Advising for College Success: Policies, Practices, and Programs That Support Students on the Path to College Completion

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From fall 2021 to summer 2022, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), as network lead, conducted virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 colleges: a nationally representative sample of 36 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges and a purposive sample of 11 colleges selected for their track record with advising. The study identified four key findings that can inform future research:

- **Advising policies, practices, and programs often focused on the first year of college, with the intent of setting students up for success at entry.** College administrators shared six practices targeted to students' first year of college, and three of these (new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising, and first-year experience opportunities) were prevalent (reported by administrators at over 50% of colleges). Administrators also shared seven practices targeted to students' progress beyond the first year of college, and five of these (wraparound supports, mentoring, technology-enabled advising, proactive advising, and promoting a culture of care) were prevalent. In contrast, college administrators only reported two practices (career advising and pre-graduation advising) targeted to students as they neared completion, both of which were prevalent.

- **College administrators reported using different types of strategies for supporting students in the face of time and resource constraints.** These strategies included assigning transition-focused advisors in the first year, using faculty advisors, using first-year experience opportunities to provide small group advising, and using technology to support advising.

- **College administrators reported using a combination of light-touch strategies (such as nudging) and more intensive strategies (such as proactive advising) to support students' progress through college.** They emphasized the importance of developing meaningful relationships with students by promoting a culture of care, but resource constraints often meant that lighter-touch strategies were necessary.

- **Increasingly, and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have recognized the importance of meeting students' basic needs.** Nearly all college administrators who participated in the study mentioned the importance of offering a comprehensive set of wraparound support services to help students maintain access to basic needs so that they can focus on their classes.

Why This Study?

There are numerous barriers to college completion, but a key challenge is that colleges have historically been structured as "cafeterias," whereby students have considerable flexibility to make decisions about programs of study and have few formalized touch points with advisors (Bailey et al., 2015). As a result, many students proceed through college with little direction, wasting time and money.

In recent years, colleges have come to recognize that advising has the potential to foster student success by addressing a range of academic and nonacademic challenges. First, there is a growing consensus that advising should be comprehensive, meaning that it should extend well beyond the first year of college and be characterized by meaningful relationships with advisors, faculty, or support staff who work together to identify and address students' needs (Karp et al., 2021). Second, advising should be a holistic process that meets students where they are, connects them with appropriate resources and supports to address academic and life challenges throughout their time in college, and helps them consider and plan for challenges and opportunities beyond college (Karp et al., 2021).

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.

Unfortunately, the fact that college advisors are typically stretched thin with large caseloads and other responsibilities has hampered the ability of colleges to implement comprehensive and holistic advising models (Shaw et al., 2021). One approach colleges have taken to expand the role of advising in the face of time and resource constraints is using technology platforms such as customer-relationship management systems, early alerts, and degree planning tools. Such tools can facilitate more rote tasks, such as course placement, making time and space to engage more deeply with students. Advisors can then work with other staff, including faculty, coaches, and peer mentors, to offer advising supports through programs and interventions such as first-year experience courses, learning communities, and student success courses, among others (Bailey et al., 2015). Increasingly, colleges also use text messaging to share important information with students, such as deadlines for registration and FAFSA completion.

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

Advising for College Success: A Systematic Review of the Evidence

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

To better understand how colleges are using advising policies, programs, and practices to support student success, the College Completion Network conducted virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 colleges. College administrators can use the findings from this study to learn about approaches to advising other colleges are using, and the successes and challenges of implementation, and researchers who study advising and other student success initiatives can use the findings from this study to identify directions for future research.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Advising policies, practices, and programs often focused on the first year of college, with the intent of setting students up for success at entry.** College administrators shared six practices targeted to students' first year of college, and three of these (new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising, and first-year experience opportunities) were prevalent (reported by administrators at over 50% of colleges). Administrators also shared seven practices targeted to students' progress beyond the first year of college, and five of these (wraparound supports, mentoring, technology-enabled advising, proactive advising, and promoting a culture of care) were prevalent. In contrast, college administrators only reported two practices (career advising and pre-graduation advising) targeted to students as they neared completion, both of which were prevalent.

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- **Increasingly, and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have recognized the importance of meeting students' basic needs.** Nearly all college administrators who participated in the study mentioned the importance of offering a comprehensive set of wraparound support services to help students maintain access to basic needs so that they can focus on their classes.

Characterizing Advising Interventions

For the purposes of this study, we define college advising interventions broadly to include any policy, practice, or program that aims to improve student success through relationships between college personnel and college students. Our definition is intentionally broad. Historically, college advising occurred between a faculty member and a student, and focused on choosing a major and selecting courses. On many campuses, this approach to advising persists. Increasingly, however, college advising has become the responsibility of many on campus (including professional advisors, tutors, mentors, and peers), and the focus has expanded to include a range of services. For example, advising might include efforts to support the transition to college, connect students with resources on campus, build time management and study skills, and troubleshoot barriers to attendance and achievement (Abelman & Molina, 2001; Johnson et al., 2016; Jones, 2013; Rios, 2019). Recognizing that stressful experiences, such as food and housing insecurity, impede student success by diverting students' attention from their coursework (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Maroto et al., 2015), advising also increasingly connects students to resources that help them meet basic needs. The extent to which this expanded set of advising services are in place on campus—and the extent to which they are fully integrated—depends on contextual factors like staffing and other resources.

