each action research question. The results of the study are

explicated in Chapter 4, and recommendations follow in Chapter 5. The specific data analysis tools and processes for each research question are as follows:

***Research Question 1: To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education?***

**Customer Orientation Scale Survey.** The extent to which undergraduate students within the School of Business identified on a continuum from learners within higher education to customers of higher education were determined by descriptive statistics. Mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation was calculated in SPSS.

The 18-question Customer Orientation Scale survey (Saunders, 2014b) asked student participants the extent to which they agreed with statements aligned with a customer mentality. Responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* on a 5-point Likert scale. One question asked students to respond to the following question: “Concerning the institution, I think of myself primarily as a customer of the university.” This single item was assessed to determine the extent to which student explicitly identified their student marketplace identity. Additionally, all responses on this section of the instrument were assigned a value and aggregated to demarcate a student’s place on the student marketplace continuum. *Strongly disagree* responses were assigned 1 point up through *strongly agree*, which resulted in 5 points. Therefore, a pure learner within higher education would only receive 18 points on this component of the survey, and a pure customer of higher education would receive 90 points. As demonstrated in Figure 7, the range of responses were segmented into three marketplace identity categories; those who earned 18-37 points were classified as learners, those who earned 38-70 points were classified as having a mixed marketplace identity, and those who earned 71-90 points were classified as customers.

Individual results informed invitations to the semi-structured focus group interviews based on the three continuum groupings. The amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) portion of the instrument was not examined for this research question.

**Figure 7**

*Student Marketplace Identity Categorization*

<p><b>Learner</b></p> <p><b>18-37 points</b> (Lowest 20 points)</p>	<p><b>Mixed Marketplace Identity</b></p> <p><b>38-70 points</b> (Middle 38 points)</p>	<p><b>Customer</b></p> <p><b>71-90 points</b> (Highest 20 points)</p>
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*Research Question 2: What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?*

**Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews.** The semi-structured focus group interview followed the protocol in Appendix B; I asked participants about their expectations of higher education, customer service, and academic advising. Students were also prompted to describe the causes, experiences, or beliefs that influenced those points of view. I used emergent, in vivo coding to establish themes in student responses, and student marketplace identities served as points of comparison. I manually analyzed and identified codes through MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software, and organized them in Microsoft Word. According to Saldaña (2021), in vivo coding prompts action researchers to use terms and concepts directly from the participants. In vivo coding also ensures the voices and complex experiences of participants are accurately captured (Saldaña, 2021).

***Research Question 3: How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?***

**Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey.** To identify the relationship between student marketplace identities and overall student satisfaction, responses to a single question as well as the aggregate responses from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were correlated with a single question and aggregate responses to the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Descriptive statistics, including mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation, were evaluated in SPSS and provided important information about the data set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since both data sets are interval-level, a Pearson's  $r$  was calculated in SPSS for correlational analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Open-ended responses from the amended Student Satisfaction Survey were intended to add depth to the quantitative results and were analyzed through in vivo coding. I created a codebook or compilation of the codes, including descriptions and examples (Saldaña, 2021), to organize and reassess emergent themes.

***Research Question 4: How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?***

**Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey.** Like the third research question, I compared responses to a single question as well as the aggregate responses from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) to both a single question and aggregate responses to the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Again, I computed descriptive statistics, including mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation, in SPSS and provided information about the data set as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, I calculated a Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficient in SPSS. I assessed

the open-ended responses from the amended Student Satisfaction Survey through in vivo coding and included in the codebook. Table 1 provides a summary of the data collection and data analysis protocol.

**Table 1***Action Research Data Sources and Analysis Table*

Action Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1. To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education?	Customer Orientation Scale Survey—quantitative	Descriptive statistics—mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation—to provide information about the data set (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)
2. What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?	Semi-structured focus group interview—qualitative	Emergent, in vivo coding analysis to identify insights, themes, and trends in responses (Saldaña, 2021)
3. How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?	Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey—quantitative	Descriptive statistics—mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation—and Pearson’s <i>r</i> to correlate interval-level data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)
	Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey—qualitative	Emergent, in vivo coding analysis to identify insights, themes, and trends in responses (Saldaña, 2021)
4. How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?	Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey—quantitative	Descriptive statistics—mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation—and Pearson’s <i>r</i> to correlate interval-level data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)
	Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey—qualitative	Emergent, in vivo coding analysis to identify insights, themes, and trends in responses (Saldaña, 2021)

*Note.* Table includes data sources and data analysis techniques for each action research question.

## **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

### ***Delimitations***

The action research study occurred within the School of Business at a private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution. Students who chose to study business may have a unique interest in and comprehension of marketing, consumer behavior, capitalism, neoliberalism, perceptions of value, and other related concepts. Their prior experiences and academic knowledge could have altered their beliefs, and therefore, their survey and focus group responses. Relatedly, a student's ability and choice to attend an institution with a high cost of attendance may have influenced opinions and responses. Due to the study location and unique population, results are not generalizable to other subpopulations or the larger higher education student population.

The proposed comparison of overall satisfaction at the institution with academic advising satisfaction intentionally limits the scope of the study. While the literature confirmed the importance and positive impact of academic advising services, future research could address satisfaction with other student services that are similarly meaningful. Additionally, at the institution under study, students are assigned a First-Year Advisor from a centralized unit at the university. The First-Year Advisors are assigned a small student caseload of first-year students within an academic school/college, and they serve as instructors for the first-year experience courses as well as academic advisors. As such, first-year undergraduate business students at the institution are not advised by academic advisors from the School of Business. Starting in their second year; however, students with a business major progress from First-Year Advising to academic advising within the School of Business. Transfer students and other special populations are not assigned a First-Year Advisor and immediately work with unit-based academic advisors. Since student participants with any number of completed credits and backgrounds were invited

to participate in the study, their academic advising perceptions, beliefs, and experiences referenced First-Year Advising as well as academic-unit advising within the School of Business. While First-Year Advising served as a frame of reference, their response data was removed given the focus on advising within the School of Business.

### ***Limitations***

A methodological limitation of this study is the length of the survey and combination of Likert-scale and open-ended questions. As such, some students may have been less inclined to complete the survey instrument due to the time commitment and requirement to create their own responses. In addition, participants may not have been able to attend the semi-structured focus group interviews due to class, work, or other personal conflicts. Students who participated in the semi-structured focus group interviews may not have been representative of the School of Business undergraduate population. That is, not all students were able to or interested in volunteering nearly 2 hours of their time. Additionally, some student participants were not able to articulate their views clearly and effectively, which influenced the results.

The combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) questions related to academic advising do not account for the difference between centralized and school/college-based advising at the institution under study. First-year students who completed the survey were asked about academic advising within the School of Business; however, they only worked with First-Year Advisors. Since first-year student perceptions of academic advising within the School of Business would not be informed by their experiences, their responses were not fully analyzed, and they were not included in the semi-structured focus group interviews.

Lastly, I intentionally designed this as an exploratory action research study. The lack of an immediate programmatic or curricular intervention limits opportunities to measure impact of those interventions during students' academic tenure. Since student marketplace identities change over time (Saunders & Kolek, 2017) and a second action research cycle cannot occur in the short-term, it is not possible to measure the extent to which administrative intervention meaningfully improved student expectations, experiences, sense of responsibility, and satisfaction.

### ***Assumptions***

An assumption of this study is that student marketplace identities are stable enough to endure for the duration of the action research study. I also assumed that student participants were honest and forthcoming in their survey and semi-structured focus group interview responses. Finally, I assumed that students did not feel pressured to respond in a particular way due to my former positionality within the School of Business as well as the use of audio/video recording.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that ethical issues in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research must be anticipated and actively addressed in research plans. Reliability and trustworthiness were included in all aspects of the research, including in planning, initial phases, data collection, data analysis, and data storage and reporting. Throughout the study, the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines were strictly followed. The raw data was and will remain available only to me and those involved with the study. The published dissertation only includes anonymized data. The raw data from both the survey and semi-structured focus group interview remain accessible only to me. The survey data

remains in Qualtrics, and the semi-structured focus group interview recorded video and transcription were saved in a secure location for future reference and use.

This action research study commenced after institutional review board (IRB) approval was granted. Prior to the survey, participants were required to sign an informed consent document (Appendix D), which included the purpose of the study and a confidentiality statement. Students invited to participate in one of the semi-structured focus group interviews were asked to sign a second informed consent agreement (Appendix E). Students were reminded throughout the study that their participation was purely voluntary, and their consent could be rescinded at any time. I also confirmed on multiple occasions that there were no wrong answers; the study purely aimed to understand how student participants see themselves within higher education, how those opinions were formed, and how those beliefs affected satisfaction. Lastly, I repeated to students that their responses and identifying information will not be shared with anyone at the institution.

### ***IRB***

I sought IRB approval from the William & Mary Educational Institutional Review Committee prior to the study. Approval was also granted by the institution at the center of this action research study, and a faculty sponsor from the School of Business provided access to the population. I completed the IRB approval training course and earned the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) certification. To protect the research subjects and their responses, participants signed a consent form prior to administration of the survey and semi-structured focus group interview. The combination of these steps ensured participants understood the data points they would provide as well as my confidentiality expectations.

### ***Positionality***

Due to my former positionality as an administrative leader within the School of Business at the institution under study, student participants might have considered me an authority figure. As such, a disclosure confirmed there was no longer a formal professional relationship between me and the institution. Prior to their participation, students were reminded that their participation and responses would not affect their academic advising experience within the School of Business. Despite the potential for my positionality to influence student responses, a complex understanding of the organization and participants served as further validation of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These procedures aimed to limit potential bias to the extent possible.

### **Timeline**

The timeline for the action research study can be found in Table 2. Preparation for the study occurred throughout the Fall 2023 semester, and the study was conducted after the add/drop period for the Spring 2024 semester. The semi-structured focus group interviews were scheduled 2 weeks after the survey closed. Data analysis occurred over the subsequent months.

**Table 2***Action Research Study Timeline*

Research Phase	Date	Activity
Phase I – Dissertation Proposal	October 2023	Defend proposal with dissertation committee and complete modifications as required
Phase II – Preliminary Preparation	December 2023	Request approval from William & Mary Institutional Review Board
	December 2023	Secure permission from higher education institution at which conduct study will be conducted
Phase III – Conduct Study	January 2024	Disseminate Student Satisfaction Survey Pilot Feedback Survey to Honors students, analyze results, and adjust instrument accordingly
	February 2024	Identify and confirm students to whom the combined survey will be sent based on finalized Spring 2024 semester roster
	February 2024	Provide survey student participants with the goals and purpose of the action research study, expectations of participation, and provide a timeline of activities
	February 2024	Send survey instrument to student participants
	February 2023 and March 2024	Briefly analyze results and recruit 12 students to participate in three semi-structured focus group interviews based on student marketplace identities
	March 2024	Conduct semi-structured focus group interviews
	April 2024 – December 2024	Analyze data and write research findings and conclusion

*Note.* Timeline of the action research study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this mixed methods action research study was to examine the extent to which undergraduate business students identify themselves on a continuum from learners within to customers of higher education (i.e., student marketplace identity) and how those perceptions correlated to overall satisfaction at their institution and satisfaction with academic advising services. The study also aimed to understand the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development. The four research questions that guided this action research study were as follows:

1. To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customers of higher education?
2. What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?
3. How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?
4. How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?

As detailed in Chapter 3, the methods of this study involved distribution of a survey instrument that combined the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Based on responses and demographic markers such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, socioeconomic status, and class year,

12 students were invited to participate in one of three semi-structured focus group interviews organized by student marketplace identity category (learner, mixed marketplace identity, and customer). The culmination of qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a vibrant analysis of student marketplace identity perspectives and will support potential institutional changes to admissions materials and processes, student orientation or onboarding frameworks, first-year seminar curriculum, student development and services, and student programming.

In this chapter, I discuss the implementation of the research protocol, including dissemination of the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) and subsequent semi-structured focus group interviews. I will then describe the sample and describe how the data were organized and analyzed. Next, I will answer the four research questions that guided the study and conclude with a summary of findings that will inform the recommendations presented in Chapter 5.

### **Overview of Research Methods and Analysis**

Quantitative data collected from the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) was assessed to determine the student marketplace identities of the sample and correlate those identities with overall satisfaction with higher education and satisfaction with academic advising services. Descriptive statistics, including mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation, were calculated in SPSS to define the basic features of the dataset. A Pearson's correlation ( $r$ ) coefficient was also calculated in SPSS to determine the relationship between student marketplace identity and student satisfaction.

Qualitative data collected from the survey and semi-structured focus group interviews provided additional insights and allowed for the identification of the root causes and

environmental factors that influenced student marketplace identity development. Qualitative data was analyzed in MAXQDA and Microsoft Word using emergent, in vivo coding. Once initial codes were identified using the six-step coding analysis process described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the codes were grouped into broader themes.

### **Adjustments to the Study**

Three minor adjustments to the study were implemented based on further analysis of survey response data as well as logistical considerations. Initially, all undergraduate students with an intended or declared major within the School of Business were invited to complete the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). As discussed in Chapter 3, first-year undergraduate business students at the institution are advised by First-Year Advisors rather than academic advisors based in the School of Business. First-Year Advisors teach the university's first-year seminar course to their assigned caseload and serve as their academic advisors. These staff members have a significantly smaller caseload of students overall in comparison to unit-based academic advisors in each school/college. Additionally, students interact with their First-Year Advisor at least twice per week for class in addition to scheduled academic advising appointments. As such, this unique structure and relationship substantively changes the advising experience for students. Although first-year students were initially invited to complete the survey, their responses were removed from the data set so only responses from sophomore through senior students with an academic advisor from within the School of Business were analyzed. Additionally, although first-year student responses were removed from the data set, the vast majority of sophomore through senior students went through the First-Year Advising program. The loss of intensive and highly accessible advising once students were assigned unit-

based advisors in the academic schools/colleges may be a factor in satisfaction with advising. A secondary analysis outside the scope of this action research study could assess first-year student responses in comparison to students who are advised by professional academic advisors within the School of Business. Such a study could also assess the differences between students who worked with a First-Year Advisor and those who immediately began working with an advisor within the School of Business.

