# Academic Advising as Servant Leadership to Bridge Gaps for Stronger Student Support

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## Abstract

Academic advising can be a game-changer for student success, yet many students experience inconsistent advising, limited availability, and a lack of structured support from their advisors. This study aims to explore how academic advising and servant leadership are perceived and how academic advising can be re-envisioned through the lens of servant leadership to bridge the gaps for stronger student support. Through a convergent mixed-method design, nine academic advisors were interviewed, and 162 undergraduate and graduate students selected via purposive sampling were surveyed. The findings indicate that advising is perceived as guiding students through their academic journey, including academic challenges, exchange programs, or even providing psychological support. Two types of advising, prescriptive and developmental models, were applied, and advisors unconsciously or consciously perform principles specific to servant leaders: listening, empathy, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community that had a positive influence on students' academic success. A key takeaway is students thrive when advisors are engaged, accessible, and well-equipped to guide them—not just academically, but in career planning and personal development. Making academic advising more effective and meaningful for students necessitates the designing training programs enhancing leadership competencies, specifically servant leadership traits and establishing structured advising frameworks in Azerbaijani higher education institutions that directly enhances the quality of student support. Expanding longitudinal research will help to observe how servant leadership-based framework impacts students' success in various higher education settings (i.e., across different cultural contexts) over time.


*Keywords:* academic advising, student support, career and personal development, servant leadership

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## Introduction

Academic advising has evolved over the years and in today's dynamic higher education landscape, it is a crucial factor in student success (Creamer et al., 2018; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Drake et al., 2010; Filson & Whittington, 2013; Frost, 1993, 2000; White, 2015). Studies show that advisors have performed numerous responsibilities: guiding students through their academic journey, supporting them on career planning as well as their personal development (Gordon, 2006; Kumar, 2007; Tinto, 1993; Tudor, 2018).

Besides, academic advisors are inclined to naturally or consciously exhibit some leadership traits aligned with servant leadership behaviors (Stone et al., 2013). The concept of servant leadership which prioritizes empathy, active listening, or a commitment to fostering the growth of others overlaps with the advising framework (Greenleaf, 1977; NACADA, 2006, 2019).

This study is rooted in the belief that integrating servant leadership qualities, academic advising can be a more effective, compassionate, and student-centered process (Greenleaf, 1977; NACADA, 2006, 2019).

Academic advising and its outcomes on student success are not well-perceived in Azerbaijani higher education though it is defined in the Decision No. 348, issued by the Cabinet of Ministers on December 24, 2013, implements a key part of the 2009–2013 State Program on Higher Education Reforms by formally approving the "Rules for Organizing Credit-Based Education" in bachelor's, master's, and basic medical programs, aligning the system with the Bologna Process, leading to the need for robust advising models (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2013). Likewise, servant leadership, which is widely theorized and practiced, has not been recognized adequately as a trait supporting the advising framework (Greenleaf, 1977; McClellan, 2007, 2024) in a local context.

The primary purpose of this research is to explore how academic advising and servant leadership are perceived and how academic advising can be re-envisioned through the lens of servant leadership to bridge the gaps for stronger student support (Greenleaf, 1977; McClellan, 2007, 2024).

The study sought to answer the following key questions:
1. How is academic advising and servant leadership perceived in higher education institutions in Azerbaijan?
2. How is servant leadership associated with academic advising in these institutions?

## Literature Review

Academic advising has evolved from a primarily administrative function to a central pedagogical practice fostering student persistence, personal development, and career readiness (Chickering, 1970; Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972; Tinto, 1987). Crookston's model facilitated student autonomy and growth, while O'Banion's model incorporated personal, academic, and career development shifted the advisor's role from prescriber to partner in learning (Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972). Then academic advising was redefined by Appleby (2008), who stated, "Advising is teaching" (p. 85), which mirrored high-impact teaching practices and summarized the perspective of fostering critical thinking,

self-reflection, and student engagement in the auditorium, aligning advising with student autonomy, persistence, and identity formation (Lowenstein, 2005).

