



Advising for College Success: Next Steps for Policymakers, Practitioners, and Researchers

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Why This Study?

From fall 2021 to summer 2022, the College Completion Network conducted virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges with the goal of better understanding the advising policies, practices, and programs (hereafter referred to as “strategies”) that colleges use to support student success. Simultaneously, the network conducted a systematic review of the research literature on advising strategies, summarizing the evidence for a wide range of advising strategies that have been the focus of research conducted during the past 2 decades.

This brief considers the findings from each study side by side, distilling gaps between policy and practice and research.

The brief answers the following three key questions:

- Which advising strategies have strong evidence of success and are widely used?
- Which information and advising strategies are widely used, but have little or no evidence of success?
- Which information and advising strategies have strong evidence of success, but are not widely used?

Policymakers and practitioners may use the findings from this gaps analysis to make decisions about which advising strategies to implement, adapt, or discontinue. Likewise, researchers can use the findings to prioritize areas for future research.



About the College Completion Network

The College Completion Network is a research network funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. Network members include five research teams studying promising interventions for improving college completion. The network lead team, which includes researchers at the American Institutes for Research and Stanford University, supports collaboration among network teams through convenings, work groups, and outreach.

Categorizing Advising Strategies Based on Level of Evidence and Use

Figure 1 provides a matrix that categorizes advising strategies based on their level of use (from college administrators’ reports in focus groups) and their level of evidence (from the systematic review). The first question focuses on advising strategies that are **high use, high evidence**. Not only are these strategies widely used by colleges, but they also have high-quality evidence of success. The second question focuses on advising strategies that are **high use, low evidence**. These strategies are used widely by colleges, but research has not yet established whether they are effective. The final question focuses on advising strategies that are **low use, high evidence**. Research has found these strategies to be effective, but they are not widely used by colleges.

For more information, read the other articles in this series:

[Advising for College Success: Policies, Practices, and Program that Support Students on the Path to College Completion](#)

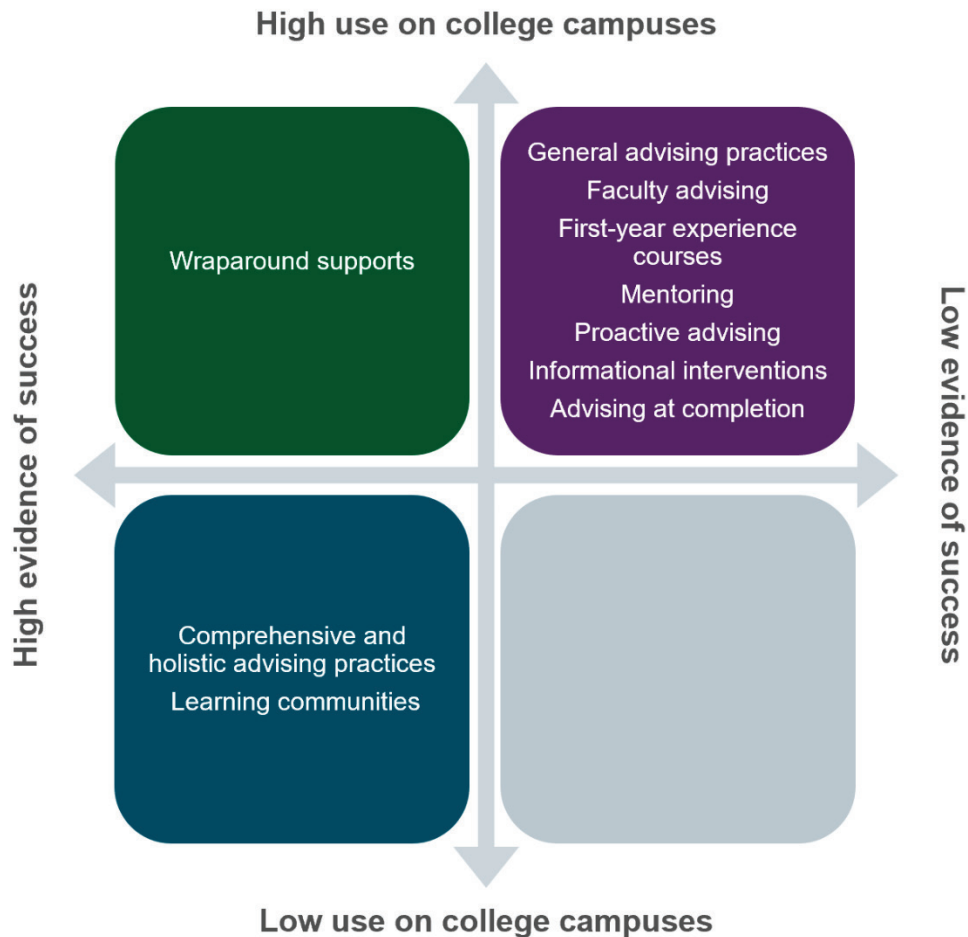
[Advising for College Success: A Systematic Review of the Evidence](#)