Once students completed the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), 12 students were recruited to participate in three semi-structured focus group interviews based on their responses and demographic markers. To aggregate responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), points were assigned to each student response. Students could respond on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Those who responded *strongly disagree* were assigned 1 point per question up to *strongly agree* responses that were assigned 5 points. Therefore, those with a low total value would be considered learners within higher education while those with the highest values would be categorized as customers.

Originally, students who yielded 18-37 points were considered learners, those who received 38-70 points were identified as having a mixed marketplace identity, and those who earned 71-90 points were classified as customers. Among the possible points, the learner category captured students who responded with the lowest 20 points (lowest 27.7% of responses), the customer category included the highest 20 points (highest 27.7% of responses), and the mixed marketplace identity category included the 38 points in between (middle 44.6% of responses). I created these categories to identify students at the poles and define the marketplace identities of student participants. Invitations to the semi-structured focus group interviews were

extended on the basis of marketplace identity categorization. Following this scale, only three student participants could be categorized as learners and no students could be classified as customers. The remaining 73 students were categorized as having a mixed marketplace identity. As such, it was not possible to recruit students from each of the three marketplace identities to participate in the semi-structured focus group interviews based on the original scale created for this study. Instead, students from the poles were recruited to represent the customer and learner identities, respectively, and students near the median of responses were invited to participate in the mixed marketplace identity focus group. The validity of the marketplace identity scale will be discussed later in this chapter.

Although four students were successfully recruited for each of the three focus groups, and all 12 students signed the informed consent agreement, only 10 students ultimately attended the focus group interviews. Three students joined the learner focus group interview, four students participated in the mixed-marketplace identity focus group interview, and three students attended the customer focus group interview. To accommodate participant schedules and aim for maximum participation, one focus group was rescheduled to the following week.

### **Data Collection, Cleaning, and Manipulation**

The combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) was sent via email to 1,005 undergraduate students with an intended or declared major in the School of Business. The survey was opened and partially completed 171 unique times. Prior to analysis, the data were cleaned to remove any incomplete or duplicate responses. Among the 171 attempted responses, one student did not consent to further participation, and 64 students did not complete the survey in its entirety as indicated by blank responses and automated Qualtrics indicator. A total of 106 students

completed the survey; however, 30 completed responses from first-year students were removed due to the unique advising structure at the institution. Ultimately, survey data from 76 undergraduate students from their sophomore through senior years with an intended or declared business major were analyzed. Those student respondents were all advised by professional academic advisors within the School of Business.

The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) asked student respondents the extent to which they agreed with 18 customer-centric higher education statements. Students responded to each of those questions on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. *Strongly disagree* responses were assigned a value of 1 while *strongly agree* responses were assigned a value of 5. The sum of response values was totaled to identify each student's marketplace identity. As such, a low summary value indicated a learner-based marketplace identity, and a high value aligned with a customer-centric marketplace identity. For the purposes of this study, marketplace identities were assigned on the basis of student scores (18-37 as learners, 38-70 as having a mixed marketplace identity, and 71-90 as customers). The learner category identified students who received the lowest 20 total points (lowest 27.7% of responses), and the customer category was comprised of students who answered with the highest 20 points (highest 27.7% of responses). The mixed marketplace identity captured students who scored within those ranges, which was the middle 44.6% of responses). I created these ranges to categorize the marketplace identities of students and inform invitations to the semi-structured focus group interviews.

The amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) asked students about their level of satisfaction with higher education overall as well as with academic advising services. Students responded to each of those questions on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged

from strongly positive to strongly negative. Highly negative responses were assigned a value of 1 while highly positive responses were assigned a value of 5. The sum of response values indicated the students' level of satisfaction. Therefore, a low aggregate value indicated low satisfaction, and a high value indicated a high degree of satisfaction.

Based on their responses to the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), 10 students ultimately participated in one of three semi-structured focus group interviews based on their student marketplace identity category. The focus group interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, and filler words that did not substantively enhance each response were eliminated during transcription and prior to qualitative analysis.

## **Description of the Sample**

### ***Demographic Markers***

Demographic markers including race, ethnicity, citizenship, socioeconomic status, and class year were collected from all survey respondents. These variables were considered during semi-structured focus group interview recruitment to ensure diverse experiences, identities, and perspectives; however, the quantitative analysis did not include an assessment of responses by demographic markers.

Despite some minor variations, the demographics of the sample generally aligns with the School of Business student population and adds validity to the study. To ensure consistent comparison of sophomore through senior undergraduate business students, first-year students were removed from the population dataset. Most significantly, students with United States citizenship were overrepresented in the sample by 18.1% in comparison to the general population, and non-United States citizens were underrepresented by 17.9% within the sample.

Despite minor variations in responses by race, ethnicity, and class year, no demographic group was overrepresented or underrepresented in the sample by more than 10%. A contributing factor for the variation between the sample and population data is missing/unknown demographic data within the institution's database. Notably, the institution's database did not include self-reported socioeconomic status. Table 3 summarizes the demographic frequencies of the sophomore through senior business student population as well as the demographic frequencies from students within the sample. Similarly, Table 4 presents a demographic profile of each of the 10 students who participated in the semi-structured focus group interviews.

**Table 3***School of Business Sophomore-Senior Student Demographics and Sample Demographics*

Demographic Marker	Population		Sample	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Race</b>				
American Indian and Alaska Native	2	0.2%	1	1.3%
Asian	99	12.3%	14	18.4%
Black or African American	66	8.2%	3	3.9%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.1%	1	1.3%
Two or More Races	37	4.6%	7	9.2%
White	468	58.3%	50	65.8%
Unknown	130	16.2%	N/A	N/A
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin	162	20.2%	19	25%
Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin	561	69.9%	57	75%
Unknown	80	10.0%	N/A	N/A
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>				
Upper-class/wealthy	N/A	N/A	10	13.2%
Upper-middle class	N/A	N/A	33	43.4%
Middle class	N/A	N/A	23	30.3%
Lower-middle class	N/A	N/A	7	9.2%
Working poor/poor	N/A	N/A	3	3.9%
<b>Class Year</b>				
Sophomore	268	33.4%	30	39.5%
Junior	274	34.1%	24	31.6%
Senior	261	32.5%	22	28.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>803</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note.*  $N = 803$ .  $n = 76$ . Student population and sample includes sophomore through senior undergraduate business students at the institution under study. Self-reported socioeconomic status data were not included in the institution's database.

**Table 4***Demographic Profile of Semi-Structured Focus Group Participants*

Participant	Race	Ethnicity	Socioeconomic Status	Citizenship	Class Year
Learner 1	Two or More	Not H/L/SO	Middle class	U.S. Citizen	Junior
Learner 2	Asian	Not H/L/SO	Upper-class/wealthy	U.S. Citizen	Sophomore
Learner 3	Asian	Not H/L/SO	Middle class	International	Sophomore
Mixed Marketplace 1	White	Not H/L/SO	Upper-class/wealthy	U.S. Citizen	Sophomore
Mixed Marketplace 2	Asian	Not H/L/SO	Middle class	U.S. Citizen	Sophomore
Mixed Marketplace 3	White	Not H/L/SO	Upper-class/wealthy	U.S. Citizen	Junior
Mixed Marketplace 4	Asian	Not H/L/SO	Lower-middle class	U.S. Citizen	Senior
Customer 1	White	Not H/L/SO	Upper-class/wealthy	U.S. Citizen	Sophomore
Customer 2	Asian	Not H/L/SO	Middle class	U.S. Citizen	Senior
Customer 3	American Indian or Alaska Native	H/L/SO	Middle class	U.S. Citizen	Junior

*Note.*  $n = 10$ . H/L/SO = Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

**Research Question 1**

*To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education?*

The student marketplace identities of participants were measured in two ways connected with responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) section of the instrument disseminated to undergraduate students within the School of Business. A single item on the survey asked students the extent to which they believed themselves to be customers of the institution. Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Further, student responses to each of the 18 items from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were assigned a value and totaled to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student marketplace identities.

### ***Responses to Single Customer Orientation Scale Question***

One of the 18 questions on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) asked students to share their level of agreement with the following statement: “Concerning the institution, I think of myself primarily as a customer of the university.” This question was direct and allowed for an analysis of whether students responded positively, negatively, or neutrally to the customer identity. Among the 76 students who completed the survey, 42 participants (55.3% of respondents) strongly agreed or agreed that they viewed themselves primarily as customers of the institution. A total of 19 students (25%) responded neutrally to the statement, and 15 students (19.7%) strongly disagreed or disagreed. With more than half of students directly identifying as customers to some extent, this indicated a positive association with this marketplace identity label.

Descriptive statistics for responses to the single item as part of the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were calculated in SPSS. Table 5 details the mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation of the data, and Figure 8 illustrates the frequency or distribution of responses as a histogram.

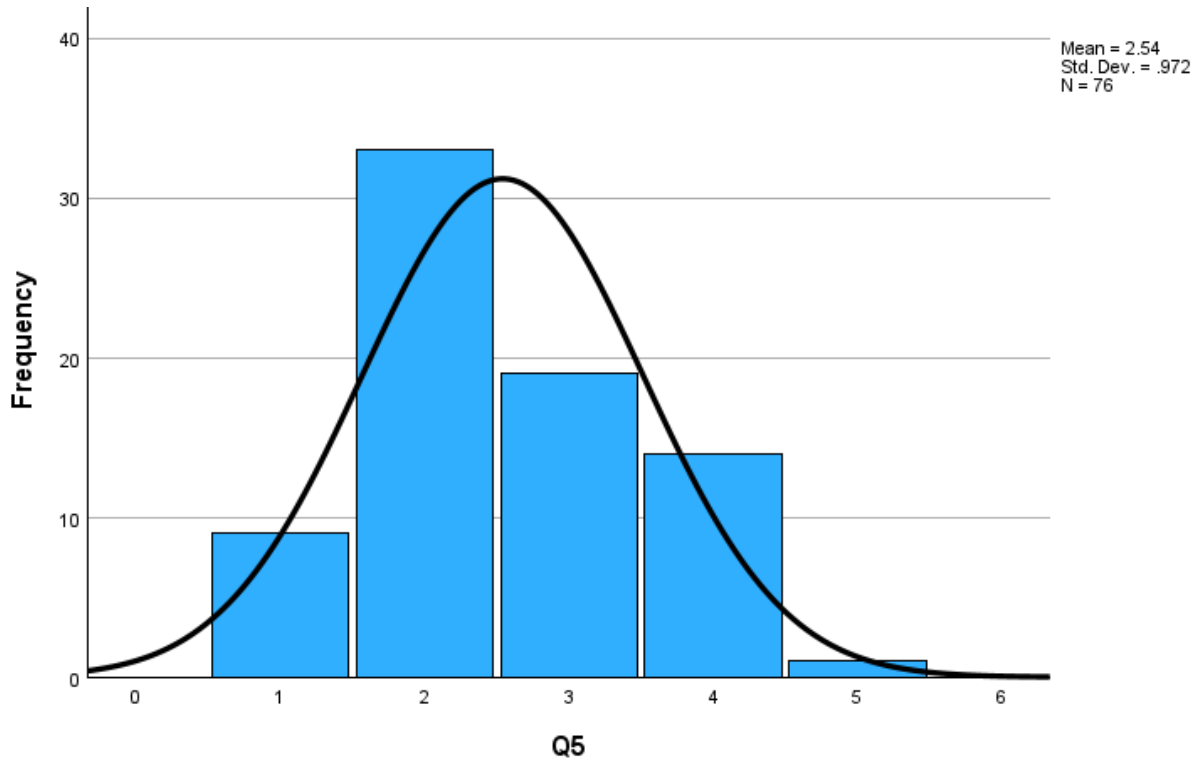
**Table 5**

*Descriptive Statistics—Student Marketplace Identity—Single Item*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
2.54	2.00	4	.945	.972

**Figure 8**

*Histogram—Student Marketplace Identity—Single Item*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . Histogram illustrates the distribution of responses to a single question on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) that asked students about their level of agreement with the statement that they are a customer of the institution.

### ***Aggregate of Customer Orientation Scale Responses***

While the single survey item allowed students to directly identify their agreement with the customer marketplace identity, it could not have captured the nuances and complexities of student marketplace beliefs and identities. For example, a subset of students may not have openly identified themselves as customers of their institution or believed themselves to be customers but still exhibited customer-like behaviors and expectations. As such, the sum of all 18 items on this section of the survey was assessed to determine student marketplace identities of students within the sample. I calculated a McDonald's omega in SPSS to estimate the reliability of the Customer

Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b). The McDonald’s omega coefficient of .815 proves a high degree of instrument reliability and confirms the worth of the instrument as a correlate.

The aggregate of responses to all 18 items on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) yield a broader, and potentially more valid, range of responses. As visualized in Figure 7, I designed student marketplace categorization parameters to classify student marketplace identities and extended invitations to the respective semi-structured focus group interviews. Based on this scale, three student participants accumulated between 18-37 points (lowest 20 points or lowest 27.7% of possible cumulative responses) and were defined as learners. A total of 73 students scored between 38-70 points (middle 38 points or middle 44.6% of possible cumulative responses) and were categorized as having a mixed marketplace identity. No students accumulated between 71-90 points (highest 20 points or highest 27.7% of possible cumulative responses), and as such, no students were classified as customers. These results indicated that either students possess more nuanced and balanced marketplace identity beliefs and/or the scale created as part of this study was not valid for categorization.

Descriptive statistics for responses for the aggregate of responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were calculated in SPSS. Table 6 confirms the mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation of the dataset, and Figure 9 is a histogram that highlights distribution of responses.