Academic advising morphed from informal faculty support into a professional, research-based practice using learning analytics dashboard, particularly proactively pinpointing and supporting students at high-risk, focusing on holistic student development (Vemula & Moraes, 2024). Guided by ethical standards and competencies established by NACADA (The Global Community for Academic Advising, 2014; Landon, 2007), it is congruent with teaching, counseling, and mentoring. By integrating human judgement, data analytics, and pedagogy, it has become a key driver of student personal, academic, and professional success transforming advisor training, student expectations, and institutional policies and strategies regarding student engagement and retention (Schechtman et al., 2025).

Research investigated both the human and technological dimensions of academic advising and captured the voices of faculty advisors, their complex roles, and existing institutional challenges (Druchyna et al., 2025; Hart-Baldridge, 2020; He & Hutson, 2020; Vemula & Moraes, 2024). While Hart-Baldridge (2020) emphasized the need for better structural support and recognition of advising as a core academic responsibility, He and Hutson (2020) devised a self-reflection tool, so advisors could reflect on their beliefs, experiences, and well-being and professional advancement, making advising sustainable. The meta-review analyzing trends in the research done in the U.S. was conducted by Hutson and He (2024) provides much more comprehensive understanding of academic advising and necessitates employing more rigid, transparent, and replicable methodologies in research.

**Academic Advising Models and Styles**

The literature reveals more blended models and range of styles adopted and utilized by institutions to respond to the growing student population with diverse needs, institutional goals, and create more adaptive advising systems.

The prescriptive or directive and task-focused model and style, where the advisor provides information and the student follows instructions (Barbuto et al., 2011; Crookston, 1972; Drake, 2011), helps student retain, persist and graduate while developmental focuses on mentorship and student autonomy, guiding academic, career, and personal growth (Crookston, 1972; Grites, 2013; O'Banion, 1972). Likewise developmental, intrusive (proactive) is mainly data-informed and centers on early alerts and highly-structured outreach to support at-risk students, and via engagement builds trust and significantly boosts retention among underprepared first-year students (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Levinstein, 2021; Rust & Chadwick, 2021; Rust & Willey, 2024; Varney, 2007) and appreciative based on a strengths-based model applies appreciative inquiry principles to advising and emphasizing positivity, trust-building, and goal alignment (Bloom et al., 2008a; Stanback & McEvoy, 2012) are reflecting distinct advisor–student relationships and institutional goals.

Evolving models and styles indicate a broader shift to holistic, data-informed, and equity-driven advising, which is matched to institutional context and student needs, and allows advisors to fluidly adjust to student profiles, institutional objectives, and advising goals.

## Challenges of Academic Advising

In the information age, academic advising encounters challenges in supporting diverse student populations amid shifting institutional structures, evolving technologies, and job demands expanding in scope and complexity (Swecker et al., 2013).

A high advisor-to-student ratio limits personal guidance advisors provide as understaffed advising services encounter heavy workload, decreased support quality, and increased risk of burnout (Akosah, 2024; Feygin et al., 2022; Robbins, 2013).

Inconsistency in academic advising practice and lack of coordination across institutions (e.g., it is split between academic departments, student affairs, and career services) lead students to experience inequality, or fragmented and inconsistent support, which in turn hinders student ability to make informed personal, academic and career decisions (White, 2015).

## Academic Advisors as Servant Leaders

For decades, academic advising has transformed from a prescriptive model into a more developmental one supporting student's academic path, career aspirations as well as personal growth. Developmental advising puts emphasis on being a mentor for students rather than dealing with documentation and procedural guidance (Chickering, 1970; Crookston, 1972). In other words, the connection between the advisors and students has evolved into more meaningful and genuine bonds, creating hope and direction rather than simply being a traditional advisor who is just involved in supporting students with their academic objectives (NACADA, 2006, 2019; Tinto, 1987).

Considering developmental models, academic advising is more seen as servant leadership, first defined by Greenleaf (1977) and later enhanced by Spears (2010). The philosophy behind servant leadership is that servant leaders serve and then lead others. The serving process happens naturally and makes this type of leadership different from others (Greenleaf, 2003). At the heart of servant leadership, there are several principles that well-define this type: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Greenleaf, 2003).

As the central idea of servant leadership is serving others, it is well-aligned with academic advising context. McClellan (2007) was the first who conceptualized servant leadership qualities with academic advising. Later more studies confirmed the link between academic advising and servant leadership by conceptualizing the framework, focusing on motivating and cultivating relationship with students, communication, and coaching students in their daily practices (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Kelly & MacDonald, 2019; Paul et al., 2012; Paul & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Taner & Özkan, 2014).