How did we define high use and low use? We categorized an advising strategy as high use if administrators at 40% or more of the colleges in the sample reported using that strategy; conversely, we categorized it as low use if administrators at fewer than 40% of the colleges in the sample reported using that strategy.

How did we define high and low evidence? We categorized an advising strategy as high evidence if it met the following criteria: (a) the systematic review identified at least two studies that met What Works

Clearinghouse (WWC) standards (WWC, 2020), and each of these studies found least one positive effect on student outcomes, and (b) no other studies that met WWC standards found no effect on student outcomes. We categorized an advising strategy as low evidence if these criteria were not met.

Figure 1. Matrix of advising strategies by level of evidence and level of use



▲▲ High Use, High Evidence

The findings from focus groups with college administrators reveal two practices often used by colleges to meet the advising goals that have strong support in the research literature: wraparound supports and learning communities. Colleges that do not currently use these strategies may benefit from identifying peer colleges that have implemented them successfully as well as seeking perspectives on their benefits, potential implementation challenges and ideas for overcoming them, and costs.

Wraparound Supports

Administrators at 95% of colleges in the sample indicated that they had implemented a set of wraparound support services. These services differed in focus and intensity across colleges, but the colleges often reported implementing at least some of the following supports: basic needs assistance, emergency aid programs, childcare and transportation assistance, healthcare or mental health services, assistance with applying for financial aid, and assistance with enrolling in other benefits or entitlement programs. Wraparound supports are likely to become even more common and necessary as colleges grapple with high rates of mental health concerns and food and

housing insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hartocollis, 2021). Two rigorous research studies—studies that met WWC standards with or without reservations—found positive impacts of referrals to wraparound supports on at least one student outcome (Daugherty et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017).



Next steps for policy and practice: Colleges may consider implementing or expanding access to wraparound supports, including those that address a wide range of student needs. They may want to consult with peer colleges about their experiences with different approaches to offering wraparound supports, as well as how best to market them to students to ensure equitable access.



Next steps for research: Additional research is needed on best practices for connecting students to the most appropriate wraparound supports to address their challenges and needs, and on the effectiveness and costs of different types and combinations of supports.

▲▼ High Use, Low Evidence

The findings from the policy and practice scan reveal several practices often used by colleges to meet the goals of advising that have little or inconsistent support in the research literature. General advising practices and faculty advising have not been studied rigorously, suggesting fruitful areas for future research. In addition, there are several practices that are common and have been studied, but with mixed evidence of success. The following sections describe practices that fall into these two categories. College administrators may consider looking at models with evidence of success to determine if adaptations to their practices are warranted, and researchers may consider devoting more attention to understanding the contexts and conditions under which these practices may be effective.

General Advising Practices

Research tends to focus on distinct programs, but college administrators who participated in the focus groups said advising comprises a series of practices, some of which may focus on a single facet of the advising process. Examples of these practices include new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising, precollege advising, assignment of transition-focused advisors, and advisor classroom visits.¹ However, no studies in the systematic review provided evidence of the effectiveness of these practices. They may be difficult to study because of their narrow and localized focus, and they may be so ubiquitous across colleges that most causal studies of advising reforms would include them in the comparison condition.



Next steps for policy and practice: In place of rigorous research, colleges may seek to better understand students' experience with these practices, such as through the collection of student perception data, then use these data to strengthen the practices.