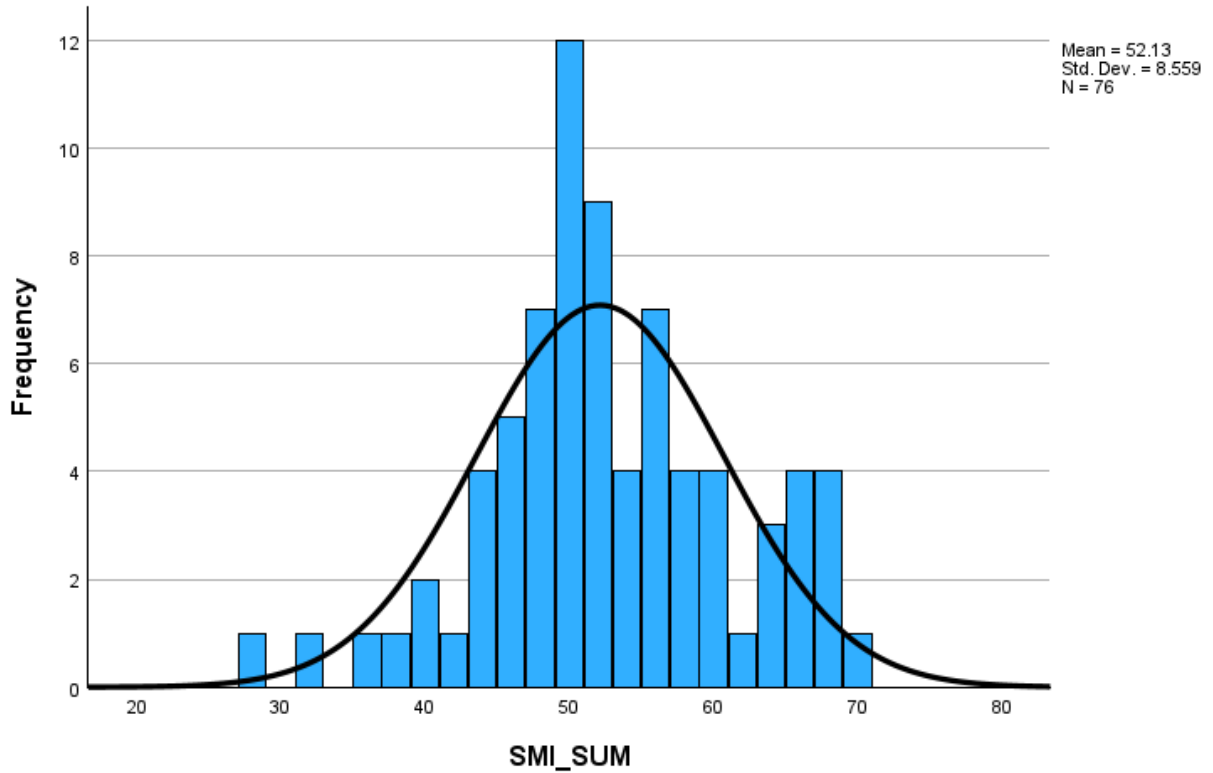
**Table 6**

*Descriptive Statistics—Student Marketplace Identity—Aggregate of Responses*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
52.13	51.00	41	73.262	8.559

**Figure 9**

*Histogram—Student Marketplace Identity—Aggregate of Responses*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . Histogram illustrates the aggregate of responses to all 18 items questions on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b).

Based on their responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), students could have earned a cumulative score between 18-90 points. A hypothetical median for this scale was 54 and the hypothetical range of responses was 72. Descriptive statistics for the data were calculated and revealed a median of 51, mean of 52, and range of 41. These results indicated more moderate perspectives that aligned with a mixed marketplace identity. In contrast to the 55.3% of students who believed themselves to be customers based on a single question, respondents did not align entirely with customer-like beliefs or perspectives based on the sum of

their responses. Further research is needed to assess the accuracy and validity of the marketplace identity categorization scale particularly for learner and customer responses closer to the poles. That is, at what point can a student's marketplace identity move from mixed marketplace identity to customer, learner to mixed marketplace identity, and so forth?

## **Research Question 2**

*What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities?*

For the purposes of this study, root causes that influence and shape student marketplace identities are distinct from environmental factors. Root causes were the experiences and beliefs students possessed prior to or immediately upon enrollment in higher education that influenced student marketplace identity development (i.e., family attitudes and experiences connected to education, media consumption, and political affiliation) while environmental factors were the ongoing experiences during enrollment in higher education that influenced student marketplace identity development (e.g., tuition cost, personal debt level, personal knowledge of higher education systems and structure, and initial degrees of satisfaction). This study posited that student marketplace identities correlated with students' expectations of higher education, and the extent to which those expectations matched their experiences affected overall satisfaction and academic advising satisfaction. To assess how those expectations were determined, student participants were asked two questions during each of the three semi-structured focus group interviews. Although all relevant student responses during the semi-structured interviews were assessed to answer this research question, the specific focus group interview questions were:

1. What beliefs or experiences shaped your expectations of higher education overall?
2. What beliefs or experiences shaped your student support expectations at the university?

### ***Root Causes and Environmental Factors—Higher Education Expectations***

**Immediate Family.** Throughout the three focus group interviews, nine of the 10 student participants referenced immediate family interactions as having influenced their expectations of higher education. While the specific family members and context varied, the influence of immediate family emerged as the most prevalent root cause of student marketplace identity development.

**Parents and Grandparents.** Seven of the 10 focus group participants mentioned that their expectations of higher education overall were shaped in some part by their parents or grandparents. Interestingly, some students discussed the influence of parents or grandparents in their decision (or lack thereof) to attend a higher education institution, what it should entail, and expected outcomes. Others shared how those family members influenced the major(s) or minor(s) they decided to pursue. Examples of student quotes related to this theme included:

- “Both of my parents have received degrees and they both encouraged/kind of required me to go pursue higher education after my high school. It was for the same reasons that you were looking for, [name of other participant], in that they wanted me to get a job that was paying higher than if I didn't go to college.”
- “I think... how I was raised and expectations of going on to obtain a higher education degree, especially between grandparents and parents, really shaped my view of higher education and how it serves me.”
- “The international business aspect of my second degree came from pressure from my parents. So, not only was going to college not really not an option, but it was... my mother and father both did double majors, and so that was the expectation was for me to do a double major.”

- “And then also... I had two older sisters [and] they both went to [local, large public institution]. And I guess my mom was familiar with the education system over there with a state school and 40,000 students. I think with me, she kind of thought that [current institution] would be better because it’s more closely knit and everything.”

**Siblings.** The brothers and/or sisters of the student participants also helped to shape their expectations of higher education at-large. Five of the student participants either watched the higher education experiences of their siblings or participated in them to some extent. Overall, these experiences served as points of comparison that allowed student participants to form their own beliefs and expectations. Three quotes from these students highlight the influence of siblings:

- “Going to my brother's [campus] tour, they said that... this one girl, she was happy that the smallest class size she had was 75, and I was like, ‘What?!’”
- “I had an older sister, and when she was going through the college process, I was helping her. I think my expectations/beliefs were not only from what my parents said, but having my sister two years ahead of me was pretty important in what my beliefs and expectations were.”
- “I also have an older sister, and she attended university, but her path was not as linear as mine in the way that she had attended a college for two years and then decided to transfer to our state college for her remaining two years. Her credit transfer affected her ability to graduate on time, so she had to take another year of academics to graduate. So during that time, I was in middle school and high school, and I saw her path and that, in a way, built my belief for college.”

**High School.** While nearly all the student participants discussed their high school experience in some form throughout the focus group interviews, three of the 10 participants referenced their high school experiences as having directly contributed to their views and expectations of higher education. In these cases, high school served as an educational comparative baseline to what students desired and expected moving forward. The following quotations highlight this theme:

- “And then just from my general expectations from going through all of high school and what I wanted to have by the time that I was done with college after going through high school.”
- “Yeah, there was something that I didn't mention which is to the degree that I went to a public high school. I went to public schooling all throughout my education, so there wasn't a whole lot that I could expect from quality because I knew that... I knew what my expectations had to be. I expected better professors or teachers, better resources, a better library, better access to databases, better networking opportunities. Something that I couldn't expect from public education.”
- “[High school] had a huge impact on shaping me into who I am today and shaping... kind of funneling me towards [current institution] because the political ideologies of the Quakers and [current institution] are very aligned, and so it was a natural feeder school from [high school].”

**Sociocultural Environment and Assumptions.** Throughout the focus group interviews, three student participants discussed root causes and environmental factors that influenced their expectations of higher education based on their sociocultural environment and associated assumptions therein. Rather than their beliefs or expectations having been shaped by a direct

source or experience (e.g., family member, campus tour, or making their first tuition payment), this theme emerged based on their deep-rooted cultural and social assumptions. Some of these ideas and concepts may have been confirmed or repeated by individuals in personal and educational circles, and students described these expectations as accepted truths. This theme was drawn out from an interpretation of student responses. Examples of these comments include:

- “I ultimately did undecided for [current institution], but my belief was that at least attending college and getting a degree would jumpstart my career.”
- “So, what I thought going to college and getting a degree would get me is basically a professional job, a job that, you know, could make me become a manager or an executive in that kind of sense.”
- “Because in Chinese society, everyone should be college students or something. In Generation Z, we must be a college student, or you will not get a good job or you cannot afford your life like that.”
- “Yeah, just to add on to that, it's also like a social norm for you to now have a college degree.”

These comments may be rooted in personal experience; however, students did not isolate from where or how these ideas came to be.

### ***Root Causes and Environmental Factors—Student Support Expectations***

During the semi-structured focus group interviews, student participants were asked to describe the beliefs or experiences that shaped their expectations of student support at the university. While students shared ideas that overlapped with higher education expectations, some unique themes emerged that were specific to student support. Notably, students were not

provided with a formal definition of student support, although a student in the customer focus group asked for clarification.

**High School.** Comparable to their expectations of higher education overall, seven of the 10 student participants referenced their high school experiences as having helped shape their expectations of student support. Again, both positive and negative high school experiences served as a mechanism for students to determine the availability and level of student support at their institution. Some direct questions from students that highlighted the impact of high school experiences on higher education student support expectations include:

- “Yeah, I guess same as [Student 4] and [Student 1], my beliefs kind of were shaped from my high school. So, in my high school, I had the same academic advisor for my four years, but I don't think they were really close to me. I don't think they really helped me navigate what I wanted to do after high school. I think it was more like, “How are you doing currently? How are you doing your freshman year, your sophomore year, your junior year?” It wasn't like, ‘Oh, what do you plan to do with your high school diploma? What do you want to do after?’ So, that kind of shades my belief going into university.”
- “Yes, for me in my high school, the student support...I don't know how to say that, but like they are in a higher level different from other students.”
- “So it feels for me... the experiences that kind of shaped my student support expectations at the university were coming from a much smaller place. ... So not only are you following friends, but also your advisor throughout. ... And so I came to [current institution] expecting to have one advisor that I was going to be able to build

a really rich relationship with and say, ‘Hi, yes, this is what I want to do with my life. This is how I want to achieve it. How can you help me achieve it at the university?’”

- “Like [Student 3], I went to the big high school. We had four counselors for 2,000 students and so I just was always... I came into college with the expectation that I would be doing it most of it myself anyway.”

In nearly all instances, students began discussing their high school experiences and then moved into how they aligned or did not align with their experience at the institution.

**Experiences at/With the Institution.** A second primary theme that emerged from the qualitative data was the influence of direct experiences with the institution, both prior to and concurrent with their enrollment. During their own college search process or alongside the search of a family member, five unique students within the focus group referenced a direct engagement with the institution as having influenced their expectations of student support services.

**Campus Tours.** Three of the 10 students cited campus tours as having had a direct impact on their expectations of student support at the institution. Notably, two of these examples came from the question related to expectations of higher education overall; two students immediately discussed student support as a critical element of their overall higher education expectations.

Their responses were as follows:

- “I would say one of the big things for me was going on... I went on a lot of college tours because I went on all of my college tours and then I went on all of mine with my brother who probably toured about 10 different schools in a short period of time. And I guess I started noticing that there were a lot of things that they all said in common and what I looked for was kind of that differentiating factor between them.”

- “since my brother is recently graduating, and we're looking around schools comparing the tours with [current institution] and [local, large public institution], I see the amount of resources we have here in the community.”

**Online Content.** Three students noted during the college search process, they came across YouTube videos that influenced their expectations of student support. These videos seemed to be published by students at their institution, but it was unclear whether the student was blogging on their own accord, or they were posting regularly on behalf of the university or a university office, such as the Office of Admissions. Quotes from the focus groups highlight the influence of online content during the search process:

- “Yeah, I guess YouTube would be also another factor. I remember watching one... I don't think if it's right to call them an influencer: [student name]. I remember my [School of Communications] professor was talking about her one time. And he was like, ‘Ah! Did everyone see her blog when you first came to [current institution]?’”
- “I watched videos... a couple like daily vlogs of students that went here. But they weren't really centered around as much... the student support that was being brought up wasn't academic at all. It was more so like, ‘You have an RA, they aren't going to be super-duper focused on you...’ It was more so... it was explaining to me that... things I was expecting to be... I was expecting to be overly watched or that I would have less freedom because there would be *a lot* of student support, and it just mainly told me that there wouldn't be in a good way.”

**Campus Engagement.** Two students identified that their expectations developed or changed because of their engagement on campus. The following quotes highlight the importance

and power of student engagement on campus, and how student expectations can be changed as a result of positive experiences:

- “I think it started when I started going to [current institution]. Before that, I didn't really have high expectations of student support mainly because I didn't really think I would use student support systems. But I realized how integral advising and career coaching and even some of the personal ones are to your success in college.”
- “I feel like the expectations that I just talked about in terms of students supporting students definitely comes from a lot of the organizations I'm involved with on campus. Like, I'm part of business clubs which help students come together, and in that way, it's kind of like a give and take.”

**Immediate Family.** Immediate family influenced beliefs and expectations of student support, albeit to a lesser extent than the formation of overall higher education expectations. Two students discussed the experiences and knowledge of their family members and how it shaped their beliefs. Quotes from the students to highlight this theme include the following:

- “I guess what helped shape my idea of student support would probably be my Mom. She went to school at a private university, [large, private institution in the South], so she told me that a private institution they would give you more support. And my dad, he went to a [a large, public institution in the West], so he would say, ‘Yeah, the private is probably better. It's more resources for you.’”
- I think with me, [my Mom] kind of thought that [current institution] would be better because it's more closely knit and everything. So that's like one of the main selling points that she told for me, at least, was when selecting either [current institution] or

[local, large public institution] was that I get more attention... and ... close advisor help, as well.”