Bonding them together (i.e., academic advisors as servant leaders), advisors are more prone to build a safe and conducive environment for students (Drake et al., 2013; Rawlins & Rawlins, 2005). Instead of prescribing the ready-made solutions, developmental advisors (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010) as servant leaders are more naturally inclined to serve their community by actively listening to each student that helps them identify their strengths and academic goals (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Besides listening, advisors steward students' growth through offering the needed resources, communication, and celebrating their success.

In doing so, students become more motivated and empowered to take ownership of their academic path (McClellan, 2024).

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with academic advisors, while quantitative data were collected via a student survey to capture the patterns in understanding of academic advising and servant leadership as well as how both intersected in daily practices in higher education context. The two strands were analyzed separately and then merged to compare and contrast student and advisor perspectives.

### Participants

Nine out of eleven academic advisors currently working in undergraduate and graduate levels (e.g., education, business, engineering) were recruited via the purposive sampling technique across the campus for interviews. However, the sample turned out to be gender biased with nine female participants.

We administered 162 surveys among higher education students from different programs. To select the participants, stratified convenience sampling was employed to ensure representation of disciplines (e.g., education, business, and engineering).

### Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded or via secure video conference hosted through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra between late March and mid-April 2024 with participant consent and lasted 45–60 minutes. The transcriptions were produced verbatim for analysis.

Then recruitment emails were sent in May 2024, and 162 students (estimated 45% response) were surveyed via google document.

### Data Analysis

The study employed a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We first familiarized ourselves with transcripts to code the predefined themes. Then, the relevant data segments were categorized under the themes to ensure coherence across them. Some data collapsed (e.g., leadership traits, meeting frequencies, student-advisor relationship), while others were split for better specificity, allowing for structured comparison and interpretation. In addition, any emerging sub-themes or unexpected patterns were considered to gain additional insight. By applying focused yet flexible analysis, we ensured the alignment of findings with theoretical constructs, allowing room for data-driven nuances.

To make a descriptive analysis of the 162 survey responses, we extracted the responses from the Google Form into an excel file and input them into SPSSv.24. There was not any missing data. To check reliability of the survey scales, we used Cronbach's alpha for both the five-item Advising Satisfaction scale and the seven-item Servant-Leadership scale. The analysis

exceeded the 0.70 benchmark for both scales. Also, mean and standard deviation were calculated for the descriptive data.

Both data sets were intersected to identify the patterns of convergence and divergence.

## Ethical Considerations

All participants were provided with informed consent; they could withdraw at any time or could skip any question. All participants ensured data anonymity. Their identities were replaced with codes; transcripts, and survey data stored on encrypted drives. Findings reported in a way to protect confidentiality.

<div align="center">

**Results**

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## Findings: Qualitative Analysis

### *Perceptions of Academic Advising*

Advisors viewed their roles as guiding students through course selection, academic challenges, and exchange programs, "Something like assisting students through their higher education, giving them some guidance during the registration period, and applying for exchange programs as well as assisting a student in understanding the value of higher education." Some advisors also believed that their roles extended beyond academics, including psychological and family support.

Three advisors were convinced that academic advising guided students through their academic journey, "It is having your student be confident about their personalities and about the way they are going to have their four years." Also, they identify themselves as advocates.

> I will compare the advisor with the advocate because you are somehow helping students in a certain situation, and it somehow reminds me of an advocate who helps his clients in a certain situation. (Participant 2)

Academic advising is perceived as a process that guides, navigates, advocates for students, or supports them to overcome academic challenges and recognized as assistance in exchange programs and ensuring student access to necessary resources.

### *Professional Development*

Advisors were assured that they needed to receive comprehensive training with three foundational components of advising: conceptual, informational, and relational. The data revealed that only two out of nine academic advisors had formal training abroad (Russia, Cyprus, and Austria) that assisted them in their jobs, indicating that in a local context there were no opportunities to professionally grow. Likewise, Participant 8 was trained at George Washington University, American University, and Georgetown University.