Next steps for research: Researchers may consider engaging in a research and development process to optimize the effectiveness of general advising practices. For example, in partnership with advisors and students, they might develop, refine, and test an approach to advisor classroom visits. Further, because such strategies may not be enough to move the needle on college completion on their own, researchers may want to focus on intermediate outcomes, such as number of advisor visits.

Faculty Advising

When asked about their strategies for engaging students beyond the first year of college, administrators at nearly half (47%) of colleges in the nationally representative sample pointed to faculty advising. Often the professional

¹ How often college administrators cited these practices varied. New student orientation and mandatory first-year advising were common, with administrators at 70% and 68% of colleges in the study, respectively, reporting their use. The following practices were less frequently reported: precollege advising (45%), assignment to transition-focused advisors (18%), and advisor classroom visits (11%).

advising team makes a formal handoff to an individual faculty member, who is expected to meet regularly with the student to address some or all advising goals. Administrators expressed doubts about the ability of faculty members to engage sufficiently with students, and few colleges had strategies in place to monitor the quality of faculty advising. The primary reason most college administrators cited for handing advising duties off to faculty members was a lack of resources to engage in more comprehensive and holistic advising strategies organized by the advising office beyond the first year.



Next steps for policy and practice: In the face of resource constraints that create barriers to scaling professional advising, colleges may consider how to improve the effectiveness of faculty advising, such as through professional development, manageable caseloads, and release time from other duties.



Next steps for research: Research is needed to assess the extent to which faculty can provide effective advising, and to identify the most appropriate role for faculty in a holistic and comprehensive advising strategy.

First-Year Experience Courses

Administrators at 60% of colleges in the sample reported using first-year experience courses to provide advising supports to students. Although these courses are common, there is mixed support for their effectiveness in the research. The systematic review uncovered three studies of first-year experience or student success courses that met WWC standards. However, only one of these studies had a statistically significant, positive effect on at least one outcome (Jamelske, 2009). Three additional studies met criteria for promising evidence, finding positive associations between participating in first-year experience courses and student outcomes (Bliss et al., 2012; Karp et al., 2017; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003).



Next steps for policy and practice: With research suggesting that students may not benefit from first-year experience courses to the extent colleges hope, given their wide implementation, college administrators may consider rethinking their investment in this strategy or refining their approach. They may want to collect student perception data to decide how to design first-year experience courses to best meet student needs.



Next steps for research: Additional research on the effectiveness of first-year experience courses may not be needed at this time, but colleges that are committed to using these strategies may benefit from data on their relative benefits and costs.

Mentoring

Mentoring programs are ubiquitous; administrators at 98% of colleges in the sample indicated that they had implemented mentoring. Mentoring focuses on meeting a wide range of student needs through one-on-one or small group sessions and other touch points with advisors, faculty, staff, and peers. The systematic review uncovered two studies of mentoring that met WWC standards. However, only one of these studies had a statistically significant, positive effect on at least one outcome (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). Two studies did not meet WWC standards but met criteria for promising evidence, finding positive associations between participating in first-year experience courses and student outcomes (Coladarci et al., 2013; Salinitri, 2005).



Next steps for policy and practice: With research suggesting that students may not benefit from mentoring to the extent colleges hope given their wide implementation, college administrators may consider rethinking their investment in this strategy, or refining their approach. They may want to collect student perception data to make decisions about how to design mentoring to best meet student needs.



Next steps for research: Although the research base on mentoring is large, colleges need more information about the most effective mentoring approaches, and how the effectiveness of these approaches varies across contexts and student characteristics to improve both targeting and utilization.

Meta-analyses of rigorous studies of such strategies with varied characteristics can provide colleges with guidance about the best approaches for program delivery, such as how to recruit students to participate, the optimal structure and delivery of sessions, and the ideal number of touch points between students and mentors.