- “And then also since I had two older sisters that they both went to at [local, large public institution].”

### **Research Question 3**

*How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution?*

This research question was answered by a quantitative analysis of student responses to the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). The Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) was composed of 18 items that asked students the extent to which they agreed with customer-centric questions using a 5-point Likert scale. One of the questions directly asked students the extent to which they believed themselves to be customers of their institution. Both the single item and aggregate of identity items were used to define student marketplace identities (SMI) and for statistical analysis. The amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) asked students about their level of satisfaction with higher education overall as well as with academic advising services. Students responded to each of those questions on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly positive to strongly negative. Highly negative responses were assigned a value of 1 while highly positive responses were assigned a value of 5. The sum of response values indicated the students' level of satisfaction. Therefore, a low aggregate value indicated low satisfaction, and a high value indicated a high degree of satisfaction.

Prior to explication of the correlational analysis, descriptive statistics for the overall student satisfaction data must be reviewed to contextualize the results.

***Descriptive Statistics – Single Overall Student Satisfaction Item***

Descriptive statistics for responses to the question on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to rate their overall level of satisfaction were calculated in SPSS. Table 7 presents the mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation of the dataset, and Figure 10 is a histogram that illustrates the distribution of responses.

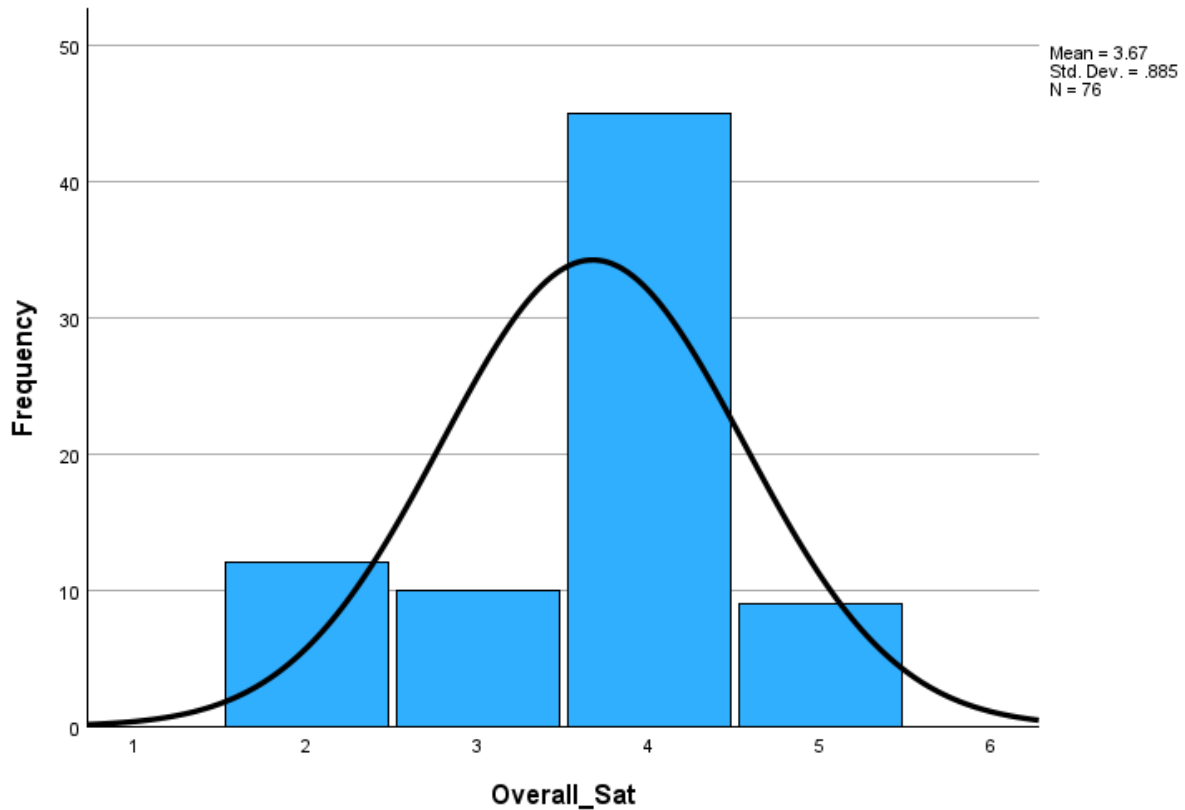
**Table 7**

*Descriptive Statistics—Single Overall Satisfaction Item*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
3.67	4.00	3	.784	.885

**Figure 10**

*Histogram—Single Overall Student Satisfaction Item*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . Histogram illustrates the distribution of responses to the single question on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to rate their level of overall satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *extremely dissatisfied* (1) to *extremely satisfied* (5).

***Descriptive Statistics—Aggregate of Overall Student Satisfaction Items***

Descriptive statistics for aggregate of responses to three questions from the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to rate their overall level of satisfaction were calculated in SPSS. Table 8 identifies the mean, median, range,

variance, and standard deviation of the dataset, and Figure 11 illustrates the distribution of responses via a histogram.

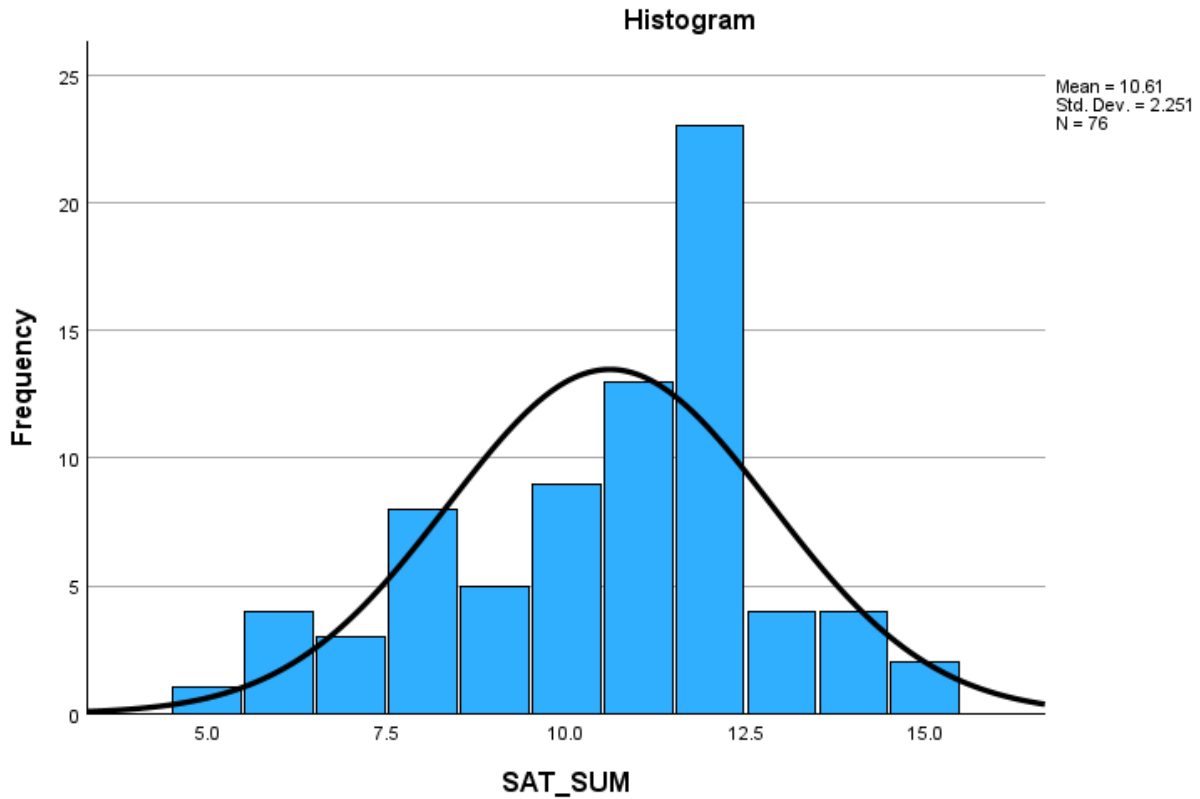
**Table 8**

*Descriptive Statistics—Aggregate of Overall Student Satisfaction Items*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
10.61	11.00	10	5.069	5.069

**Figure 11**

*Histogram—Aggregate of Overall Student Satisfaction Items*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . Histogram shares the aggregate of responses to three questions on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to describe their level of overall satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale.

Overall, the descriptive statistics for both the single item and aggregate items suggest that students within the sample are more satisfied than not with their overall experiences at the institution.

***Correlation Analysis—Single SMI Response and Single Overall Satisfaction Response***

A Pearson's  $r$  measured the relationship between student marketplace identity based on the single Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) question and overall student satisfaction. The Pearson's  $r$  between student marketplace identity and overall student

satisfaction ( $r [n = 76] = -.08, p = .46$ ) was not significant, indicating a lack of relationship between the variables. A relationship between the two variables would only be evident if the correlation coefficient approached 1 or -1. Quantitative analysis demonstrated a statistically insignificant correlation between student marketplace identity (single item) and overall student satisfaction.

A possible explanation for this result is related to the descriptive statistics of this research question. Both the single customer orientation scale question and single satisfaction question have limited variability, as demonstrated by the standard deviations. Due to the low variability of these data, the potential for correlation was reduced.

#### ***Correlation Analysis—Single SMI Response and Aggregate of Overall Satisfaction Responses***

A Pearson's  $r$  was calculated to determine the relationship between a single marketplace identity question and the aggregate of three overall student satisfaction responses with the sample. The Pearson's  $r$  between student marketplace identity and aggregate of overall student satisfaction responses ( $r [n = 76] = -.01, p = .92$ ) was not significant indicating a lack of relationship between the variables. Quantitative analysis demonstrated a statistically insignificant relationship between student marketplace identity (single item) and aggregate of overall student satisfaction responses.

#### ***Correlation Analysis—Aggregate of SMI Responses and Single Overall Satisfaction Response***

A Pearson's  $r$  was calculated in SPSS to examine the correlation between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) question and a single overall student satisfaction response. The Pearson's  $r$  between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and a single overall satisfaction response ( $r [n = 76] = .13, p = .26$ ) was not significant, very weak, and confirmed there was no

substantial relationship between the variables. Again, given the limited variability of the overall satisfaction responses, the potential for correlation was weak.

### ***Correlation Analysis—Aggregate of SMI Responses and Aggregate of Overall Satisfaction Responses***

A fourth and final Pearson's  $r$  was run in SPSS to answer this research question. The aggregate of SMI responses and aggregate of overall satisfaction responses were analyzed to understand the relationship between these composite variables. The Pearson's  $r$  analysis ( $r [n = 76] = .23, p = .04$ ) confirmed a statistically significant relationship between the variables. Despite this result, a weak positive correlation between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and overall student satisfaction responses confirmed there was no strong pattern to confirm higher levels of satisfaction by either learners or customers.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

To add depth to the quantitative analysis, thematic analysis was conducted for responses to three questions from the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). For students who responded negatively to the primary question related to overall satisfaction at the institution, they were asked to discuss when their dissatisfaction began in the form of open-ended questions. Those questions were as follows:

1. Until what point has this university corresponded to your expectations?
2. Until what point has this university corresponded to your needs?
3. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to attend this university?

Student responses to the aforementioned questions varied widely. While some students pointed to a specific point in time without any context, others used this open-ended response as an

opportunity to detail their frustrations with administrators, education experience, social and political environment, campus infrastructure, and more. Despite these inconsistencies, eight of the 37 students who responded negatively to at least one of the three primary questions stated their dissatisfaction began in their first year or sophomore year. Four students stated they were never satisfied. Otherwise, no significant codes or themes emerged to further illuminate the quantitative results.

### **Summary**

Based on the sample data, only one of the four quantitative analyses yielded a statistically significant result. Overall, there is no statistical evidence to confirm a meaningful correlation between student marketplace identity and overall student satisfaction. Qualitative analysis of open-ended student responses did not yield codes or themes that provided further insight on overall student satisfaction, although just under one-third of respondents were either never satisfied or became dissatisfied early in their educational tenure related to their expectations, needs, and decision to attend the institution. In short, those with a learner marketplace identity were no more satisfied with their higher education experience than customers, and vice versa. Further discussion and analysis will follow in Chapter 5.

### **Research Question 4**

*How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services?*

This research question was answered by a quantitative analysis of student responses to the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009). Like the last research question, both a single item from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) as well as the aggregate of each

student’s responses were analyzed. The second half of the Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) asked students six primary questions related to their satisfaction with academic advising services. One question directly asked students to rate their level of satisfaction, and those responses were the focus of this research question. For students who expressed dissatisfaction with academic advising services on the Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), three secondary open-ended questions asked them to describe the point at which their dissatisfaction began. Descriptive statistics for the academic advising satisfaction data will be reviewed prior to explanation of the correlation analysis results.

***Descriptive Statistics—Single Advising Satisfaction Item***

Descriptive statistics for responses to the single question on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to rate their level of satisfaction with academic advising services were calculated in SPSS. Table 9 confirms the mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation of the dataset, and Figure 12 is a histogram that highlights distribution of responses.