### *Roles and Responsibilities*

Most participants' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities also included working with students on probation. They see their role in sending letters to those students and advising

them how to get out of probation. Participant 5, "I explain rules and regulations to students who are on probation. I've worked very closely with the Records Office." Some advisors believed that their role was also to provide emotional support to students. Participant 5 said, "I am not criticizing students for being lazy, for being irresponsible, you know, considering some families where they come from. I try not to be very critical. Just try to listen." Academic planning and course registration were considered crucial responsibilities by six of the advisors, and only one advisor mentioned her duty as helping students find career paths, connect them to stakeholders, and transfer them to different companies. Most of them analyzed academic catalogs of partner universities and selected universities and classes that best matched students in exchange programs, while two out of nine participants described the importance of involving parents whose children were falling behind, "Parents should be involved in the meetings." Overall, academic advisors reported diverse responsibilities, from supporting at risk-students and career planning to managing exchange programs and reviewing academic catalogs and liaising with parents.

## Meeting Frequencies

Five of the nine participants met with students at the beginning of the semester (i.e., both in-person and online meeting options) to discuss goals and expectations, followed by informal check-ins around mid-term to assess progress. Yet, the rest had regular meetings throughout the semester with students who were on probation. Participant 3 shared some thoughts regarding the frequency of meetings, "I get appointments based on teachers' feedback and students approach me whenever they want. Don't have any structured scheduled meetings." The participants believed that dedicated office hours provided consistent availability for student support. Accordingly, the main meeting times included the beginning of the semester, and during the exchange period, after midterms, or at the end of each semester.

The academic advisors also hosted Orientation Day and Orientation Sessions at school and university levels to provide essential information and support to newly admitted students They believed that both facilitated engagement and helped students feel informed and connected from the outset.

## Advisor-Student Relationship

The advisors emphasized the importance of cultivating a positive relationship with students, fostering a supportive environment where students feel safe. The majority expressed a desire to be seen as accessible and helpful, frequently describing their roles as a mother, balancing warmth with professionalism. Participant 1 asserted, "I feel like I am a bit like a mother." The participants acknowledged that being friendly encouraged students to approach them but could lead to students overstepping boundaries. Participant 5 was hesitant and shared negative experiences, "When you are close, students overuse it. That is why sometimes I am friendly and sometimes I am tough", which might challenge relationship limits.

Trust was highlighted as a foundational element in advisor- student interactions, which assisted in engaging student to open dialogue, "I create an environment for them to be sincere, and they trust me." Also, humor helped create a judgment-free environment, yet formal, "I am a bit of a humorous person, and I don't hide it in my relations with students", stated Participant 7, for nurturing and supporting student growth.

**Observed Leadership Skills and Styles in Academic Advisors.** *The leadership skills* advisors developed included communication and active listening skills, empathy, and creating a safe and friendly environment. *Communication skills were* among the most valued. Participant 2 said, "Most of all, I like communicating with students. Communication, knowing people talking to them and they like it."; "We communicate and collaborate with students that releases the stress." The responses indicated that this skill facilitated information exchange with students and a supportive environment building.

Another emerging skill was *empathy* and perceived as a central skill for leaders. Advisors noted that empathy had an importance in creating a deep understanding of the students' concerns, including their emotions and experiences, fostering a positive rapport, and building a trusted relationship with them.

*Active listening* is also highlighted as a key to relationship building. Participant 1 stated, "I like to listen to [students] much more than I like to speak." Being an active listener demonstrated a true interest in the students' concerns, "When I listen to ..., I can imagine it, I know how to help, or I can see that help is not going to work." All three skills were integral in building meaningful relationships with the students.

**Academic Advisors as Servant Leaders.** Advisor's perceived leadership style was servant leadership, and the idea was serving others through prioritizing their needs above one's own. Since servant leadership implies a strong commitment to serving the community, leaders are more interested in others' success and foster a sense of belonging. Accordingly, the responses emphasized dedication in service to support and guide the students in their academic journey.

The participants were inclined to naturally (i.e., unconsciously) serve and lead students, which indicated their intrinsic motivation. Participant 3 shared her understanding as a leader, "It is natural, it should be natural, otherwise, you will not be able to succeed in academic advising because it should come from inside." The analysis suggests that supporting others was rooted in the participants' beliefs and values as leaders. Their inner motivation highlighted their sincere service as leaders and advisors. They believed that this intrinsic motivation could support students to achieve their academic goals.