Proactive Advising

Administrators at 85% of colleges reported engaging in proactive advising, whereby advisors reach out to students on a regular basis to check in, assess needs, and connect students to supports and resources to ensure they remain on track for success. The systematic review found inconsistent support for proactive advising. Five studies of proactive advising met WWC standards, and three of these studies had a statistically significant, positive effect on at least one outcome (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Rodriguez Ott et al., 2020; Scrivener & Weiss, 2009). One additional study met criteria for promising evidence, finding a positive association between participating in proactive advising and student outcomes (Abelman & Molina, 2001). Proactive advising interventions that had a positive effect on student outcomes tended to require or incentivize participation, and involve sustained outreach with multiple touchpoints, including one-on-one meetings. In contrast, interventions that involved outreach to students without such features had no effect on student outcomes (Rios, 2019; Schwebel et al., 2012).



Next steps for policy and practice: College administrators may consider designing or redesigning their outreach efforts to require or incentivize participation. They also may want to ensure students are receiving multiple touchpoints with advisors, including one-on-one meetings. A barrier to implementation of this approach is the resources required to support regular one-on-one meetings between students and advisors. College administrators often reported using student data to make decisions about how to target supports to students, which can ensure the students most in need of support are receiving it.



Next steps for research: Researchers may consider engaging in a research and development process to further develop, test, and optimize proactive advising interventions that have shown promise. Further, they may consider conducting research on the costs and benefits of such approaches and determine whether lower cost approaches may be as effective as standard approaches.

Informational Interventions

Informational interventions (also referred to as “nudging”) were relatively common across colleges in the policy and practice scan (45% of colleges indicated that they had implemented nudging). An attractive feature of informational interventions is their low cost. However, the evidence on informational interventions suggests that they may be effective only when they are personalized and require follow-up meetings with advisors (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2019; Stoddard et al., 2017).



Next steps for policy and practice: Given the relatively low cost of implementation, colleges may want to consider implementing informational interventions focused on meeting key deadlines or completing important tasks. The information should be customized and incorporate sustained follow-up from advisors. Colleges also may benefit from implementing strategies that combine informational interventions with higher touch and personalized outreach to students to increase the likelihood that students follow up with an advisor.



Next steps for research: Colleges could benefit from more research on approaches to combine nudging with more intrusive and personalized outreach. Such strategies may be cost prohibitive for some colleges, so research on the costs and benefits of such approaches would be helpful.

Advising at Completion

As students approach degree completion, administrators at nearly all colleges in the study (96%) reported offering career advising, and administrators at nearly two thirds of colleges in the study (62%) reported offering pre-graduation advising. However, no studies that met the inclusion criteria for the systematic review focused on these strategies.



Next steps for policy and practice: In place of rigorous research, colleges may seek to better understand students' experience with these practices, such as through the collection of student perception data, and use these data to strengthen the practices. In addition, colleges may consider consulting with peer colleges and professional organizations about the best approaches to advising as students near degree completion.



Next steps for research: Colleges need rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of advising strategies targeted to students as they near completion, including but not limited to career advising and pregraduation advising. In addition, they could benefit from evidence related to strategies used to recruit and reengage students who left college with some credit, but no degree.

▼▲ Low Use, High Evidence

Although most research studies uncovered in the systematic review point to mixed evidence at best, two advising strategies stood out as having strong evidence of effectiveness, but were implemented infrequently by colleges.

Comprehensive Student Services

Consistent with evidence highlighted in the recent WWC effective advising practice guide (Karp et al., 2021), the advising strategies with the most promising evidence of effectiveness identified in the systematic review tended to be comprehensive and holistic; that is, they supported students throughout their time in college and went beyond the traditional advising role of helping students choose courses and programs to establish meaningful relationships with students, connect them to relevant supports, and navigate the complexities of college and life. An evaluation of the City University of New York's (CUNY's) Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP) found positive effects on credit accumulation and degree attainment; in fact, graduation rates doubled in 3 years (Scrivener et al., 2015). A replication of the program in Ohio also found positive effects on student outcomes (Miller et al., 2020). Two additional studies met criteria for promising evidence, finding a positive association between comprehensive student services programs and student outcomes (Chapman, 2017; Saltiel, 2011).



Next steps for policy and practice: Many of the colleges that did not implement comprehensive and holistic advising strategies expressed a strong interest in reforming their advising programs to better support students beyond the first year of college and to address additional goals of advising. These colleges cited resource constraints as a primary barrier for not expanding their advising programs. Colleges can learn from peer colleges about how to implement comprehensive and holistic advising practices.