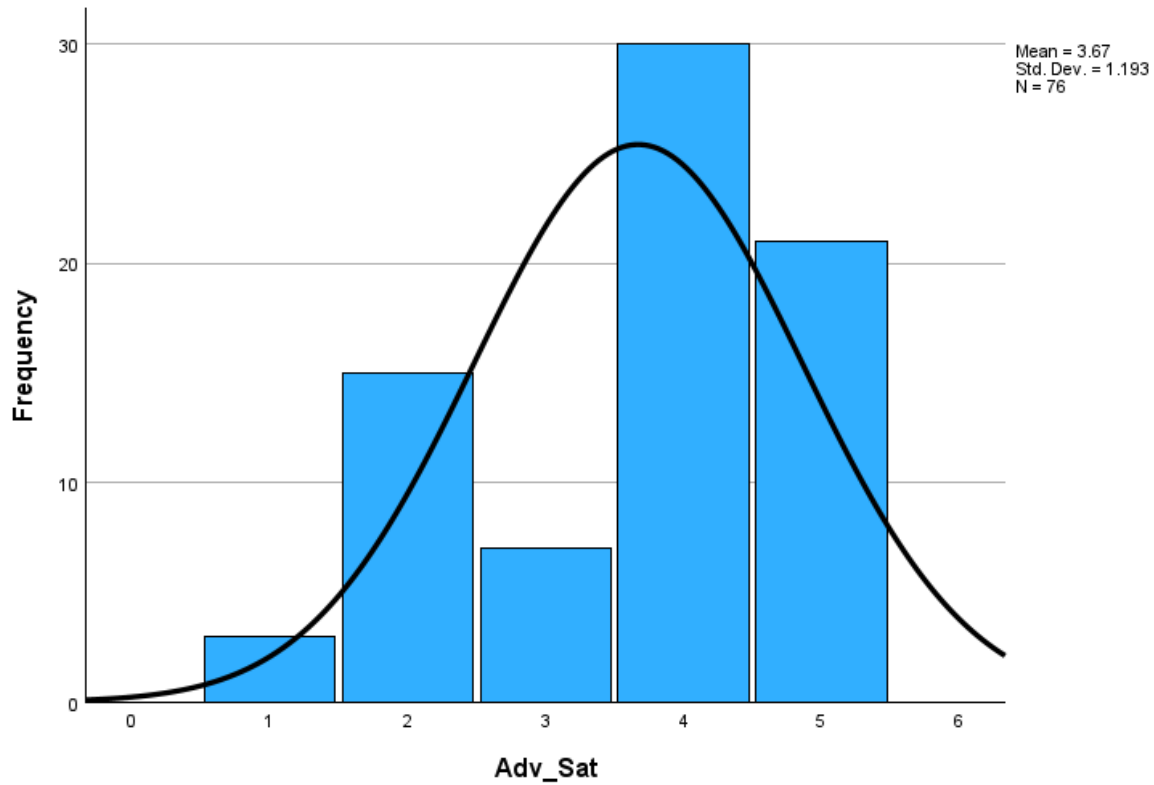
**Table 9**

*Descriptive Statistics—Single Academic Advising Satisfaction Item*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
3.67	4.00	4	1.193	1.424

**Figure 12**

*Histogram—Single Academic Advising Satisfaction Item*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . Histogram illustrates the distribution of responses to a single question on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to rate their level of satisfaction with academic advising services on a 5-point Likert scale.

***Descriptive Statistics—Aggregate of Advising Satisfaction Items***

Descriptive statistics for responses to the three advising-specific questions from Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) were run in SPSS. Table 10 confirms the mean, median, range, variance, and standard deviation of the dataset, and Figure 13 illustrates the distribution of responses with a histogram.

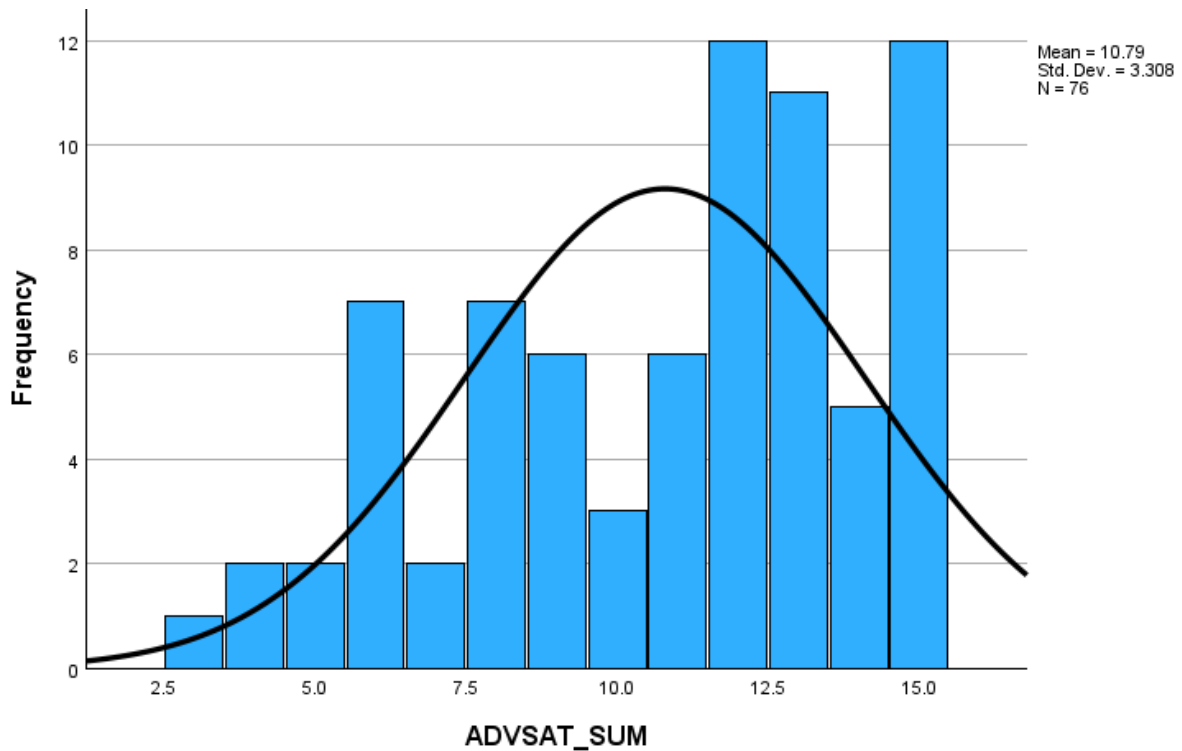
**Table 10**

*Descriptive Statistics—Aggregate of Advising Satisfaction Items*

<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range	<i>s</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>SD</i>
10.79	12.00	12	10.942	3.308

**Figure 13**

*Histogram—Aggregate of Academic Advising Satisfaction Items*



*Note.*  $n = 76$ . This histogram shares the aggregate of responses to three questions on the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) that asked students to describe their level of satisfaction with academic advising services on a 5-point Likert scale.

The descriptive statistics confirmed that levels of satisfaction with academic advising were similar to those with overall satisfaction with higher education. The aggregate data

demonstrated students were slightly more satisfied with academic advising services than with their overall experiences at the institution.

***Correlation Analysis—Single SMI Response and Single Advising Satisfaction Response***

A Pearson's  $r$  was calculated in SPSS to examine the relationship between student marketplace identity and student satisfaction with academic advising based on single questions from the respective surveys. The Pearson's  $r$  between these variables ( $r [n = 76] = -.08, p = .46$ ) was not significant and indicated a lack of relationship. Qualitative analysis demonstrated a weak negative correlation between student marketplace identity and satisfaction with academic advising. Like the results from Research Question 3, the low variability of both the single customer orientation scale question and single academic advising satisfaction question limits the potential for a correlation.

***Correlation Analysis—Single SMI Response and Aggregate of Advising Satisfaction Responses***

Another Pearson's  $r$  was run to explore the relationship between student marketplace identity from the single Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) question and the aggregate of responses to three questions specific to advising satisfaction. The Pearson's  $r$  between these items ( $r [n = 76] = -.08, p = .44$ ) was not significant and indicated a weak negative correlation between the variables.

***Correlation Analysis—Aggregate of SMI Responses and Single Advising Satisfaction Response***

A Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficient was calculated to define the relationship between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and satisfaction with academic advising services. The analysis again demonstrated a statistically insignificant relationship between student marketplace identity (aggregate of responses) and single responses to satisfaction with

academic advising services. Despite higher variability of the aggregate of SMI responses (see Table 6 and Figure 9), the results ( $r [n = 76] = -.06, p = .55$ ) demonstrated a lack of statistical significance. As such, it is possible these results could have occurred due to chance. A Pearson's  $r$  value of  $-.069$  demonstrated a very weak negative correlation between these two variables. As discussed throughout this chapter, low variability satisfaction responses limited the potential to confirm a correlation.

### ***Correlation Analysis—Aggregate of SMI Responses and Aggregate of Advising Satisfaction Responses***

A final Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficient determined the relationship between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and aggregate of advising satisfaction responses. The Pearson's  $r$  analysis ( $r [n = 76] = -.10, p = .39$ ) for these two variables again confirmed a statistically insignificant result.

Data from the students confirmed there is no significant or consequential relationship between student marketplace identity and student satisfaction with academic advising services within the School of Business at the institution under study. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of these results in greater detail.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Responses to three questions from the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) specific to satisfaction with academic advising services were analyzed. Students who expressed dissatisfaction with academic advising were asked to detail when their expectations were no longer being met. Responses to the following questions were reviewed for analysis:

1. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your expectations?
2. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your needs?
3. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?

Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses provided insight into student dissatisfaction. Among the 31 students who expressed dissatisfaction to one of the three primary questions noted above, 22 students cited the ineffectiveness or unhelpfulness of academic advising within the School of Business. Two comments highlighted this cross-cutting sentiment:

- “From the very beginning, I had been told different things and it ultimately led to me now having to graduate a semester later based on them not looking at my prior transcript and what courses transferred over.”
- “I set up my own schedule and four-year plan. Had I listened to what one of my advisors had said, I would have had to take an extra semester. I also don't have an assigned advisor. I'm supposed to send all of my emails to a general advising email address, which may be helpful if someone else is better equipped to answer my question than an assigned advisor would've been, but I think it would've been nice to have an advisor who specialized in working with my specific major who I could build a relationship with that I was more comfortable with so asking my questions wouldn't seem like such a burden.”

Three students wrote that they have never been satisfied with School of Business academic advising but did not include any justification. Three additional students cited issues related to

jobs and internships as the source of their dissatisfaction; however, another office within the School of Business directly supports students on those matters. While these themes do not directly connect student marketplace identity and satisfaction with academic advising, they provide insight as to the sources of student frustration.

### Summary of Correlation Analyses

The correlation analyses between student marketplace identity, overall satisfaction, and satisfaction with academic advising services presented in this chapter are summarized in Table 11.

**Table 11**

*Summary of Correlation Analyses*

Student Satisfaction Responses	Single SMI Response	Aggregate of SMI Responses
Single Overall Satisfaction Response	$r = -.08, p = .46$	$r = .13, p = .26$
Aggregate Overall Satisfaction Responses	$r = -.01, p = .92$	$r = .23, p = .04^*$
Single Advising Satisfaction Response	$r = -.08, p = .46$	$r = -.06, p = .55$
Aggregate Advising Satisfaction Responses	$r = -.08, p = .44$	$r = -.10, p = .39$

*Notes.*  $n = 76$ . *SMI = Student marketplace identity.* The only statistically significant result was the correlation between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and aggregate of overall satisfaction responses. A weak positive correlation was found. Otherwise, there is no relationship between student marketplace identity and satisfaction.

### Summary of Findings

I sought to understand the extent to which students identified on a continuum from learners within higher education to customers of higher education. Additionally, my aim was to understand the relationship between student marketplace identity and overall satisfaction at the institution as well as satisfaction with academic advising services.

I sent an online survey to all 1,005 undergraduate students within the School of Business at the institution under study. In part, this survey contained the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), which asked students to express their level of agreement with 18 customer-centric statements. First, a single item that asked students directly about their marketplace identity. Among the 76 sophomores through seniors who participated, 42 students (55.3% of respondents) strongly agreed or agreed that they viewed themselves primarily as a customer of the institution, 19 students (25%) responded neutrally to the statement, and 15 students (19.7%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that they viewed themselves primarily as customers.

To aggregate responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b), points were assigned to each student response. Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. *Strongly disagree* responses were assigned 1 point per question up to *strongly agree* responses that resulted in assignment of 5 points. A low student marketplace identity value resulted in a categorization of learners while those who accumulated the highest values were characterized as customers. Surprisingly, based on the segmentation of the three marketplace identities (learner, mixed marketplace identity, and customer) from the student marketplace place categorization scale illustrated in Figure 7, the results were as follows: three students were categorized as learners, 73 students were categorized as having a mixed marketplace identity, and zero students were classified as customers. These results suggested that students are more comfortable defining themselves as customers but may not agree with all customer-centric ideas and expectations as it pertains to their education.

To understand the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identities, 10 students participated in one of three semi-structured focus group

interviews. While these interviews were segmented into marketplace identity groupings, those identities were not considered for the purpose of answering the second research question. Several themes emerged when students were asked how their expectations of higher education came to be and from where they were formed. Nine of the 10 participants referenced their immediate family as having helped them shape their expectations of higher education. Among those responses, seven of the 10 participants named their parents and five of the 10 discussed their siblings. Next, three of the 10 students confirmed their high school experiences shaped their expectations, and lastly, three students indirectly shared that their sociocultural environment contributed to their beliefs.

Regarding student support, five of the 10 students referenced high school as having influenced their expectations. Five of the 10 students also discussed their interactions with the institution as contributing factors. Within that theme, three students specifically named campus tours, three students discussed online content published by the institution or affiliated students, and two shared that campus engagement influenced their expectations of student support. Lastly, two students identified conversations with family as the source of their expectations.

The last two research questions asked how student marketplace identities correlate with overall satisfaction in higher education as well as satisfaction with academic advising services. To answer these questions, I analyzed response data from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) using a Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficient in SPSS. To determine the relationship between these dimensions, a single item and aggregate of items from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were analyzed against a single and aggregate of satisfaction items indicative of satisfaction. In seven of the eight Pearson's  $r$  calculations, there were no statistically

significant responses and weak correlations between the variables. The only statistically significant result was the correlation between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and aggregate of overall satisfaction responses, in which a weak positive correlation was found. Overall, the culmination of these results reveals no meaningful relationship between student marketplace identity and satisfaction with higher education or satisfaction with academic advising. Themes from open-ended responses provided additional information as to when students became discontented and the sources of their frustration with academic advising services within the School of Business.

