Navigating College with MAAPS: Students' Perceptions of a Proactive Advising Approach

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In 2016, State University (a pseudonym) implemented a proactive advising approach known as Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS). The initiative was designed to improve academic achievement and retention measures for first-generation students and students from limited-income backgrounds. Using a qualitative methodological design, the purpose of this study was to learn about students' experiences with MAAPS advisors and their overall perceptions of the program. Findings confirm prior research that suggests some students may benefit from advisors' proactive communications and holistic approach. However, the design and implementation of MAAPS discouraged many from participating in the initiative, highlighting several implications for improved future practice.

As higher education policymakers strive to improve measures of equity and student success, one of the greatest obstacles to realizing these goals is the achievement gap between students from low socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds[1] and their more socioeconomically-advantaged peers. Since the 1970s, the achievement gap between students from high- and low-SES backgrounds has steadily become more pronounced (Calahan et al., 2020; Reardon, 2013). These differences are not the fault of our students, as the overall culture of higher education perpetuates a classist experience that favors continuing-generation students and those from middle-class or high-SES backgrounds (Jury et al., 2017). Students from low-SES backgrounds often face a range of obstacles throughout their academic careers, beginning before they arrive on campus. These challenges include insufficient preparation for college-level coursework (Heuer & Stullich, 2011), placement into remedial classes (Calcagno & Long, 2008; Complete College America, 2012), competing familial responsibilities (Castleman & Page, 2015), and financial pressures (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Bettinger 2004). First-generation students and students from limited-income backgrounds routinely face psychological barriers throughout their college journey, including high levels of stress due to perceived lack of institutional support (Garriott & Nisle, 2018), fear of failure (Spencer & Castano, 2007), and pervasive messages, which imply they do not belong (Jury et al., 2019; Ostrove & Long, 2007). In addition, Students of Color from low-SES backgrounds experience marginalization and exclusion in ways that are distinct from their White peers (Oikonomidoy et al., 2020). Compounding these challenges, students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to avoid sharing their concerns with close friends and family (Barry et al., 2009). Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the task of successfully navigating college can be challenging for students from low-SES backgrounds.

Proactive academic advising is one approach that may foster students' sense of engagement with their institution and help them navigate obstacles on their path to academic success. Proactive advising is generally understood as intentional contact initiated by the institution designed to foster positive relationships between students and advisors and facilitate students' persistence and success (Varney, 2013). In 2016, State University (a pseudonym) implemented a proactive advising approach known as Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS) to support the engagement and success of first-generation

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[1] In this article, we use the term "students from low socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds" to encompass those who identify as first-generation college students as well as students from limited-income backgrounds. We acknowledge that these two terms often overlap but actually refer to two distinct experiences. Our use of the term "students from low-SES backgrounds" is consistent with the criteria used by Jury et al. (2017) in their literature review concerning psychological barriers that students from low-SES backgrounds face in higher education environments. This definition is also consistent with inclusion criteria from the MAAPS intervention, which specifically prioritized the needs of limited-income and first-generation college students. Students in our sample could identify with either one or both experiences.

students and students from limited-income backgrounds. This project was developed in coordination with the University Innovation Alliance (UIA). The initiative's goal was to implement Bettinger and Baker's (2014) scholarship recommendations on student coaching and validate their finding that proactive advising can significantly improve retention measures for students from low-SES backgrounds. A prior randomized control trial (RCT) study compared academic achievement measures of students who were offered the MAAPS intervention (in addition to the university's primary academic advising services) with students who only worked with primary advisors. This RCT study showed no significant differences between groups at most institutions (Alamuddin et al., 2018, 2019). However, student surveys and focus groups suggested some students gained beneficial skills and experiences (Alamuddin et al., 2019). These comments suggested the need to further explore students' perceptions of MAAPS advising to identify recommendations for improving the design and implementation of this approach. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about students' experiences with MAAPS advisors (also known as student success specialists or specialists). Research questions included:

RQ1. What were students' experiences with the MAAPS advising intervention;

RQ2. How did students perceive the advising they received from the university;

RQ3. In what ways, if any, did students believe MAAPS advising contributed to their academic success; and

RQ4. What barriers, if any, limited students' engagement with MAAPS advisors?