Next steps for research: Extensive research has been conducted on CUNY ASAP, as well as several lower cost replication efforts as part of the Opening Doors demonstration. Additional research on the effectiveness of comprehensive student services may not be needed at this time, but researchers may consider partnering with colleges to implement and continuously improve lower cost comprehensive student services approaches. Such studies could focus on identifying barriers and facilitators to implementation.

Learning Communities

College administrators reported using learning communities to provide advising, but to a lesser extent (28%) than other advising strategies. Three studies found strong evidence of the effectiveness of learning communities on short-term student outcomes (Weiss et al., 2015; Weissman et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2018). Six additional studies met criteria for promising evidence (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Johnson, 2001; Mangold et al., 2002; Nosaka & Novak, 2014; Stassen, 2003; Walker, 2013). Importantly, the learning communities studied were accompanied by additional supports like enhanced counseling, tutoring, textbook vouchers, and peer mentoring.



Next steps for policy and practice: Colleges may consider implementing learning communities as part of a broader, comprehensive strategy to support students throughout their time in college.



Next steps for research: Extensive research has been conducted on learning communities, and additional research may not be needed at this time. However, researchers may consider studying the best approaches for incorporating learning communities into a broader, comprehensive strategy to support students throughout their time in college.

Discussion

By considering the findings from the policy and practice scan and the systematic review side by side, several implications for researchers and practitioners emerge. First, researchers and practitioners may consider how strategies with mixed evidence of success could be an important part of a broader advising strategy when implemented well. Research often finds evidence of impact on short-term outcomes but not long-term ones. A natural conclusion is that these strategies are not worth the investment and that colleges should stop using them. However, before abandoning strategies that already are widely implemented and may be popular among students, colleges should consider (a) how these strategies fit into a larger investment in advising, potentially paying off for students in combination with other strategies; and (b) consulting research to learn about nuances in implementation that may matter for effectiveness. Strategies implemented in the first year of college may not have evidence of effectiveness on longer term outcomes, but if they get students to the next year, they may be a worthwhile investment if they are coupled with other strategies that then help get students to completion. In some cases, there may be an emerging consensus among researchers about when and where such strategies can be effective. For example, in the case of nudging, researchers generally agree that nudging is most effective when focused on encouraging students to follow through with tasks that have a strict deadline and clear consequences, and also may be effective for encouraging behaviors associated with student success—such as studying for exams or attending tutoring—when effectively combined with intrusive and personalized outreach from trusted sources. Colleges could benefit from consulting relevant WWC intervention reports and practice guides and may benefit from additional research-based practice and implementation guides that help to distill these lessons and share them in a user-friendly way.

Second, when asked to share about barriers to implementing more comprehensive and holistic advising strategies, college administrators highlighted resource constraints and extremely high advising caseloads, with some advisors being assigned caseloads as high as 1,000:1. Administrators at these colleges often pointed to efforts to reduce advising caseloads as a primary strategy to improve advising, but few could reduce caseloads to a level that they felt would allow advisors to sufficiently engage with students. It is possible that the strong focus on the need to reduce advising caseloads is simply a product of the extreme resource constraints and resulting caseloads that college advising departments face across the nation, but it is worth considering as a general strategy to improve advising, particularly where advising caseloads are particularly high. More research on the costs and benefits of reducing advising caseloads would be useful for administrators grappling with how best to deploy scarce resources to improve student success. Administrators also may consider technology, such as early alert systems, to support advising in the face of high caseloads.

Finally, both the systematic review and the policy and practice scan pointed to the power and value of collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners often said they would like to invest in research-based strategies to improve advising, but they lacked the resources to do so and the internal capacity to engage in research and development on their own. Most studies included in the systematic review arose from collaborations between researchers and practitioners. These studies often provided the practitioners with necessary resources to implement promising strategies, and with external expertise to engage in and learn from rigorous research. In the case of CUNY ASAP, external resources provided a launching pad for implementing a comprehensive but resource-intensive advising strategy. Based on learnings from the original demonstration project, CUNY was able to modify the program to be less expensive, and it has been scaled with success (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017; Strumbos et al., 2020).

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