In Chapter 5, a discussion of the findings from this study will examine how the results of this study align with or vary from prior literature and add to the body of research. The finding that there is no statistically significant relationship between student marketplace identity and overall satisfaction or satisfaction with academic advising is surprising given the anecdotal experiences of professional academic advisors within the School of Business at the institution under study. The implications for policy, theory, and practice, including how institutional leaders and administrators within the School of Business may use these results to inform changes to student onboarding, campus service offerings, recruitment tactics, and more are examined further. Opportunities for future research are also proposed.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In part due to financial strains, concerns over the value of a college degree, and demographic changes in the United States, higher education institutions must prioritize student recruitment and retention. To achieve their minimum fiscal goals, institutions increasingly view and treat students as customers (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Emery et al., 2001; Guilbault, 2016; Mark, 2013; Mulnix, 1990). While designed to support student satisfaction and continuous enrollment, this approach can result in behaviors and beliefs that contradict the historical aims of higher education. For example, students with a strong customer mindset may demand logistical problems be solved by professional staff, openly complain about policies or requirements, or expect higher grades than the ones earned (Brule, 2004; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Finney & Finney, 2010; Titus, 2008).

The purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to explore the extent to which undergraduate business students at a private, urban, mid-Atlantic institution identified themselves on a continuum from learners within to customers of higher education (i.e., student marketplace identity) and how those perceptions correlated to overall satisfaction at the institution and satisfaction with academic advising services. I also aimed to understand the root causes and environmental factors that influenced student marketplace identity development. This chapter includes a summary and comprehensive discussion of the findings, recommendations for policy and practice, and opportunities for future research in the field of student marketplace identity implications.

## Summary of Major Findings

### *Research Question 1*

Research Question 1 asked: To what extent do undergraduate business students characterize their student marketplace identities on a continuum from traditional learner within higher education to customer of higher education? To answer this question, student participants completed the 18-question Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b). As part of the survey, students were asked to share their level of agreement with various customer-centric statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. One question directly asked: “Concerning the institution, I think of myself primarily as a customer of the university.” Among the 76 sophomore through senior undergraduate business students who completed the instrument, 42 respondents (55.3%) strongly agreed or agreed that they viewed themselves primarily as customers of the institution based on their responses to the single item. Only 19 students (25%) responded neutrally, and 15 students (19.7%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement.

The aggregation of all 18 items from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) allowed me to categorize student marketplace identities into three distinct categories: learner, mixed marketplace identity, and customer. Figure 7 illustrates the marketplace identity scale created as part of this study. When totaled, students who answered within the 20 lowest possible points were classified as learners, those who fell within the highest 20 possible points were categorized as customers, and those with a total value in between those poles were labeled as having a mixed marketplace identity. Based on this scale, only three student participants were defined as learners and zero students were considered customers. As such, the remaining 73 students were defined as having a mixed marketplace identity. These results suggested that

students are attracted to the concept and title of customer but may not agree with all the term entails. Further, the categorization scale created for this study may not be accurate for marketplace identity classification. Despite this concern, student respondents displayed moderate and nuanced marketplace identity beliefs most closely aligned with the mixed marketplace identity marker. Additional investigation of the data may confirm the topics or areas to which students held customer-like beliefs.

### ***Research Question 2***

Research Question 2 asked: What root causes and environmental factors influence student marketplace identities? Among the 76 students who completed the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009), 10 students participated in one of three semi-structured focus group interviews based on their student marketplace identity. Students in each group were asked nine questions related to their expectations, root causes and environmental factors that shaped those expectations, and their level of satisfaction at the institution and with academic advising services. Students were also asked to reflect upon a hypothetical scenario related to an advising error. Once the Zoom interviews were transcribed, emergent, in vivo coding analysis was employed to identify themes in student responses.

Students reported three primary root causes or environmental factors that influenced their overall expectations of higher education. Those factors included immediate family, high school, and sociocultural environment and assumptions. Students specifically named the influence of their parents, grandparents, and siblings on their expectations. Based on their responses, student expectations of higher education clearly were formed prior to matriculation at the institution rather than during their enrollment. As for expectations of student support, students noted their

high school experiences, experiences at or with the institution under study, and immediate family members served as the primary root causes or environmental factors for their beliefs. Campus tours, online content, and campus engagement were identified as subthemes that had an impact on student support expectations while enrolled at the institution. In contrast to overall expectations of higher education, student support expectations were partly shaped by their time at the institution.

### ***Research Question 3***

Research Question 3 asked: How do student marketplace identities correlate with overall student satisfaction at their institution? A Pearson's  $r$  correlation analysis was conducted in SPSS to assess the relationship between a single question and an aggregation of responses from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and both a single question and aggregate responses to the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) related to overall satisfaction. Pearson's  $r$  coefficients for these four analyses ranged from a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.08$ ) to a weak positive correlation ( $r = .23$ ). Only the weak positive correlation of  $r = .23$  between the aggregate of student marketplace identity responses and aggregate of overall satisfaction responses was statistically significant ( $p \geq 0.05$ ).

Overall statistical evidence did not confirm a consequential relationship between student marketplace identity and overall student satisfaction. Notably, the data showed that students who received higher aggregate scores on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were more satisfied with higher education overall. As such, those with a marketplace identity closer to the customer pole marginally were more satisfied than their learner or mixed marketplace identity peers. Qualitative analysis of open-ended student responses did not result in thematic evidence that connected student marketplace identity and overall satisfaction but

confirmed that four of the 37 dissatisfied students were never pleased with their experience and 12 students became unhappy in either their first year or sophomore year.

#### ***Research Question 4***

Research Question 4 asked: How do student marketplace identities correlate with student satisfaction with academic advising services? A Pearson's  $r$  correlation analysis was run to understand the relationship between a single question and aggregate responses from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and both a single question and aggregation of responses to the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) related to satisfaction with academic advising services. There were no statistically significant results from these four quantitative analyses, and Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients demonstrated weak negative correlations between  $-.06$  and  $-.10$ .

Like with overall satisfaction, there was no evidence to confirm a meaningful relationship between student marketplace identity and academic advising satisfaction. Therefore, there is no discernable difference in satisfaction between customers, learners, or those with a mixed marketplace identity. Despite the lack of relationship between the variables, qualitative analysis of open-ended student responses specific to academic advising confirmed that students believed their advisors were ineffective or unhelpful. Three students stated they were never satisfied with School of Business academic advising, and three students expressed frustration with lack of assistance with jobs and internships. While these themes do not connect student marketplace and academic advising satisfaction, they provide further insights as to the experiences and attitudes of students.

## **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, the findings for each research question will be discussed and assessed, and the results will be compared to the literature presented in Chapter 2. Prior to this explication, it is important to consider the context in which the study occurred. Specifically, the cumulative results may have been affected by the high cost of attendance, as students may have elevated expectations of quality based solely on the published cost. Expectations for an expensive vehicle or brand are likely to be higher than expectations for a more affordable alternative. Although financial aid package amount or net tuition cost for each student participant may have aided in the overall analysis and interpretation of the results, the institution's accessibility influenced who was able to attend and therefore participate in the study.

### ***Research Question 1***

As introduced in Chapter 4, student responses to a single question from the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) varied significantly to the aggregate of their responses related to marketplace identity. Within the sample, 55.3% of students (42 of the 76 participants) strongly agreed or agreed that they viewed themselves primarily as a customer of the institution. When all Likert-scale responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) were aggregated, the results indicated more balanced perspectives. The aggregation of student responses could have resulted in a value between 18 and 90 with low scores indicating a learner perspective and high scores demonstrating a customer perspective. The hypothetical median of responses was 54 and hypothetical range was 72. Actual descriptive statistics for the data set yielded a median of 51, mean of 52, and range of 41. On their own, these aggregate responses suggested that students possess temperate perspectives that most closely align with a mixed marketplace identity. Additionally, only three students received

aggregate scores within the lowest 20 or highest 20 possible point aggregates, which categorized them in this study as learners and customers, respectively (see Figure 7). The remaining 73 students or 96% of the sample were defined as having a mixed marketplace identity based on the categorization scale since their aggregate responses were within the poles. These results implied that students conceptually may be drawn to a customer viewpoint or self-definition but not necessarily towards all that such a belief entails. For example, students may call themselves customers and express customer-like behaviors and expectations related to student services and the value of their education but reject such ideas for classroom instruction or grading.

Questions related to the usefulness of the student marketplace identities construct as well as the validity of the student marketplace identity categorization scale created for this study are credible given the small number of students who were categorized as learners or customers. Does the aggregation of Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) responses provide a more complex understanding of student marketplace identities or is the single item that asked students to confirm their level of agreement with a customer-centric perspective sufficient? Is the student marketplace identity categorization scale sensitive enough to accurately segment these populations? Despite the results of the study, have students at-large moved further toward the customer side of the marketplace identity continuum? While the specific context of the institution or other unknown factors may have influenced the results, further investigation is necessary to better understand the role of student marketplace identities and identity categorization.

While the results of this action research study varied based on the data analysis method, they closely aligned with one other study that used another instrument. Over 1,000 students at a medium-sized institution in the southern United States were surveyed, and 52% of respondents

confirmed customer-like perceptions based on their responses to a single statement (Finney & Finney, 2010). The researchers used a 7-point Likert scale; however, the result is similar to the finding within this study. The results of this research question also aligned with the findings of Koris and Nokelainen (2015) which confirmed second- and third-year Estonian undergraduate business students “expect to be treated as customers in some, but not all categories of educational experiences (as some scholars suggest)” (p. 128). The aggregate responses from the institution under study support this finding.

Contrarily, when Saunders (2014b) administered the Customer Orientation Scale Survey at a large public research institution in the northeastern United States, he found that 21.6% of students strongly agreed or agreed with the conceptualization of themselves as customers of their institution. While first-year students were removed from the sample for this action research study, Saunders dispensed the instrument during an orientation session. Similarly, Xu et al. (2018) found that only 5% of students within a Hong Kong university’s travel and tourism program identified themselves as customers. Overall, these fluctuating results demonstrate the complexities and nuances of student marketplace identity perspectives, the influence of myriad external factors and contexts, and the need for consistent instrumentation at a singular institution or academic unit to assess student marketplace identity.

### ***Research Question 2***

The conceptual model of student satisfaction developed by Alves and Raposo (2007) cited that customer expectations among other factors influenced student satisfaction in higher education. Similarly, Santini et al. (2007) discussed that resources provided to students and service quality perception similarly altered student satisfaction. The literature broadly cited neoliberalism as a primary cause of the transformation from students-as-learners to students-as-

customers (Chaffee, 1998; Morgan, 2022; Saunders, 2007; Saunders, 2014a; Saunders & Kolek, 2017; Wellen, 2005); however, few studies examined the environmental factors and root causes (sources) from which students developed their marketplace identities and the associated expectations. This action research question aimed to understand how those student expectations came to be. During three semi-structured focus group interviews, students discussed the root causes and environmental factors that influenced their expectations of higher education overall and expectations of student support. Three primary themes emerged for each topic area.

With respect to expectations of higher education overall, students named immediate family members, their experiences in high school, and their sociocultural environments and assumptions as having shaped their beliefs. Within the immediate family primary theme, students identified the specific influence of parents and/or grandparents as well as siblings. Specifically, parents and grandparents relied on their prior experiences and understanding of higher education to help their student establish their overall expectations. Students also discussed watching their older siblings navigate the college search process and work towards degree completion. The student participants used their siblings' positive and negative experiences as comparative data points in building their own expectations. This theme is noteworthy given its connection to socioeconomic status and the ability for a family members to afford an education and then financially or logistically support the education of multiple children.

The influence of high school on overall expectations of higher education was a key theme. Again, the positive and negative aspects of their education up to that point helped inform what would be most important in college. One student commented on the poor quality of their public schooling and that they “expected better professors or teachers, better resources, a better library, better access to databases, [and] better networking opportunities” in higher education.

The context in which each student attended high school may have influenced their responses. For example, a student who attended public high school in a rural or low-income area may have provided different responses in comparison to a student who attended a private, urban high school.

Finally, participants discussed the underlying sociocultural assumptions that told them what college should be like. For example, multiple students shared that a college degree would jumpstart their careers and allow them to ascend the professional hierarchy. While a college degree has been confirmed to improve career prospects and increase lifetime earnings, it is not guaranteed. Students did not discuss this nuance. A Chinese student from Generation Z stated, “we must be a college student, or you will not get a good job, or you cannot afford your life like that.” The cultural assumption of the necessity of a college degree and what it can provide was left uncontextualized by students.

Students reported their expectations of student support were formed by experiences in high school, experiences at or with the institution under study, and their immediate family members. Once again, positive and negative high school experiences served as comparative points by which student support at the institution was judged. The availability of academic advisors or counselors, personalization of support, breadth and accuracy of information, and other examples were determinative on students’ views. During their experiences at or with the institution, students named campus tours, online content, and campus engagement as subthemes. Students confirmed the student support expectations were formed because of the institution’s communications prior to admission and matriculation as well as during their enrollment. During the focus group interviews, many students shared their disappointment and frustration with student services and how they fell short of expectations. As such, opportunities exist to better

explain the support options available to students, the limits of that support, and the associated student responsibilities throughout the student lifecycle. Like expectations of higher education overall, family members helped students understand and frame their student support expectations resulting from their own understanding and experiences.

To better understand the comparisons students used to assess their higher education expectations, responses from the semi-structured focus group interviews were reconsidered from another perspective. This secondary analysis of qualitative themes involved coding student comparisons as aligned with a learner, mixed marketplace or customer perspective. Overall, student responses largely represented customer or mixed marketplace perspectives with an acknowledgment of the academic implications. At the surface, most students suggested their expectations should result in a level of personalized attention that addressed their wants and needs. However, those needs affected their ability to structure their academic plans most efficiently and have access to the resources necessary to succeed. This nuance was highlighted by a student who stated, “I would expect that there's resources for every problem or solution [to a problem] a student might have, whether that's a personal problem or an academic problem.” Another student said, “when selecting either [institution under study] or [local, large public institution] was that I [would] get more attention... and ... close advisor help, as well.” While additional attention and assistance is aligned with a customer mindset, it also speaks to the desire for an environment and resources that would benefit the student in their learning and academic outcomes. Summarily, students responded as customers but expressed a tacit understanding of the distinctions between services and academics. Future research should address whether students view learning altruistically, as a proxy for career and salary goals, or somewhere in between.