On the other end of the spectrum, some colleges have taken advantage of new technology platforms and the widespread use of mobile devices to provide information to students through text messages and emails (Ideas46, 2016). These low-touch, low-cost strategies allow colleges to convey important information to students, such as deadlines for applying for financial aid, choosing courses, signing up for orientation, making tuition payments, and

more. Some informational interventions include an interactive component by allowing students to respond to the messages and communicate directly with an advisor (for example, see Oreopoulous & Petronijevic, 2019). Although the findings from research on the effectiveness of informational interventions to date is mixed, this study considers them to be advising strategies because they play an increasing role in communicating and engaging with students. Indeed, for many students—particularly those considered self-sufficient—information may be the only form of advising they receive.

Given the broadness of advising interventions, the research team sought to organize the study by characterizing these strategies based on the goals they intend to achieve. The study describes seven goals, including four that we consider the core—or traditional—goals of advising, and three that expand on these core goals. Advising interventions are holistic when they address multiple goals, and they are comprehensive when they address these multiple goals across students' trajectories through college, rather than solely in the first year. The goals include the following:

Goals of advising:

Goal 1: Helping students enroll in appropriate courses

Goal 2: Establishing meaningful relationships with students

Goal 3: Connecting students to relevant academic supports

Goal 4: Connecting students to relevant nonacademic supports

Goal 5: Helping students navigate the complexities of college

Goal 6: Helping students navigate life challenges

Goal 7: Helping students plan for and transition to next steps

Methodological Approach

The study team conducted 60- to 90-minute virtual focus groups with administrators at 47 colleges. The study included two samples: a nationally representative sample, and a purposive sample of colleges selected for their track record with advising (referred to as the advising purposive sample).

For the nationally representative sample, the study team identified a sample of 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (see Appendix A for more information about the sampling strategy); administrators at 36 colleges agreed to participate in focus groups. For the advising purposive sample, the study team identified administrators at 15 community colleges as candidates

for recruitment. Each college was either a recent Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalist or winner, or a winner of the Leah Austin Mayer Achieving the Dream award; administrators at 11 of the colleges agreed to participate.

The study team coded focus group transcripts on a rolling basis for main themes using deductive and inductive approaches. The team began by breaking each overall advising strategy into its core components, and then characterized each of the core components according to the goals that they intended to achieve. More details about the methods used to conduct the study are in Appendix A.

Findings

The findings describe key policies, practices, and programs (referred to as "strategies" hereafter) used to support success across a student's trajectory through college. The strategies are organized into three sequential sections: entry and the first year of college, progress through college, and nearing degree completion. Caution should be used when interpreting the study findings because they only capture the knowledge of participating administrators. It is possible that the college administrators who participated in the focus groups were not aware of or did not have a full understanding of all strategies in use.
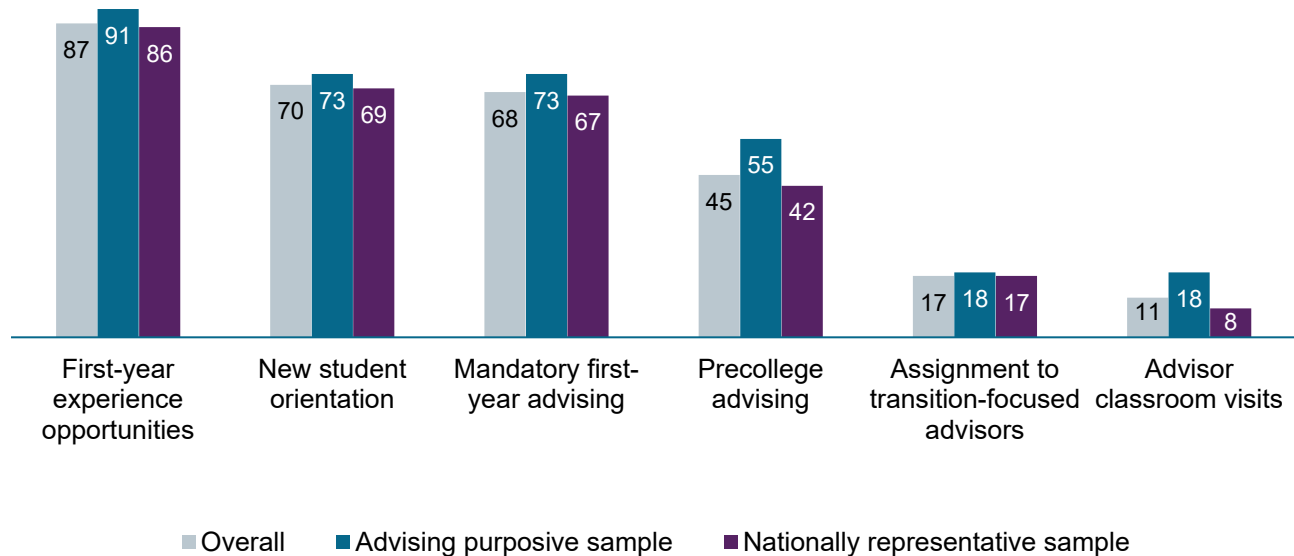
Advising strategies often focused on the first year of college, with the intent of setting students up for success at entry

College administrators reported a wide range of advising strategies focused on the first year of college. Some were provided upon students' immediate entry into college, while others spanned the first semester or entire first year. These strategies included distinct programs offered to students (for example, first-year experience opportunities and new student orientation) as well as less visible practices that guided advisors' approach (for example, mandatory advising during the first year and the assignment of students to advisors focused on the transition to college before they move on to academic advisors). Strategies also varied in the advising goals that they intended to address, but most focused on core advising goals like helping students enroll in appropriate courses, establishing meaningful relationships with students, and connecting students with academic supports.