> Since my childhood, I used to teach children and my relatives. I used to do volunteer work, and I discovered I have a deep passion for teaching and education. In the field of education, I already know the purpose of my life and I think it comes naturally. (Participant 4)

Yet not all the participants were aware of the specific leadership styles and lacking awareness might prevent them from identifying any established leadership roles.

**Community Engagement.** Community engagement as another central theme introduced advisors' tendency toward servant leadership and serving their community naturally, "It comes from my heart because I am a very empathetic person in nature."; "Definitely, I don't force myself to do it." Engaging the community to collaborate and foster a sense of belonging within their teams were the main characteristics academic advisors manifesting, which are well-aligned with the servant leadership core principals. "We have a social responsibility program, we encourage students to help the community, to go to orphanages and teach those students English, etc." The advisors 'community service efforts

may have fostered empathy, nurtured a sense of belonging, and encouraged collaboration by connecting students through shared efforts to support and uplift others.

***Academic Advisors' Challenges.*** Regardless of predetermined themes, the data analysis revealed some challenges the advisors faced in their roles, which were parental interference in student affairs, lack of private office space for confidential discussions, overlapping deadlines for advising tasks, students falsifying contact information, psychological pressure from students and parents, and students' reluctance to engage in scheduled advising sessions. Participant 2 shared her concern about difficulty in better supporting the students, "Sometimes students falsify their personal contacts, even information about themselves." Participant 5 emphasized, "One more thing I don't like is our office spaces, [which]are not confidential. Academic advisors need their own offices as well." These challenges were systemic, hindered academic advising, and necessitated interventions to enhance efficiency and student support.

## Findings: Quantitative Analysis

### Research Question One

*How is academic advising and servant leadership perceived in higher education institutions in Azerbaijan?*

The findings suggest that academic advising in higher education institutions in Azerbaijan is perceived with mixed effectiveness, and the presence of servant leadership characteristics among academic advisors is inconsistent. 61.1% of students defined academic advising as support with academic challenges, indicating a strong academic focus in their expectations. However, 37.7% of students reported that advising meetings provided no significant help, and 29.6% felt that their advisor's leadership qualities did not support them, suggesting a gap between expectations and actual advising experiences. Only 28.4% described their advisor as supportive and helpful, while (27.2%) reported minimal interaction, and 20.4% described the relationship as professional but distant. These findings highlight a lack of consistent, meaningful engagement between students and advisors.

Besides, most frequently selected active listening, problem-solving skills, and trustworthiness were aligned with servant leadership traits.

Also, most students observed open communication and negotiation (30.9%) and support for initiatives and unity (29.0%), with fewer students observing empowerment and trust building (19.8%). Furthermore, while (65.4%) of students reported some form of encouragement to engage in community service, a core principle of servant leadership (34.6%) reported no encouragement at all.

Overall, students value servant leadership in advising, particularly empathy, support, and problem-solving, though not all advisors embody these traits.

### Research Question Two

*How is servant leadership associated with academic advising in these institutions?*

These qualities were most frequently selected in combinations like "active listener, problem-solver, and trustworthy" (28.4%) and "active listener, empathetic, and problem-solver" (24.7%). However, when asked what leadership characteristics they observed in their advisors, the most common responses were open communication and negotiation (30.9%) and support for initiatives and unity (29.0%). Fewer students observed empowerment and trust building (19.8%), which are central to servant leadership. Additionally, (29.6%) of students reported that their advisor's leadership qualities did not support them, and 34.6% said their advisor did not encourage community service, a key tenet of servant leadership.

Findings suggest that while students appreciate servant leadership in advising, their experiences only partially reflect it; communication and support are common, but traits like empowerment, trust, and civic engagement appear less consistently.