Across both topics and regardless of the source, expectations shared by students were seemingly reasonable and attainable: accessible resources, high-quality instruction, personalized student services, plentiful internship and networking opportunities that would parlay to a successful career, and cross-departmental communication. These align seamlessly with those detailed by Mintz (2021) and confirm how the marketization of higher education continues to affect student expectations. While institutions cannot influence all environmental factors and root causes that influence student marketplace identity development, there are ample opportunities to balance recruitment and retention needs with guiding students to set suitable expectations that benefit their long-term development. The institution should realistically describe their benefits and offerings, how students' actions will inform their outcomes, and detail any limitations. Recommendations on how to achieve this aim will follow later in the chapter.

### ***Research Question 3***

During the author's tenure as an academic advising professional and leader at the institution under study, anecdotal evidence suggested that students increasingly exhibited customer-like behaviors. It seemed students did not sufficiently take accountability or responsibility for their decisions and often utilized academic advising conversations to express complaints and concerns about the university. As such, a primary aim of this research study was to identify the relationship between student marketplace identities and overall student satisfaction. From a practical perspective, this research question was designed to answer whether students who held customer-like beliefs were less satisfied than their peers.

Given the limited statistical power of single-response correlations, the composite of responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) related to overall satisfaction were also analyzed.

Only the aggregate of responses to both instruments yielded a statistically significant result. Despite the statistical significance, a weak positive correlation ( $r [n = 76] = .23, p = .04$ ) was confirmed. Table 10 summarizes the correlation analyses. In practical terms, students with a customer marketplace identity were slightly more satisfied, and those who were more satisfied were somewhat more likely to be customers. The results should not be overstated, as overall, the data confirmed that there was no substantial correlation between the student marketplace identities of undergraduate business students within the sample and satisfaction with higher education overall.

Analysis of open-ended responses from the 37 students who expressed dissatisfaction with their time in higher education found that eight students became disappointed in their first year or sophomore year, and four students stated they were never satisfied. With nearly one-third of dissatisfied students in the sample experiencing discontent from early on in their experience, there is an opening for the institution to frame expectations alongside students immediately upon their engagement.

Despite research that confirmed institutions further regard students as customers (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Emery et al., 2001; Guilbault, 2016; Mark, 2013; Mulnix, 1990) and that students increasingly self-identify as customers as they engage with their institution (Saunders & Kolek, 2017), student satisfaction with higher education does not seem to have been affected meaningfully by marketplace identity. The results of this research question suggest that other factors described in Alves & Raposo's (2007) conceptual model, such as the difference between student expectations and experiences as well as perceived value, are a greater factor in satisfaction than student marketplace identity.

#### ***Research Question 4***

During the same academic advising conversations referenced in Research Question 3, students did not conduct sufficient research to answer their questions or take accountability or responsibility for their decisions. When issues arose, many students often placed blame on staff, faculty, and administrators without considering their role. While advising errors occurred on occasion, most problems were the result of student inaction, incorrect information, or lack of advance research. Given these seemingly increasing interactions, this study aimed to identify the relationship between student marketplace identities and satisfaction with academic advising. That is, were students who identified themselves as customers more dissatisfied with their academic advising experience?

Like the last research question, single responses and aggregate responses to the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) specific to academic advising satisfaction were assessed. Data analysis confirmed there is no statistical relationship between student marketplace identity and satisfaction with academic advising, as each of the four analyses was not statistically significant. A summary of the correlational analyses can be found in Table 10. Overall, student marketplace identity is an inconsequential factor in student satisfaction with academic advising.

When asked to expand upon their dissatisfaction with academic advising within the School of Business, 22 of the 31 students named themes of ineffectiveness or unhelpfulness. Three students stated they were never satisfied while three other students cited a lack of assistance with jobs and internships. All these responses were shared by students from across the marketplace identity continuum. As such, institutions can focus more on the expectations of students and the efficacy of student support offices to improve student satisfaction.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this action research study confirmed that although more than half of student participants defined themselves as customers, their views were moderate and aligned with the mixed marketplace identity perspective based on all 18 items on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b). While Saunders and Kolek (2017) found that students expressed a stronger customer orientation in their sophomore year compared to their first year, the related literature did not categorize student marketplace identities or provide comparison points to allow for an analysis of changes in marketplace identity perspectives over time. Further, although there is no meaningful correlation between student marketplace identity and overall satisfaction or satisfaction with academic advising services, students stressed that their satisfaction hinged on the difference between their expectations and experiences. While the results of this action research study are not generalizable, recommendations for policy and practice may prove useful to students and institutions at-large. This section will discuss the implications related to policy and practice to ensure institutions continue to attract and retain the number of students necessary to support their mission and students receive maximum value from their education. A summary of research findings and their connections to the recommendations and supporting literature is listed in Table 12.

**Table 12***Findings and Recommendations*

Findings	Related Recommendations	Supporting Literature
Expectations for higher education were formed prior to enrollment	Assess marketing and onboarding materials to ensure balance between recruitment goals and realistic expectations	Alves & Raposo (2007); DeShields et al. (2005); Santini et al. (2017); Schreiner (2009)
Student were attracted to customer label but largely possess moderate perspectives; speaks to pressures of cost and value	Build orientation and first-year experience curriculum focused on developmental skill-building, expectation-setting, and value maximization via examination of higher education as a system	Bunce et al. (2017); Clayson & Haley (2005); Cuthbert (2010); Delucchi & Korgen (2002); Guilbault (2016); Ng & Forbes (2009)
Advising satisfaction was largely rooted in (mis)alignment of expectations (formed prior to and during enrollment) and experiences	Create advising communications that set and confirm expectations with students; assess quality of services; assess student satisfaction	Alves & Raposo (2007); Blau et al. (2019); DeShields et al. (2005); Elliott & Healy (2001); Santini et al. (2017); Schreiner (2009)

*Note.* This table connects the research findings to recommendations and supporting literature.

***Recommendation 1: Devise Recruitment Strategies and Communications Centered on******Realistic Expectations***

During the semi-structured focus group interviews, students named immediate family members, experiences in high school, and sociocultural environments and assumptions as having informed their beliefs and expectations of higher education overall. Parents and/or grandparents and siblings were credited as the specific family members who largely shaped their views.

Although institutions cannot alter the foundational beliefs of prospective students and their families, they must design recruitment communications that balance the institution's enrollment goals with realistic expectations of value, service offerings, and the responsibilities of students.

Santini et al. (2017) found that service quality perception and marketing orientation were among the six consequent constructs positively related to student satisfaction. The Alves and Raposo (2007) conceptual model of student satisfaction also confirmed student expectations and perceptions of technical and functional quality affected satisfaction. As such, the institution should verify campus tours do not over-promise about services, financial aid presentations should discuss the realities of investment in a college education, and students should be informed they must work for and own their outcomes. An institution's benefits and unique offerings should be on full display and coupled with an expectation that students are held to high standards. Students should feel supported in an environment that is safe for them to explore, learn, and grow. For example, rather than showcasing the nicest residence halls, improving dining options during recruitment events, or confirming all the impressive employers with whom students intern, realistic information and data should be communicated.

Even when crafted with precision, students and their families may be more attracted to institutions with embellished or extravagant pitches. Despite this potential, the institution under study may benefit from increases to satisfaction, as satisfaction and retention are directly linked (DeShields et al., 2005; Schreiner, 2009). While such an approach to enrollment and marketing will not solve all problems, it will serve as a basis under which further expectations with students can be set.

***Recommendation 2: Create New Orientation and First-Year Experience Curriculum Focused on Developmental Skill-Building, Expectation-Setting, and Value Maximization Via Examination of Higher Education's History and Current Challenges***

As confirmed in the literature review, a customer-centric framework by students led to negative beliefs and outcomes, such as entitlement to high grades and degree completion (Bunce

et al., 2017; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Given the enormous cost and risk of higher education, Clayson and Haley (2005) and Cuthbert (2010) advocated for a moderated approach that balances the aims of higher education as well as the marketplace and fiscal realities for students. The results of this action research study found that 55.3% of undergraduate business students strongly agreed or agreed that they were customers of the institution. Despite this figure, 0 of the 76 participants scored within the highest 20 possible aggregate responses on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) that indicated a strong customer-centric mentality. The inclination for students to identify as customers from a direct question but not provide customer-like answers on other questions suggests anxiety related to cost and value. Students may choose to consider themselves customers based on the idea that the company (institution) offering the product (education/degree) will ensure their needs are met.

As such, a meaningful opportunity for the institution under study is centered on developmental skill-building, expectation-setting, and value maximization immediately upon matriculation to the institution. These expectations would build upon the core expectations set forth during the admissions process. Instructors would begin with readings and lessons on the history of higher education and its' modern systemic problems, including the crowded marketplace, competition for enrollments, and budget constraints. With the foundational information, students could discuss the inherent contradictions within the system, identify and debate solutions, examine their roles within the educational environment, clearly identify their expectations, and consider how to make the most of their experiences. Such a curriculum would help to combat the dissatisfaction expressed by students in the combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) and amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) as having begun during the first year or sophomore year. Importantly, students must not be

indoctrinated to accept the flaws within the higher education system or at their current institution. Instead, data-driven information about higher education should be used as a framework by which students can learn, employ critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and set lofty but realistic expectations.

***Recommendation 3: Set Advising Expectations and Assess Service Quality and Satisfaction***

Elliott and Healy (2001) wrote that student satisfaction is an attitude that occurs when a student's expectations are met or exceeded. As noted in earlier recommendations, alignment of student expectations and experiences perceptions of quality are vital components of student satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Santini et al., 2017). Given research by DeShields et al. (2005) and Schreiner (2009) that found a direct connection between student satisfaction and retention, the institution under study should set advising expectations early and often with students and assess both service quality and satisfaction.

Academic advising should aim to support students but distribute communications that confirm the limitations of their work. For example, students should not expect academic advisors to create a 4-year graduation plan for students and send them on their way. Instead, communications and structures should be developed so students must conduct initial research and confirm their findings alongside an academic advisor. This student-as-partner approach (Clayson & Haley, 2005; Guilbault, 2016; Ng & Forbes, 2009) requires students to take responsibility for their education and the institution to provide appropriate support as partners in learning. While this balance may be difficult to achieve, it is important to set expectations from the beginning.

While students must maintain responsibility for their education, the School of Business advising office must work to assess service quality and student satisfaction. Analysis of open-

ended responses to the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) demonstrated that 22 of the 31 students who confirmed discontentment with academic advising services referenced ineffectiveness and/or unhelpfulness as the source of their frustration. Some of these comments may be directly actionable by the institution or School of Business leadership while others will require further analysis. Regardless of whether the issues named by students were real or perceived, their dissatisfaction remains. In tandem with alignment of student expectations, these results suggest a quality assessment effort is needed. Student dissatisfaction does not inherently indicate poor advising quality; however, additional research can identify opportunities for structural improvement, additional training for professional staff members, or clearer communications. Relatedly, ongoing assessment of student satisfaction with advising can highlight any misalignment between the office and students and inform further programmatic initiatives by the institution at-large.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

A central aim of this action research study was to understand the correlation between student marketplace identities and satisfaction with both higher education and academic advising services. Despite the limited relationship between the variables in this occurrence, satisfaction and academic advising are vitally important to institutions and students alike (DeShields et al., 2005; Schreiner, 2009; Tippetts et al., 2022; Young-Jones et al., 2013). This finding highlights several opportunities for future research related to the marketization of higher education, student marketplace identities, and the impact of consumerism.

Prior to discussion of future research topics, the limitations of this action research study are worthy of note. Fundamentally, this study is not a definitive examination of the topic, as the methodological approach and context in which the research took place frame the results. My

former positionality within the School of Business served as the justification for the study's focus, and as such, the results are not generalizable within the institution let alone across higher education.

Methodologically, the length of the survey instrument and inclusion of open-ended questions may have limited the number of students inclined to participate, and students willing to participate in a voluntary semi-structured focus group interview for 75 minutes may not have captured the breadth of themes held across the School of Business undergraduate population. While the study originally included first-year undergraduate business students, their response data were excluded because of the institution's unique advising protocol for first-year students. Since current first-year students were not advised within the School of Business, their comments were not germane to the research question. Open-ended responses within the amended Student Satisfaction Survey (Alves & Raposo, 2009) confirmed that eight of the 37 students who expressed dissatisfaction at the institution began to feel discontentment in either their first year or sophomore year. The perspectives of first-year students were not included in the qualitative analysis and limited the opportunities for additional findings. As noted earlier in this chapter, the categorization scale created and employed for this study may not be valid in student marketplace identity classification. The instrument may not be sensitive enough to account for subtleties in marketplace identity that would alter a student's categorization of learner, mixed marketplace identity, or customer.

This exploratory study aimed to better understand the relationship between students' marketplace identities and their higher education experience; however, the research design did not allow for the implementation of interventions meant to improve institution and student outcomes. With these limitations in mind, opportunities for future research include additional

analysis of the action research data collected as part of this study, validation of the student marketplace identity categorization scale, and application of consistent methodology and instrumentation through longitudinal and comparative studies.

### ***Additional Analysis of Action Research Study Data***

The academic literature confirmed that additional understanding of student marketplace identity, satisfaction, and the associated implications are necessary (Bunce et al., 2017; Guilbault, 2016; Ng & Forbes, 2009). At the micro-level, rich data were collected from this action research study that was outside the scope of the research questions. Further analysis of student marketplace identity and satisfaction responses by race, socioeconomic status, and other demographic markers could provide valuable insights. This additional research is supported by the notion that the current higher education marketplace affects who can afford college, the demographic make-up of the student body, and the long-term financial implications on students (Mintz, 2021).

### ***Validation of Student Marketplace Identity Categorization Scale***

Past research has been inconsistent in how students have been defined as customers. Further validation of the student marketplace categorization scale created for this study is needed to determine when students can be accurately characterized as customers, learners, or as having a mixed marketplace identity. A valid scale that factors in the aggregation of all 18 items on the Customer Orientation Scale Survey (Saunders, 2014b) would allow for a more complex and accurate understanding of marketplace identities. With more precise marketplace identity categorization, comparative data, such as satisfaction, retention, and other student success markers, would be more useful to administrators as they devise interventions.