The most common strategies shared by college administrators were first-year experience opportunities, new student orientation, and mandatory first-year advising. Reports of precollege advising fell in the middle, and the assignment of students to transition-focused advisors and advisor classroom visits were least commonly reported.

The following sections describe each advising strategy targeted to students' first year of college in more detail.

Figure 1. Percentage of colleges reporting specific practices targeted to students' first year of college, by sample

	First-year experience opportunities	New student orientation	Mandatory first-year advising	Precollege advising	Assignment to transition-focused advisors	Advisor classroom visits
Overall	87	70	68	45	17	11
Advising purposive sample	91	73	73	55	18	18
Nationally representative sample	86	69	67	42	17	8

■ Overall ■ Advising purposive sample ■ Nationally representative sample

First-Year Experience Opportunities

Administrators at 87% of colleges reported providing students with first-year experience opportunities, an umbrella term that captures a wide range of programs intended to provide academic supports and help students build a sense of community, such as first-year experience courses (also referred to as first-year seminars or student success courses) and learning communities. Drilling down, administrators at 60% of colleges reported providing first-year experience courses and 28% reported providing learning communities (data not shown). Administrators at colleges in the advising purposive sample were slightly more likely to report offering first-year experience courses (64% compared to 58% of the nationally representative sample), but administrators reported providing learning communities at similar rates across colleges in the two samples.

First-year experience courses are credit-bearing courses taught by faculty, advisors, and other staff that focus on comprehensive advising goals, such as building nonacademic skills (advising goal 4) and helping students navigate the complexities of college (advising goal 5). An advisor at a Midwestern technical college who teaches a first-year experience course shared that the course "teaches [students] things such as time management skills, how to be successful in college, but it also gets into balancing a checkbook and fiscal responsibility and things like that." First-year experience courses also provide an opportunity for advisors to develop meaningful relationships with students (advising goal 2). Administrators at some colleges shared that first-year experience courses are mandatory, providing an opportunity for advisors to engage with students in lieu of one-on-one meetings, which can be difficult to scale when caseloads are large.

Learning communities may include a first-year experience course, but also offer a wider range of supports in a small group format. Learning communities may be organized around a particular theme or affinity group (for example, students with a common major or students with a particular demographic characteristic), enabling more extensive, targeted, and culturally competent advising. One college administrator shared how they use learning communities to support students of color:

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> It's essentially a learning community for the first-year students who identify as Hispanic or Latino. What they get is, of course, they have an assigned advisor through our regular system … but then they also get to take their first-year experience course together. And it's using a culturally informed version of the first-year experience course. It talks a lot more about family roots, and cultural identity, and community and things like that, that have been culturally informed by those who develop the curriculum and identify themselves as Hispanic and Latino. We're on our second year of that, and that's been very promising … we've got advising but then we've got this other sort of support.

The administrator went on to share that the college is developing a similar program for Black students, which was an approach seen at other colleges in the sample.

New Student Orientation

College administrators at 70% of colleges reported offering new student orientation, which is often—but not always—mandatory. Administrators in the advising purposive sample were slightly more likely to report offering new student orientation than administrators in the nationally representative sample (73% compared to 69%). New student orientation, held during the summer or first few weeks of the fall, focused on core goals of advising, including helping students enroll in appropriate courses (advising goal 1), establishing meaningful relationships between advisors and students (advising goal 2), and connecting students to relevant academic supports (advising goal 3). Often, new student orientation was also designed to connect students to relevant nonacademic supports (advising goal 4).

According to college administrators, new student orientation introduces students to college, familiarizes them with available services and resources, shares "college knowledge," and creates opportunities for students to begin forming connections and building community. Advisors' involvement in orientation helps establish them as authorities related to program requirements and as resources for students should they have questions. Students who attend colleges that assign advisors typically meet their advisor for the first time at orientation, and at that time begin building a relationship with their advisor. Advisors review academic program requirements with students, help students register for their first semester, and provide information about steps that students need to take between orientation and the start of classes. New student orientation also provides an opportunity for students to complete placement tests, which colleges use to determine whether students will take entry or gateway courses in the first term. Some colleges will jump-start career exploration by having students complete career assessments, which are then provided to advisors to help inform advising sessions.

College administrators shared that offering new student orientation online since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities to reach more incoming students by making it more convenient to attend. In addition, online orientation has allowed colleges to restructure orientation to make the information provided more accessible. For example, several college administrators discussed using learning management systems to break down information into easily consumable modules that could be revisited at any time by the student. However, a drawback to holding orientation online is that students may not be able to use orientation as a launching pad for establishing meaningful relationships with advisors.

Mandatory First-Year Advising

Administrators at more than two thirds of the colleges noted providing mandatory advising in the first year. Mandatory advising was most common in the advising purposive sample, with administrators at 73% of colleges reporting using this strategy, compared to administrators at 67% of colleges in the nationally representative sample. Like new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising focused on the core goals of advising, including helping students enroll in appropriate courses (advising goal 1), establishing meaningful relationships

between advisors and students (advising goal 2), and connecting students to relevant academic supports (advising goal 3). Mandatory first-year advising was also designed to connect students to relevant nonacademic supports (advising goal 4).