Theoretical Framework and Literature

Historically, many researchers believed college students were most likely to succeed when they fully integrated with their institution's academic, cultural, and social life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Higher education scholars have since moved away from this integration viewpoint, believing that it unfairly assigns students the responsibility of acculturating to campus life (Bensimon, 2007; Berger, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). Campus organizations have historically been—and in many ways remain—exclusive environments dominated by racist, sexist, and classist norms, which explains why

it is burdensome for students from systemically-minoritized communities to assimilate to university life (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2014). Instead, researchers have increasingly stressed the importance of an adaptive approach, whereby institutions and their actors operate with flexibility and creativity to meet the varied needs of the diverse students they serve (Museus, 2014; Tinto, 2010, 2012). In combination with early-alert technologies that monitor student warning signs, a proactive advising approach is one example of how such adaptive strategies may function in practice. Such critique of Tinto's (1987, 1993) integration theory served as a framework to guide the current project.

Overview of Proactive Advising

Early-alert interventions paired with proactive advising have emerged to provide timely support to students at the greatest risk of departure from the institution (Finnie et al., 2017; Valentine & Price, 2020). Proactive advisors leverage a relational approach that emphasizes trust and communication to help students assume responsibility for their academic success (Glennen, 1975; Varney, 2013). Specifically, proactive advisors focus on: reaching out to students before they ask for help; gaining students' trust and building meaningful relationships; asking questions that illuminate students' underlying concerns or needs; and empowering students to take responsibility for their academic success and performance (Varney, 2013). Among the most important features of proactive advising is that staff monitor students' academic performance, identify early warning signs, and initiate contact with students to offer assistance (Molina & Abelman, 2000). Research has suggested there are various benefits associated with this approach.

Benefits of Proactive Advising

Compared to more passive delivery models such as a "build it, and they will come" approach (Dietsche, 2012, p. 85), proactive advising can facilitate important outcomes such as improved grades and retention rates (Allen & Smith, 2008; Molina & Abelman, 2000). The benefits accrued through proactive advising are also known to persist over time (Abelman & Molina, 2001; Bettinger & Baker, 2014). In their longitudinal study of nearly 14,000 students, Bettinger and Baker (2014) compared retention and completion rates of students who were randomly selected for proactive advising with a control group. The

authors found proactive advising significantly improved student retention during the treatment period and over the ensuing 12 months, even after controlling for demographic and academic background (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Proactive advising is an especially effective practice for supporting first-generation students (Swecker et al., 2013), Students of Color (Museus & Ravello, 2010), students on academic probation (Abelman & Molina, 2002), and students who enter college underprepared (Abelman & Molina, 2002; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Swecker et al., 2013). While research has overwhelmingly confirmed the benefits of proactive outreach, there are various strategies for designing and implementing these services.

Options for Administering Proactive Advising

One way to ensure students connect with an advisor is to enforce mandatory requirements for scheduling and keeping appointments. Prior research has framed mandatory appointments as a highly-intrusive strategy that, compared with passive approaches, is more likely to produce long-term, positive results (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Vander Schee, 2007). Yet some worry this approach may negatively shape students' attitudes toward their advisor and deter motivation to fully invest in this relationship (Donaldson et al., 2016). Others have argued for intrusive communications, such as phone calls or emails that encourage but do not require students to attend advising sessions, but they noted that in some cases, these methods might not be intrusive enough to affect students' contact with advisors, student success, or retention metrics (Schwebel et al., 2008; Schwebel et al., 2012).