**Null Hypothesis (H$_0$)**

*There is no relationship between perceived support from advisor leadership qualities and encouragement to serve the community.*

A cross-tabulation was conducted to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of how their academic advisor supports them and whether their advisor encouraged them to serve the community in various ways. The table below summarizes the frequency and percentage distributions across these variables. The findings suggested that among students who felt their advisor inspires confidence, the majority (62.5%) reported being encouraged toward civic responsibility, while none reported receiving no encouragement. Students who said their advisor creates a safe environment for discussing issues were most likely to report being encouraged to take on leadership roles (35.7%) or being connected to service opportunities (25.0%). However, 10.7% still reported no encouragement. Those who felt their advisor provided clear guidance and direction were most likely to be connected to service opportunities (42.9%) and encouraged civic responsibility (28.6%), with only 4.8% reporting no encouragement. Students who said their advisor helps with solving problems showed a relatively even distribution across all encouragement types, with the highest being volunteering (21.4%) and leadership roles (23.8%). Only 9.5% reported no encouragement. Among those who felt their advisor motivates personal and academic growth, the most common forms of encouragement were leadership roles (33.3%) and civic responsibility (26.7%). None reported receiving any encouragement. Notably, all students who selected "No Support" from their advisor also reported no encouragement to serve the community (100%). These results suggest a strong link between perceived advisor support and student engagement in community service. Advisors seen as helpful and supportive are more likely to inspire civic evolvement, while those perceived as unsupportive rarely do (*see* Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Crosstabulation*

**How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? * Has your academic advisor encouraged you to serve your community? If yes, how? (Select all that apply)**

| | | | Encouraged volunteering | Connected me to service opportunities 36 | Promoted leadership roles | Encouraged civic responsibility | No encouragement | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | Inspire nfidence | Count | 2 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 8 |
| | | Expected Count | 1.1 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 2.8 | 8.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 25.0% | 0.0% | 12.5% | 62.5% | 0.0% | 100.0% |
| | Create a safe environment for discussing issues | Count | 5 | 7 | 10 | 3 | 3 | 28 |
| | | Expected Count | 3.8 | 5.2 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 9.7 | 28.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 17.9% | 25.0% | 35.7% | 10.7% | 10.7% | 100.0% |
| | Provide clear guidance and direction | Count | 4 | 9 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 21 |
| | | Expected Count | 2.9 | 3.9 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 7.3 | 21.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 19.0% | 42.9% | 4.8% | 28.6% | 4.8% | 100.0% |
| | Help with solving problems | Count | 9 | 10 | 10 | 9 | 4 | 42 |
| | | Expected Count | 5.7 | 7.8 | 7.0 | 7.0 | 14.5 | 42.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 21.4% | 23.8% | 23.8% | 21.4% | 9.5% | 100.0% |
| | Motivate personal and academic growth | Count | 2 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 15 |
| | | Expected Count | 2.0 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 5.2 | 15.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 13.3% | 26.7% | 33.3% | 26.7% | 0.0% | 100.0% |
| | No Support | Count | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 48 | 48 |
| | | Expected Count | 6.5 | 8.9 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 16.6 | 48.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Total | | Count | 22 | 30 | 27 | 27 | 56 | 162 |
| | | Expected Count | 22.0 | 30.0 | 27.0 | 27.0 | 56.0 | 162.0 |
| | | % within How do you think these qualities help your advisor support you? | 13.6% | 18.5% | 16.7% | 16.7% | 34.6% | 100.0% |

The chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of how their academic advisor supports them and whether their advisor encouraged them to serve the community in various ways. The results of the Pearson chi-square test were statistically significant, indicating a strong association between the two categorical variables Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2$ (20, N = 162) = 155.64, p < .001. These results suggest that students' perceptions of advisor support are significantly related to the types of

encouragement they receive regarding community service. The results are statistically significant; we reject the null hypothesis.

## Discussion

### Cross-Sectional Analysis, Advisor and Student Perspectives

#### *Perceptions of Advising*

Most advisors believe that they guide students academically, helping with course selection, exchange programs, and academic challenges, while some offer psychological support. Most students' responses are congruent with the advisors' insights.

The above description of academic advisors corresponds with the prescriptive and developmental models of advising (Crookston, 1972; Grites, 2013; O'Banion, 1972).

#### *Meeting Frequencies*

Some advisors regularly scheduled early-term goal-setting meetings and mid-term email check-ins, which they believed supported student success, and this view was echoed by many students. However, a slightly larger group of students reported receiving little meaningful help.

The mixed-method findings underscore the importance of meetings in boosting student achievement, echoing research connecting proactive contact to better persistence and retention (Settle & Glatz, 2011; Vander Schee, 2007).