In most cases, students were required to meet with an advisor at least once per term, but some colleges required more frequent meetings, and some required participation in advising beyond the first year. This requirement was often enforced by restricting the student's ability to register for the next term until they have met with an advisor, either by placing a registration hold in the student information system or having the registration system require a unique password that can only be received from an advisor. Other colleges reported more personalized outreach to students who did not attend mandatory advising appointments. For example, a community college administrator shared:

> There is basically a "First Time in College" appointment that advisors have with their students, and it's important to meet with their advisor within their first semester in the college. We know that students sometimes will try to skip the appointments. If they feel they have what they need, sometimes they try to skip. We generate a report, a no-shows report, and follow up the following semester, sort of saying, "You never met with advisor for the first time," and we follow up with those students to make sure that they have a comprehensive meeting with an advisor where they can work on their academic plan and understand exactly what their program requires and what it will take for them to be successful and graduate.

During mandatory advising meetings, students typically complete or review their academic plan, which is the "road map" of courses they plan to take during their enrollment to satisfy academic program requirements. Advisors will also use this opportunity to revisit the student's academic program and ensure it aligns with the student's career aspirations. An advisor at a community college shared that they have had conversations with students where they say, "I see you selected this particular major, but all of your strengths and all of your career interests are in [a] different area. So, how did you come to that decision?" and that this academic program and career aspiration information "provide[s] a little bit more context when we visit with students." For students who have not selected a major, advisors might connect them with career services to help them understand different options available to them. These mandatory advising appointments can also be used as a touch point for connecting students with resources on campus if they are facing academic or personal difficulties.

Precollege Advising

College administrators at 45% of colleges reported using precollege advising practices that support onboarding students to set them on a path to success during their first year. This practice was more common in the advising purposive sample, with 55% of colleges reporting offering precollege advising opportunities for incoming students, compared to 42% of colleges in the nationally representative sample.

The specific precollege advising practices varied widely across colleges of different types and sizes, but generally focused on the core goals of advising, such as helping students enroll in appropriate courses (advising goal 1). A common light-touch practice used by colleges was to share sample degree plans on their website, with links to program information or admissions pages, allowing prospective students to familiarize themselves with the curriculum and requirements. Less often, college administrators reported connecting students to an advisor during the admissions process rather than waiting until new student orientation. In addition to helping students enroll in appropriate courses, this practice helped establish meaningful relationships between advisors and students (advising goal 2).

Assignment of Transition-Focused Advisors

College administrators at 18% of colleges reported temporarily assigning advisors during the transition to college (the percentages of administrators in each sample who reported assigning transition-focused advisors were nearly identical). Assignment of transition-focused advisors focuses on three core goals of advising: helping students enroll in appropriate courses (advising goal 1), connecting students to relevant academic supports (advising goal 3), and connecting students to relevant nonacademic supports (advising goal 4).

The assignment of transition-focused advisors in the first year—also referred to as a "split model" of advising—most often occurs at colleges that use a decentralized advising model in which responsibility for advising is shared between a variety of faculty and staff across different academic units and departments. Transition-focused advisors are assigned to students until they clear a particular threshold, such as a certain number of terms completed or number of credits earned, or upon acceptance into an academic program (at colleges that have a secondary application process for specific academic programs). For example, a student enrolling at a college will be assigned an advisor from a central undeclared or exploratory advising office until they earn 30 credits, after which the student will be handed off to an academic unit advising office. Although the assignment of transition-focused advisors can be a hindrance to developing meaningful relationships with students, some advisors at colleges that used this model reported maintaining some of the relationships developed with students after the transition to a new advisor, with some students seeking their support on an informal basis.

Advisor Classroom Visits

Overall, administrators at 11% of colleges reported using classroom visits to share information and engage with students. This practice was more common in the advising purposive sample (18%) than in the nationally representative sample (8%).
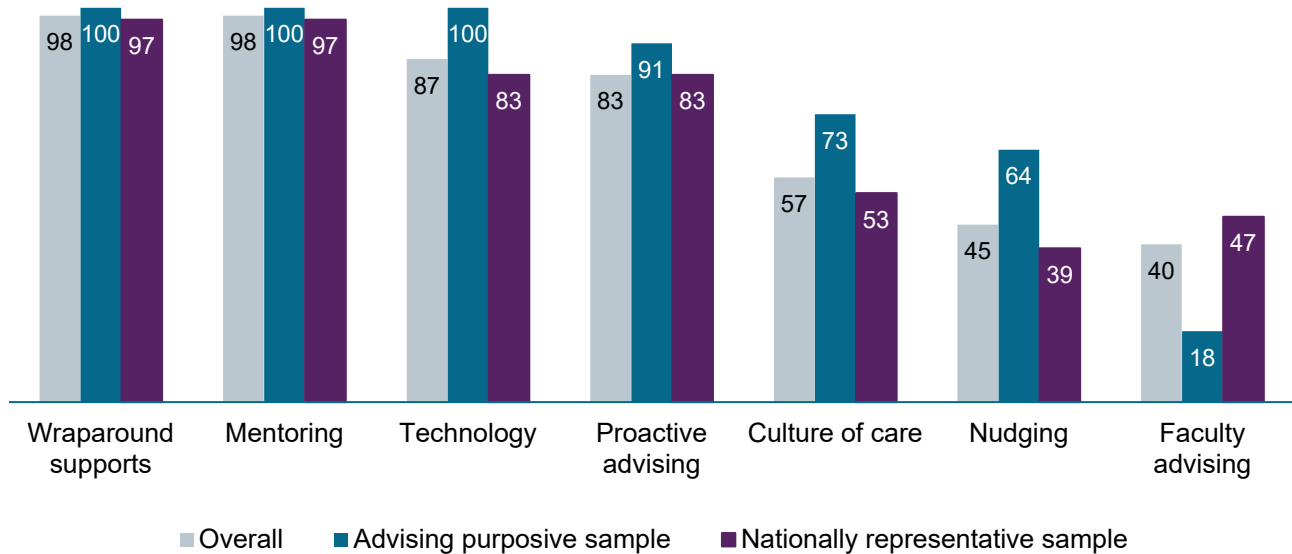
Advisors visited sections of courses first-year students usually take, such as a first-year seminar, as part of an effort to connect new students to the resources available to them (advising goals 3 and 4). Classroom visits often involved sharing information about what students can expect when working with an advisor, reviewing academic program requirements, and providing group advising to recommend courses that students might register for in the next term (advising goal 1). College administrators shared that these visits provide important information to students, but also create a touch point between advisors and students to encourage students to meet with an advisor in the future.