Some researchers have advocated for the use of learning outcomes (Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019) or competencies (Walters, 2016) to guide conversations between advisors and students. However, the fidelity of such programs is limited by available training, staff turnover, and the fact that advisors are often asked to handle multiple priorities at any given moment. For example, the institutions in Bettinger and Baker's (2014) study relied on a team of highly-trained coaches employed by a private coaching service to contact students via phone, email, text message, and social media. However, when individual institutions manage a proactive advising program, advisors may not have access to individualized training and feedback. Additionally, they may not have dedicated time for outreach and advising

sessions. These considerations can make it difficult to replicate quality interactions between advisors and students (Mayhew et al., 2016). Because proactive advising has many dimensions, future studies must better explain how specific structures, processes, and outreach shape students' engagement and success (Schwebel et al., 2012). This way, researchers can attempt to replicate findings, and practitioners can implement evidence-based recommendations with greater fidelity.

Limitations of Prior Scholarship

Prior studies have often used experimental designs that compare outcomes for students who receive proactive advising with those assigned to a control group. Few, however, have looked at students' experiences with proactive advising by using a diverse sample and qualitative methods (Alvarado & Olson, 2020). Because student cohorts increasingly reflect many dimensions of diversity, advising research must focus more on disaggregating the experiences of systemically-minoritized student populations from their socially-advantaged peers and understand these interventions from students' points of view (Alvarado & Olson, 2020).

Proactive advising is an adaptive approach designed to help students overcome personal and institutional barriers to seeking help (Dietsche, 2012); however, not all students will decide to participate. Although much of the help-seeking literature treats seeking support as a logical and expected behavior, help seeking varies based on social and psychological factors, including understanding where and how to access support (Finney et al., 2018; Rivera, 2019). For example, students might refrain from asking for help if they fear doing so will give the impression they are unintelligent or incapable (Karabenick, 2004). For first-generation students, this uncertainty of where to go for help was particularly pronounced (Rivera, 2019). How can proactive advising mitigate these barriers to accessing help? This study seeks to address these concerns.

Methodology and Research Methods

To understand students' experiences with the MAAPS intervention, we employed a qualitative methodological design. Specifically, the research team used a constructivist approach to thematic analysis (Crotty, 1998). Thematic analysis is a widely-used methodology offering qualitative

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Campus Change*	First-Gen Status	Met In-Person with MAAPS Specialist
Adrianne	Black / African American	Female	Yes	First-Gen	Never
Anshu	Asian	Male	No	Continuing-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Jake	White	Male	Yes	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Jessica	White	Female	No	First-Gen	Limited
Katie	Asian	Female	No	First-Gen	Limited
Leah	Multiracial	Female	Yes**	Continuing-Gen	Never
Marissa	White	Female	Yes	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Nishant	Asian	Male	No	First-Gen	Never
Scott	Asian	Male	No	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Vicki	White	Female	No	Continuing-Gen	Limited

Note. *Campus change refers to students who started their degree programs at one of State University's regional campuses and moved to the main campus to complete their degree.
**Changed from one regional campus to another.

researchers a flexible yet trustworthy approach to identifying and reporting findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017). Researchers look for key concepts within and across data to generate themes, which are defined as insights related to the research questions that represent "some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). As researchers gradually build their list of potential themes, analysis progresses from description (noting the presence of patterns within data) to interpretation (discussing the broader meaning of themes in relation to the research questions and extant literature) to ultimately reporting. One of the greatest strengths to thematic analysis is that it can be applied to many epistemological commitments, so long as research-ers explicitly name their perspectives for their readers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We leveraged a constructivist paradigm, embracing a relativist ontology whereby knowledge was co-constructed by researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jones et al., 2014). Our objectives were to understand the MAAPS intervention from the student perspective, acknowledge our position-alities as the researchers conducting this study, and attend to credibility and authenticity when reporting findings (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Sampling Criteria and Recruitment