### ***Consistent Methods and Instrumentation***

Given the various instruments used to assess student marketplace identities and satisfaction, additional research should prioritize application of a consistent measure of student marketplace identity and student satisfaction. Numerous valid satisfaction instruments have been used in past research; however, use of the same methods and instrumentation moving forward would yield potent results.

**Longitudinal and Comparative Studies.** The application of consistent instrumentation and validity of the student marketplace categorization scale within this area of research would support the launch of longitudinal and comparative studies and result in a more complex understanding of student dispositions over time. While Saunders and Kolek (2017) readministered the Customer Orientation Scale Survey to students who participated in previous study and found that students progressively identify as customers as they advance in their studies, this methodological approach has not been replicated. As such, longitudinal studies should be conducted to demonstrate how student marketplace beliefs, expectations, and satisfaction change over time and how institutions may contribute to fluctuations. While results from a particular institution are not generalizable, they may provide evidence of broader shifts in student marketplace identities.

Similarly, comparative studies should be conducted to further add to the body of knowledge on these topics. Such comparative analyses could demonstrate the differences in student marketplace identities and satisfaction between assorted populations, including institution types, academic discipline, and various student demographics. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses would help identify the expectations students have once they arrive at the

institution, the sources from which they developed, opportunities to reframe expectations, and gaps in educational or student service quality.

### ***Assessment of Interventions***

Another proposal for further research is to assess interventions designed to alter student marketplace identities and the associated expectations away from a customer mindset. As described in the recommendations, these interventions should work to ensure students understand their role and responsibilities within the institution and the institution's offerings and limitations. Such examples include changes to marketing materials, recruitment and enrollment materials, orientation modules, and first-year seminar course content. Each of these items should be assessed for efficacy to ensure students prioritize learning within the higher education environment and still receive a high-quality education and accessible services.

### **Summary**

Neoliberalism and the marketization of higher education have required institutions to compete for a shrinking number of students (Brule, 2004; Grawe, 2021; Kimball & Iler, 2023; Musselin, 2018; Newson, 2004). To attract and retain students, institutions began to further regard students as customers (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020; Emery et al., 2001; Guilbault, 2016; Mark, 2013; Mulnix, 1990). This approach may benefit the bottom line of the institution in the short-term, but it has negative implications on students' educational experiences and outcomes (Brule, 2004; Bunce et al., 2017; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Finney & Finney, 2010; Titus, 2008). Anecdotal evidence from the institution study drew attention to student behaviors born from a customer-centric mentality. In many cases, these students seemed deeply dissatisfied with their experience. This action research study was designed to understand how students

perceive themselves within higher education and how those perceptions influence expectations, satisfaction, and interactions on campus.

Data were collected from undergraduate students with majors within the School of Business, and responses from 76 individuals were analyzed. Based on their student marketplace identity responses and categorization, 10 students were invited to participate in one of three semi-structured focus group interviews. Overall, quantitative data confirmed there was no statistically significant relationship between student marketplace identity and overall satisfaction or satisfaction with academic advising. Despite this unexpected finding, the qualitative focus group data provided valuable insights as to the formation of student marketplace identities and the associated expectations.

The knowledge gleaned from this study adds to the body of knowledge rooted in the success of higher education institutions and students. As the “traditional” undergraduate population continues to shrink, institutions will have to use additional resources to attract and retain students. That focus on recruitment and retention must not be at the expense of student learning and positive life-long outcomes. The recommendations proposed in this study are designed to ensure the longevity of a valuable college education via student satisfaction. As students change, so must institutions.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Combined Customer Orientation Scale Survey and Amended Student Satisfaction Survey**

*Welcome/Purpose:* “Thank you for your participation in this action research study. The study intends to understand the extent to which undergraduate business students identify themselves on a continuum from learners within to customers of higher education (i.e. student marketplace identity) and how those perceptions correlate to overall satisfaction at the institution and satisfaction with academic advising services. The study also aims to better understand the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development. The survey is segmented into three sections will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Based on your responses and level of interest, you may be invited to a follow-up focus group interview. Three students who complete the survey in its entirety will be entered into a drawing for a \$20 Amazon gift card. Please follow the instructions at the end of the survey to enter.”

*Informed Consent:* “To continue your participation in this study, please review the informed consent form that confirms all responses will be confidential, your participation is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time, and there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research. If you do not wish to proceed, please select ‘No, I do not consent’ and you will be advanced to the end of the survey.”

#### *Demographic Questions:*

1. What is your race?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your country of citizenship?

4. How would you describe your socioeconomic status?
5. What is your class year at the institution?

*Instructions:* “Please respond to each question and be as specific as possible in the open-ended responses.”

*Survey Questions:*

### Section 1

1. I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing.
2. I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career.
3. If I could get a well-paying job without going to college, I would not be here.
4. If I complete all my assignments, I deserve a good grade in a course.
5. Concerning the institution, I think of myself primarily as a customer of the university.
6. For me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than it is to learn the material.
7. It is more important for me to have a high-paying career than one I really like.
8. My professors should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next letter grade.
9. Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career.
10. I will only major in something that will help me earn a lot of money.
11. While at the institution, I am going to try to take the easiest courses possible.
12. If I cannot get a good job after I graduate, I should be able to have some of my tuition and fees refunded.
13. Because I will have paid to attend the institution, the university will owe me a degree.
14. If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at the institution.

15. The main purpose of my college education should be maximizing my ability to earn money.
16. For the most part, education is something I receive, not something I create.
17. It is part of my professors' job to make sure I pass my courses.
18. The financial returns on my education are not very important to me.

## Section 2

19. Considering your overall experience with this university, in general, what is your level of satisfaction?
20. Overall, has this university met your expectations?
  - a. Until what point has this university corresponded to your expectations?
21. Overall, has this university met your needs?
  - a. Until what point has this university corresponded to your needs?
22. Imagine a university, perfect in all aspects. At what distance would you place this university from the ideal one?
23. Do you believe it was a wise decision to choose to attend this university?
  - a. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to attend this university?
24. What is your level of happiness for having chosen this university?

## Section 3

25. Considering your academic advising experience within the School of Business, in general, what is your level of satisfaction?
26. Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your expectations?

- a. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your expectations?
27. Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your needs?
- a. Until what point has academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your needs?
28. Imagine an academic advising office, perfect in all aspects. At what distance would you place academic advising services within the School of Business from the ideal one?
29. Do you believe it is a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?
- a. Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?
30. What is your level of happiness with academic advising services within the School of Business?

*Closing:* “Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! As part of the second phase of my study, I am recruiting student participants for a 75-minute focus group. Students who are selected and ultimately attend the entirety of the focus group will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card. If you are open to joining the focus group, please enter your email address below.

To enter a drawing for one of three \$20 Amazon gift cards, please complete this hyperlinked form. Note: This unique form will ensure your survey responses are separated from your drawing entry.

## APPENDIX B

### Student Satisfaction Survey Pilot Feedback Survey

Welcome/Purpose: “Thank you for your participation in this pilot study to test a survey that will be utilized as part of my dissertation action research study. Your responses will inform potential changes to a survey designed to correlate student marketplace identities with overall satisfaction and satisfaction with academic advising services. The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.”

Instructions: “Please respond to each question and be as specific as possible in the open-ended responses.”

Questions:

1. Read the following question: “Overall, has this university met your expectations?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
2. Read the following question: “Until what point has this university corresponded to your expectations?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
3. Read the following question: “Overall, has this university met your needs?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
4. Read the following question: “Until what point has this university corresponded to your needs?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.

- b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
5. Read the following question: “Do you believe it was a wise decision to choose to attend this university?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
6. Read the following question: “Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to attend this university?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
7. Read the following question: “Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your expectations?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
8. Read the following question: “Until what point have academic advising services within the School of Business met your expectations?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
9. Read the following question: “Overall, have academic advising services within the School of Business met your needs?”
  - a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
10. Read the following question: “Until what point have academic advising services within the School of Business corresponded to your needs?”

- a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
11. Read the following question: “Do you believe it is a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?”
- a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?
12. Read the following question: “Until what point do you consider having made a wise decision to choose to utilize academic advising services within the School of Business?”
- a. In your own words, describe what this question is asking.
  - b. What is another way to ask this question? How might you reword or reframe it?

Closing: “Thank you again for your time. Your invaluable insights will inform the next phase of my action research study.”

## APPENDIX C

### **Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Protocol**

Logistics: This 75-minute semi-structured focus group interview will be conducted via Zoom.

The researcher will lead the focus group conversation and observe as a participant.

Welcome: “Students, thank you so much for joining me this evening for a semi-

Structured focus group interview. I sincerely appreciate your time and involvement in this action research study. My name is Derek Jansante, and I am doctoral student in Education Policy, Planning, and Leadership at the College of William and Mary.”

Purpose: “Based on your responses to my initial survey, you have been invited to participate in this semi-structured focus group interview. As a reminder, the purpose of my action research study is to understand the extent to which students identify themselves on a continuum from learners within to customers of higher education (i.e. student marketplace identity) and how those perceptions correlate to overall satisfaction at the institution and satisfaction with academic advising services. The study also aims to better understand the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development.”

Instructions: “To facilitate my data analysis, this conversation will be recorded via Zoom. While our conversation will be recorded and transcribed, responses will be anonymized and remain confidential in the published dissertation. Although you have all signed the informed consent agreement I shared in advance of this conversation, I want to remind you that all personal information will be confidential, your participation is voluntary, you may end your participation at any time, and there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research. While we move through this focus group interview, please

answer all questions honestly. I encourage you to respectfully engage on these topics with your peers. This focus group will last approximately one hour and 15 minutes, and we will spend approximately 6-8 minutes on each question. You will see me taking notes, and I may interrupt to ask for additional clarification to your responses or ask follow-up questions.

*Ice-Breaker:* “Before we get started, please share your first name, the place you call home, your major, and your class year.”

*Interview Questions:*

1. What are your expectations of higher education overall?
2. What beliefs or experiences shaped those expectations?

For the remainder of our focus group, use the following brief scenario as a frame of reference for your responses: Suppose you registered for and passed a course at the university that does not apply toward your degree requirements. As a result, you learned you must complete another course and extend your graduation by one semester.

3. How would you react?
4. How do you think such an error could occur?
5. Generally, what are your expectations of student support at the university?
6. What beliefs or experiences shaped your student support expectations at the university?
7. What are your expectations of student support within academic advising, specifically?
8. Have your overall higher education experiences matched your expectations? How or how not?
9. Have your academic advising experiences matched your expectations? How or how not?

*Wrap-Up:* “Based on our conversation today, do you have any brief final thoughts to share?”

Closing: “Thank you again for your time. Your invaluable insights will inform the next cycle of this action research study.”

## APPENDIX D

### Participant Informed Consent Form—Survey

I agree to participate in an action research study that aims to correlate student marketplace identities with both overall student satisfaction and satisfaction with academic advising services. I understand the study also aims to explore the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development. This investigation will yield data that can be used to inform future programmatic, curricular, and student development interventions at the university and/or within the School of Business. The data from the student may also catalyze structural or administrative changes at the university and/or within the School of Business.

I understand that data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from January 1, 2024 to January 1, 2025. The primary data source for this first phase of the study is a survey to be disseminated via email to all undergraduate students with a declared major in the School of Business. I understand that the survey data will be collected via Qualtrics and that my responses will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My identity will not be associated with the research findings.

I understand that the researcher has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary, the William and Mary School of Education, the institution at which I am enrolled, or the School of Business.

If I have any questions about the study, I understand that I should contact the researcher, Derek Jansante, via phone at (724) 825-1655 and/or email at [ddjansante@wm.edu](mailto:ddjansante@wm.edu). I understand that I may also contact the College of William and Mary's Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Jennifer Stevens, 855-800-7187 or [jastev@wm.edu](mailto:jastev@wm.edu).

My confirmation below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

## APPENDIX E

### Participant Informed Consent Form—Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview

I agree to participate in an action research study that aims to correlate student marketplace identities with both overall student satisfaction and satisfaction with academic advising services. I understand the study also aims to explore the root causes and environmental factors that influence student marketplace identity development. This investigation will yield data that can be used to inform future programmatic, curricular, and student development interventions at the university and/or within the School of Business. The data from the student may also catalyze structural or administrative changes at the university and/or within the School of Business.

I understand that data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from January 1, 2024 to January 1, 2025. The primary data source for this second phase of this study is a semi-structured focus group interview. Based on responses to the survey and demographic markers, 12 students were invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews conducted via Zoom. Participation in the focus group interview is not required. I understand that the focus group interview will be recorded on Zoom and transcribed for analysis. Information from the focus group recording and transcription will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My identity will not be associated with the research findings.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary, the William and Mary School of Education, the institution at which I am enrolled, or the School of Business.

If I have any questions about the study, I understand that I should contact the researcher, Derek Jansante, via phone at (724) 825-1655 and/or email at [ddjansante@wm.edu](mailto:ddjansante@wm.edu). I understand that I may also contact the College of William and Mary's Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Jennifer Stevens, 855-800-7187 or [jastev@wm.edu](mailto:jastev@wm.edu).

My confirmation below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

## VITA

### Derek Daniel Jansante

#### **Education**

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) 2025  
*Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership*  
*Higher Education Administration*  
The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia

Master of Arts in Education and Human Development (M.A.Ed.H.D.) 2016  
*Higher Education Administration*  
The George Washington University, Washington, District of Columbia

Bachelor of Business Administration (B.B.A.) 2011  
*Major: Management; Minor: Marketing*  
Stetson University, DeLand, Florida

#### **Higher Education Experience**

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Compliance 2023 - Present  
School of Continuing Studies  
Georgetown University, Washington, District of Columbia

Director of Undergraduate Programs 2019 - 2023  
Kogod School of Business  
American University, Washington, District of Columbia

Assistant Director of Kogod Honors and Advising 2018 - 2019  
Kogod School of Business  
American University, Washington, District of Columbia

Academic Advisor 2016 - 2018  
Kogod School of Business  
American University, Washington, District of Columbia

Alumni Relations Coordinator 2014 - 2016  
The George Washington University, Washington, District of Columbia