As students progressed beyond the first year of college, colleges continued to offer a range of advising supports, including many that addressed an expanded set of advising goals

Many colleges, particularly those in the advising purposive sample, continued holistic and comprehensive advising services beyond the first year. College administrators most often reported implementing wraparound supports, mentoring, technology-enabled advising, proactive advising, and a culture of care (see Figure 2). Administrators at fewer colleges reported relying primarily on faculty members to provide advising support for students after the first year, but administrators at nearly half of colleges in the nationally representative sample reported this practice.

The practices described varied in the advising goals that they intended to address, with some more narrowly focused than others. Some strategies (for example, wraparound supports and nudging) only addressed three advising goals, while others addressed as many as six or seven advising goals.

Figure 2. Percentage of colleges reporting specific practices targeted to students after the first year, by sample

Legend: ■ Overall ■ Advising purposive sample ■ Nationally representative sample

Practice	Overall	Advising purposive sample	Nationally representative sample
Wraparound supports	98	100	97
Mentoring	98	100	97
Technology	87	100	83
Proactive advising	83	91	83
Culture of care	57	73	53
Nudging	45	64	39
Faculty advising	40	18	47

Wraparound Supports

Increasingly, and especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges have recognized that meeting students' basic needs is a critical piece of the completion puzzle. Nearly all colleges (98%), and all colleges in the advising purposive sample, mentioned the importance of offering a comprehensive set of wraparound support services to help students maintain access to basic needs so that they can focus on their classes. Some common wraparound supports offered by colleges include emergency aid, food pantries, counseling, childcare services, transportation support, and support in accessing public benefits. Administrators often reported using a case management approach to advising to connect students to the supports they need. This approach helps advisors or case managers establish meaningful relationships with students (advising goal 2), connect students with relevant nonacademic supports (advising goal 4), and help students navigate the complexities of college and life (advising goals 5–6).

While administrators at nearly all colleges in the study reported offering some forms of wraparound supports, colleges varied considerably in their strategies for connecting students to those supports. Some colleges identified students informally during advising sessions or through other means, whereas others utilized early alert systems or risk scores to identify students most in need of supports so advisors could reach out to them to connect them to services proactively. For example, one college administrator noted:

> From food support, to housing insecurity, to other supplemental financial aid and emergency aid services, the risk score—it tells us the students who are most at risk to the ones who are not. We actually took [students with high risk scores] and assigned them to faculty and staff, to contact them, to mentor them one on one, and [provide] group mentoring. We also have the faculty call them … and refer them to services.

Other colleges mentioned partnering with national organizations like Single Stop U.S.A., partnering with community agencies, or creating positions in the advising department—such as a "basic needs coordinator"—to address student needs and prevent life challenges from hampering their progress.

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Mentoring

Nearly all colleges (98%) reported connecting students with mentoring services as a key component of their advising strategies, and as one of the core services the colleges use to provide academic support (advising goal 3). While mentoring services are ubiquitous, advisors use a range of strategies to connect students who are struggling academically to robust mentoring. Some colleges take a hands-off approach, simply encouraging students to engage with the services. Others use early alerts or risk scores to identify students who are struggling academically and proactively connect them to mentoring services. Others focus on a set of courses with high enrollment and low pass rates and send reminders to students about the availability of mentoring services at key times during the semester, such as around midterms or finals.

Technology-Enabled Advising

The majority (87%) of administrators at colleges in the study cited the central role of technology in supporting their advising process. Many colleges reported using a customer relationship management (CRM) system to track student information and communicate more efficiently with students. In many cases, colleges reported leveraging their CRM system as an early alert system to identify students who need extra support and connect them to relevant academic and nonacademic supports (advising goals 3–4). Other colleges reported the use of degree-mapping and educational planning tools to facilitate discussions with students about choosing courses, degree programs, or pathways. The use of such technology was more prevalent among the advising purposive sample (100%) than the nationally representative sample (83%).

Administrators noted that well-implemented technology platforms can greatly facilitate advising sessions with students and reduce the time advisors need to spend to look up relevant information about student background or degree plans independently. This can free up time for advisors to engage in other aspects of advising or increase their caseloads. Early alerts also serve to get important information to advisors and advising support staff so that they can intervene quickly. Technology tools like these have the potential to help advisors address all advising goals. However, many administrators cited the cost of common advising technology platforms as a key barrier that can limit their use.

Proactive Advising

College administrators at 85% of colleges reported engaging in proactive advising (also referred to as intrusive 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. This practice was slightly more common in the advising purposive sample, with 91% of colleges reporting the use of proactive advising as students progressed beyond the first year, compared to 83% of colleges in the nationally representative sample.