#### *Advisor–Student Relationship*

Most advisors strive for a "motherly" warmth with students, suggesting their relationship is built on trust and approachability. Likewise, most student respondents describe their relationship with advisors as being positive, especially the one as being "supportive and helpful," "friendly and approachable". Clearly, advisor-student relationships manifest through the combined model of developmental and appreciative advising, emphasizing positivity, trust-building, and goal alignment (Bloom et al., 2008a; Crookston, 1972; O'Banion, 1972). Some advisors concerned about being too friendly might blur professional boundaries, while a few students described their relationships as distant and formal.

#### *Leadership Skills and Styles*

Advisors often demonstrated leadership through communication, empathy, active listening, and intrinsic motivation, and constantly without conscious intent. Similarly, students found their advisors as being "active listener, problem-solver, trustworthy" and "open to communication." "Having no support" was another student insight among advisors' leadership qualities. Overall, advisor leadership traits and student success align, though a few students' data claim the opposite.

Students' emphasis on empathetic, communicative, and problem-solving advisors reflects core tenets of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010). The data revealed that only a few advisors had formal training that could help develop leadership skills and styles. Yet,

others intuitively adopt servant leader behaviors defined by Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (2010).

### *Community Engagement*

Many advisors inherently promote community service, encouraging students to do civic activities where they may often take on leadership roles. This finding aligns with research on service learning which links academic content to real-life experience, fostering independence, confidence, and responsibility which are key factors in student development, persistence, and completion (Largent & Horinek, 2008a; Maynes et al., 2013; Prentice & Robinson, 2010; Tos, 2015).

The data show that while advisors strongly promote community engagement among the students; yet, the student respondents are not consistent with community engagement, and this inconsistency is congruent with Johnson and Stage (2018).

Academic advising in Azerbaijani HEIs remains fragmented, reflecting broader systemic mediocrity (Yunusova, 2019). The Decision No. 348 issued by Cabinet of Ministers on December 24, 2013, introduces academic advisors (tutors) to help students navigate credit-based curricula and support their academic progress (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2013). Local adaptations of leadership-infused advising must therefore address systemic constraints: for example, by reallocating administrative tasks away from frontline advisors or by creating shared advising hubs that foster confidentiality and collaboration.

Future research should evaluate the impact of leadership-focused training modules on both advisor behaviors and student outcomes, thereby providing an evidence base for scaling such interventions across Azerbaijan's higher education landscape.

## Conclusion

The study underscores the importance of academic advising intersected with servant leadership supporting student success, and it contributes to the growing body of research on academic advising. The findings indicate that advising is perceived as guiding students through their academic journey, including academic challenges, exchange programs, or even providing psychological support. Two types of advising models emerged: prescriptive and developmental (Antoney, 2020; Chickering, 1970; Crookston, 1972; NACADA, 2006; Tinto, 1987).

Depending on the students' needs, advisors demonstrated various styles. If students had academic challenges, then advisors guided them via schoolwide policies to support them, being a prescriptive advisor. Students' roles were simply following advisors' directions. When taking the developmental style which is seen as servant leadership, advisors act as mentors who build trustworthy relationships with students. Advisors unconsciously or consciously perform principles specific for servant leaders: listening, empathy, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Greenleaf, 1977, 2003) that had a positive influence on students' academic success.

## Limitations of the Study

The study's main limitation was a gender imbalance, with most participants (100% of interview participants and 70% of survey respondents) identifying as female, potentially introducing bias and limiting generalizability. The lack of analysis on gender-based differences may have overlooked important insights, necessitating the need for more balanced samples in future research.

Interviews were conducted in-person and online. In-person interviews offered richer communication through non-verbal cues and rapport-building but also introduced limitations that may have affected participant engagement, response depth, and interaction quality (Opdenakker, 2006), but video interviews limited interaction, possibly reducing advisors' willingness to share sensitive details or elaborate on responses (Archibald et al., 2019; Irvine et al., 2013).

## Recommendations

The study highlights several practical recommendations:

1. Designing **training programs** enhancing leadership competencies, specifically servant leadership traits.
2. Establishing **structured advising frameworks** in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. University wide leadership and policymakers can create structured advising protocols, or a handbook rooted in servant leadership principles: active listening, empathy, stewardship, and community building that directly enhances the quality of student support.
3. Expanding **longitudinal research** will help to observe how servant leadership-based framework impacts students' success in various higher education settings (i.e., across different cultural contexts) over time.

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## Declaration of Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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