While colleges reported using proactive advising to help students choose appropriate courses throughout college (advising goal 1), most colleges that engage in proactive advising reported doing so as part of a larger strategy to more effectively engage and support students. Colleges reported collaborating with mentors or coaches, whom they often referred to as "navigators," to establish meaningful relationships with students (advising goal 2), connect students to a range of academic and nonacademic supports (advising goals 3–4), and navigate challenges related to college or life generally (advising goals 4–5). In many cases, faculty members engaged in the proactive advising process by helping to identify students in need of support, providing input and advice on the overall process, or by engaging directly with students. As one administrator described:

> In the BA program we have navigators … the expectation for navigators is that they are really working to connect students with other resources, like helping them navigate the entire system for the college, but also [other things] going on in their lives. Because we predominantly, we get adults who have families, who have jobs, who have all of these pieces … there's an expectation that we are doing a lot of the navigation pieces for first-generation students, who don't know that you have to apply for financial aid months in advance, or that don't know that there's a resource to help find housing.

While some colleges organized proactive advising around regular touch points with students, most colleges used technology such as early alerts to trigger proactive engagements with students deemed to be most in need of support or intervention, as described in more detail below.

Culture of Care

Administrators at 57% of colleges reported creating a "culture of care" for students. This practice was more common among colleges in the advising purposive sample (73%) than in the nationally representative sample (53%).

At colleges that engage in holistic advising and care, administrators often framed advisors as caregivers who meet students where they are, foster strong relationships with students (advising goal 2), help them connect to relevant supports (advising goals 3–4), and help them navigate the complexities of college and life (advising goals 5–6). Administrators noted care as the core of their professional advising approach, be it through a "culture of caring," a "culture of care," a "coordinated care model of advising," formalized care networks (for example, a CARE Team, CARES team, or Center of Care), or some combination of these. As part of this culture of care, advising offices implement other positive, strengths-based, culturally competent approaches to advising. One college administrator shared the motivation behind this approach:

> I think that's a misconception about advisors that we're just schedulers—that we put students into classes and then, and then we go on our way, and that's not the case. It's really about learning who the students are … if we build a rapport, if we can connect with our students, then the component of our culture, which is the culture of caring, is able to be introduced and maintained so that our students hopefully along the way will meet their academic and career goals.

Nudging

Just under half (45%) of administrators at colleges in the study reported the use of text or email-based "nudges" to encourage students to complete important tasks, meet with their advisor, or engage with relevant supports. The use of nudging was more common among colleges in the advising purposive sample (64%) than among colleges in the nationally representative sample (39%). While colleges' primary use of nudging was to remind students to complete important tasks—particularly related to enrollment, registration, and applying for financial aid—many administrators reported using nudges to encourage students to engage with relevant supports (advising goals 3–4) and navigate the complexities of college (advising goal 5). In some cases, administrators reported using data and technology to send targeted nudges—for example, to students in particular courses or students who were at risk of not completing tasks.

Faculty Advisors

Administrators at 40% of colleges reported that they relied primarily or exclusively on faculty members to handle most advising activities as students progressed beyond the first year. This practice was significantly less common among colleges from the advising purposive sample (18%) than the nationally representative sample (47%).

Colleges that reported using faculty advisors generally reported that the intention was for faculty members to help students choose courses (advising goal 1), foster meaningful relationships (advising goal 2), connect with academic and nonacademic supports (advising goals 3–4), navigate the complexities of college and life (advising goals 5–6), and plan for and transition to next steps (advising goal 7). However, administrators generally recognized that these were unreasonable expectations for overstretched faculty, and few had strategies in place to effectively monitor whether faculty advising was meeting these goals or hold faculty members accountable for doing so. Administrators at most colleges that reported heavy reliance upon faculty advising reported that the primary reason for doing so was a lack of resources to support professional advising (that is, staff members whose sole job is advising) and to keep advising caseloads to a reasonable level. One administrator noted:

> We can't afford to hire 30 professional staff advisors. If you want the advisee-to-advisor ratio to be roughly 50:1 … we can't afford to have that type of ratio with full-time staff advisors. It's just not feasible. And so we had to shift to using faculty, because faculty are already on the payroll, they're already here. … If we wanted to move more towards a proactive or intrusive advising model, we can't afford to do that with staff. … If we were waiting for the students to kind of come to us to get registered, we can handle that. But to really do intrusive advising, there was no way we could do that with the staffing we have on the professional side.

College administrators reported fewer practices targeted toward students approaching the end of their degree programs relative to those who just began

Colleges reported fewer practices oriented toward the end of a student's degree program. The practices reported included career advising and pre-graduation advising (see Figure 3). These practices all focused on the advising goal of helping students plan for and transition to next steps (goal 7), but some also focused on additional advising goals.

Figure 3. Percentage of colleges reporting specific practices targeted to students as they near completion, by sample

<div align="center">■ Overall   ■ Advising purposive sample   ■ Nationally representative sample</div>
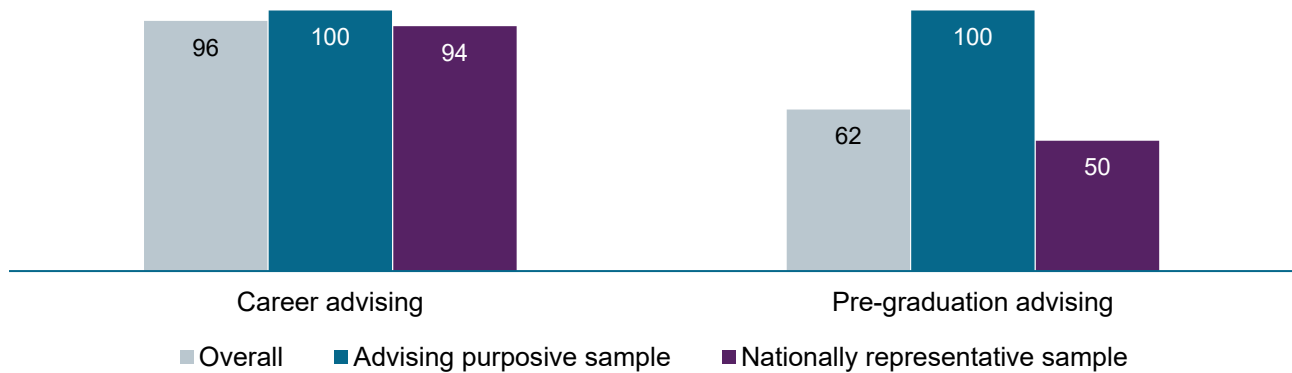
Career Advising

Administrators at nearly all colleges in the study (96%) reported a focus on helping students choose a career and connect to jobs (advising goal 7), and the percentage of administrators who reported implementing career advising was similar across the two samples. Administrators reported using a career center on campus where students can receive assistance with conducting job and internship searches, developing resumes, and practicing for interviews. In addition, career centers host job fairs throughout the year. Administrators from several colleges mentioned being able to provide their students with access to a virtual career center. Students can conduct interest assessments and explore different careers. In some cases, colleges utilize dedicated career advisors or an internship coordinator to help connect students to jobs and internships. It was also the norm for technical programs to have internships and practicums embedded in the curriculum.

Often colleges do not provide career services until students are close to completion, at some colleges career advising begins on day one. As one administrator stated:

> Because a lot of students start off not knowing what they want to major in, there is an ongoing connection with career and transfer services from the start. Part of what advising likes to do is help students make the connection between the degree and what they can do with their degree.

Another administrator shared that having a career advisor stay connected with the student from the beginning of their time on campus through to the end reduces their stress and anxiety because "the fear of what it means to complete the degree can be very scary for a lot of students." At these colleges, where academic advising and career services are intertwined, support for students' transition to the labor market is integrated into students' academic experiences. For example, one college revamped their first-year experience course from a seminar informing students about study skills and resources on campus to a "Design Your Life" curriculum. The advisor shared, "Our approach is that when students have clarity of purpose about their end goal and what they want, they are more inclined to persist. The class is about building their life on campus towards post-graduation life, so a lot of that is around career readiness."

Pre-Graduation Advising

Over half (62%) of administrators at colleges in the study cited the importance of pre-graduation advising for helping students efficiently enroll in courses to complete their degree in a timely manner and stay on track to

graduate. This practice was significantly more prevalent among colleges in the advising purposive sample (100%) than among colleges in the nationally representative sample (50%).

While administrators in many colleges reported that pre-graduation advising was triggered when students applied for graduation, other colleges utilized a proactive approach and used technology to identify and reach out to students who were nearing completion of their degree. In either case, pre-graduation advising can help students choose appropriate courses to complete their degree (advising goal 1), connect to relevant supports (advising goals 3–4), and navigate challenges as they near completion (advising goals 5–6). In some cases, administrators also reported using pre-graduation advising as an opportunity to engage in discussions with students about their plans after college (advising goal 7). Some administrators reported that pre-graduation advising was handled by a student's primary advisor, while other administrators shared that they engaged dedicated pre-graduation advising staff. A number of administrators shared that resource constraints made it challenging to sufficiently engage students in pre-graduation advising, but believed it to be important. As one administrator shared:

> Some really successful programs across the nation have specific advisors dedicated to just graduation advising. We think that's a really important part of the puzzle—to ensure time to graduation and not just semesterly retention.

Discussion

Colleges implement a wide range of strategies to support students throughout their college careers. These strategies are often provided early in a student's trajectory through college. At entry, students have opportunities to access numerous supports, such as precollege advising, new student orientation, and first-year experience opportunities. In addition, first-year students often participate in mandatory advising and receive outreach from advisors who are assigned to them or who visit their classrooms. As students move through college, they continue to receive support in the form of proactive advising, targeted nudges, wraparound supports, and technology-enabled advising. As students near completion, advising supports include pre-graduation advising and career advising. Future research is needed to better understand, from the perspective of students, how these programs interact with one another and how students engage with multiple strategies over the course of their college career.

The focus groups revealed how colleges are coping with resource constraints, and the tradeoffs advisors must make between establishing meaningful relationships with students and reaching as many students as possible. Some of the strategies college administrators reported included assigning transition-focused advisors in the first year, using faculty advisors, using first-year experience opportunities to provide small group advising, and using technology to support advising. College administrators in the advising purposive sample were less likely to report using faculty advisors and were the most likely to report engaging in proactive advising. Future research is needed to better understand how colleges choose among advising strategies in the face of resource constraints, and how they make decisions about targeting more intensive advising strategies to students at particular timepoints or with particular needs.

Finally, focus group discussions revealed the importance of providing wraparound supports to students to meet their basic needs, which is increasingly seen as a critical part of the completion puzzle. Most colleges across the two samples reported providing these supports, although there was variation in which supports were provided, how advisors identified students in need of support, and the approach to providing support. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students requiring wraparound supports is likely to continue to expand, particularly as mental health concerns become an increasingly critical issue facing colleges.

Limitations

This study has three primary limitations.

First, the findings from the focus groups only captured whether a practice was used on campus, and not how widespread its use was. For example, administrators at 83% of colleges reported using proactive advising, but the number of students reached by this type of outreach is not known. It could be that only a small percentage of students on campus benefited from this type of advising.

Second, the findings only capture the knowledge of those participating in focus groups. It is possible that the college administrators who participated in the focus groups were not aware of or did not have a full understanding of all practices in use (particularly more informal practices). The focus groups attempted to incorporate the voices of many campus professionals—from high-level administrators to advisors working directly with students—but there may be gaps in the knowledge of the participants.

Finally, the findings do not reflect the experiences of students. Future research that incorporates the voices of students is needed to better understand how students experience different college advising strategies.

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Appendix A: Policy, Practice, and Program Scan Methods

This appendix describes how the study team conducted the policy, practice, and program scan, including the sampling approach and the methods used to conduct the focus groups and analyze the data collected.

Sampling Approach

The policy, practice, and program scan used two sampling approaches: a purposive sample of colleges selected based on their track record of success with advising, and a nationally representative sample.

Purposive Sample

For the purposive sample, the study team selected colleges that engaged in state-of-the-art approaches to advising. The study team set out to recruit 15 colleges that had a demonstrated track record of success with advising, including recent Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalists or winners and winners of the Leah Austin Mayer Achieving the Dream award. After identifying the 15 colleges, the study team began recruitment to participate in the focus groups. Of the 15 colleges identified for the advising purposive sample, 11 agreed to participate in focus groups.

Nationally Representative Sample

For the nationally representative sample, the study team worked with Beth Tipton at Northwestern University to create a nationally representative sample of 2-year and broad-access 4-year colleges. Tipton used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to sample colleges.

The population to be sampled included community colleges and broad-access 4-year colleges, and excluded the following:

- For-profit colleges
- Large online universities
- Special-focus colleges as defined by the Carnegie 2010 classification
- Colleges with an acceptance rate of less than 75%
- Colleges that did not have a Carnegie classification and had fewer than 1,000 students (these tend to be special-focus colleges)

The resulting population of 1,597 colleges was stratified on 12 variables using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System:

- *Urbanicity:* Rural
- *Urbanicity:* Town
- *Urbanicity:* Suburb
- *Urbanicity:* City
- *Control:* Public
- *Size:* Log of the total number of students enrolled in an undergraduate program in the college
- *Minority-serving status:* Percentage of White students
- *Low-income-serving status:* Percentage of students receiving Pell Grants
- *Age:* Percentage of students older than 25 years of age
- *Offers graduate degrees*

- *Average SAT score*
- *Average ACT score*

Based on these variables, the sampling team conducted a *k*-means cluster analysis, varying the number of clusters. When there are seven clusters (strata), more than 80% of the variation in these strata is between strata, meaning that the strata themselves are mostly homogeneous (i.e., consisting of similar colleges on the given variables). Colleges were ranked within stratum, with the colleges that were "most average" for that stratum at the top and colleges that were "least average" for that stratum at the bottom. The sampling team provided a target number of colleges to recruit from each stratum and a list of colleges in ranked order.

Focus Groups Methods

Before conducting the focus groups, the team consulted prior literature and findings from the website scans to develop a discussion protocol. This discussion protocol was intentionally broad and used open-ended questions to guide conversation. The protocol included questions related to both advising and supports for returning students, which is the focus of a separate study that draws on these data.

The study team began recruitment for focus groups in fall 2020, relying on their network to facilitate outreach to college presidents when possible. When the team did not have connections at colleges, they identified college vice presidents, deans, and provosts for outreach. The research team offered four $25 Amazon gift cards that participating administrators could deliver to students as a small token of appreciation for participating in the focus groups. Ultimately, administrators at 47 colleges agreed to participate.

To conduct the focus group discussion, two members of the study team conducted a 60- to 90-minute virtual focus group with the three to seven administrators from each college. The administrators included college advisors, directors of student services, associate deans, and others who shape college advising. One member of the study team was the primary facilitator; the second member took notes. Each focus group was audio recorded and transcribed by Rev.com.

The research team developed a comprehensive codebook to support robust within- and cross-case analyses of the transcribed interview data using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Codebook development entailed two major steps: (1) the research team established a preliminary set of codes based on our key constructs of interest, and (2) we used this preliminary set of codes to code a sample of the interview transcripts, using both inductive and deductive coding methods to generate a final set of codes. The team structured the final set of codes so that analysts could apply more than one code to the same interview passage. Throughout the analytic process, the research team engaged in regular communication to ensure consistent application of the coding structure, strategies, and rules for coding the data. Specifically, to ensure that data were coded consistently and reliably, the coding stage involved a multistep process that first included practice coding and double coding a subset of transcripts as an initial assessment of interrater agreement. The team then discussed and reconciled the few discrepancies in their application of codes and finalized the codes and code definitions to guide the subsequent coding process. Each researcher independently coded a set of the transcripts and the full team met weekly to debrief, review, and discuss code applications and any challenges or questions arising throughout the coding process. Major emergent patterns and themes also were identified and discussed to support shared understanding and interpretation of the coded data.

Based on this thematic analysis, the research team developed a list of strategies reported by colleges. Then the team determined the prevalence of each strategy across the two samples by counting their presence in each transcript. The research team drew on the counts, the thematic analysis, and direct quotes from administrators when constructing the findings.

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