All prospective participants enrolled at State University during the fall 2016 term and were offered the MAAPS intervention by one of three dedicated advising specialists during their first year of school; the intervention concluded at the end of the spring 2019 term. Recruitment for this study occurred in fall 2020. Each participant was Pell-eligible based on their FAFSA application and/or self-identified as a first-generation college student, earned over 90 credit hours[2], and had not invoked FERPA. We sent recruitment messages to 114 prospective participants via email, briefly explained the purpose of the study, and provided a link for students to register for an interview. In addition, we offered all students a $25 gift card as an incentive to participate. After the initial outreach, students were sent two follow-up recruitment messages, each roughly two weeks apart. Consistent with sampling guidelines for thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), 10 students agreed to an hour-long, one-on-one, semistructured interview. All interviews were conducted using secure Zoom videoconferencing because of COVID-19 precautions. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

The lead author (Matt) conducted each interview and followed a similar protocol. Protocol creation was guided by the principles of narrative inquiry, which is appropriate for the study of past experiences because it facilitates "retrospective meaning making" (Chase, 2010, p. 214). To establish rapport, Matt began by asking

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[2] Students were considered 4th-year students if they had completed over 90 credit hours. Some, however, were in their 5th-year at the university, and others had started graduate programs.

participants to describe their high school experience and transition to college. Conversation then shifted to academic or social hardships that students may have experienced during their time at the university. Next, Matt asked students to describe their relationship with their primary advisor, describe their relationship with the MAAPS team, and compare/contrast those experiences. Finally, Matt asked students to describe how advisors supported their academic success and what additional support would have been most helpful. The semistructured nature of these interviews allowed for follow-up questions when there were opportunities to gather additional detail related to the research questions. Often, these follow-up questions centered around perceived strengths and limitations of the MAAPS intervention.

Immediately following each interview, Matt recorded memos in a research journal. These memos constituted an important means of tracking initial impressions, nonverbal communication, body language, observations, and ideas to further explore in successive interviews. Audio recordings of the interviews were professionally transcribed and confirmed for accuracy. We then employed a two-stage, thematic approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, we scanned interview transcripts to develop a list of tentative codes based on the MAAPS advising process, students' perceptions of MAAPS advising, and students' successes and challenges during college. Although these notes provided early direction, we primarily used an open-coding scheme throughout the first stage of analysis, using a line-by-line approach to remain close to the data (Gibbs, 2007). Following this line-by-line coding stage, we collated codes into potential themes and conducted a second round of coding, looking for analytic patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These focused codes provided a "thematic map" of the overall phenomena under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, we selected clear and compelling excerpts from participants' narratives to provide supporting evidence for each theme and bring findings to life.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to qualitative research methods designed to instill confidence in one's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, trustworthiness measures included prolonged engagement with data, memoing, regular peer debrief conversations, and vetting potential themes to achieve consensus (Nowell et al., 2017). Further, consistent with a constructivist paradigm, we used a reflexive approach to consider how our identities and positionalities shaped relationships with participants and influenced ensuing interpretations. To briefly share our positionalities, Matt is a White man graduate student raised in a middle-class household. This project was a component of his graduate fellowship in an academic advising unit, but he has never worked as an academic advisor. Kaity is a White woman scholar-practitioner from a middle-class background. Although she has never been employed in an advising capacity, she currently works in the unit responsible for the MAAPS intervention.

Furthermore, both authors identified as continuing-generation college students. Thus, throughout this project, it was important for us to question how our socioeconomic backgrounds and continuing-generation student identities shaped our engagement with participants. These debrief conversations were critical to our efforts to present participants' experiences in authentic and trustworthy ways.

Findings

Students reported mixed impressions of MAAPS advising. Although some viewed their MAAPS specialist as highly collaborative and supportive, most students had limited interactions with the MAAPS team or never accepted the invitation to meet with their specialists face-to-face. In other words, administrators intended for the program to support a population who may encounter systemic barriers throughout college, but students did not necessarily perceive MAAPS to be a resource that clarified their path toward academic and personal success. Through our thematic analysis of students' accounts, we questioned why this might have been.

Students who decided to forgo MAAPS advising generally did not understand the purpose of MAAPS or how it differed from primary advising, preferred to confide in people who shared their backgrounds and social identities, or believed they did not need a success specialist because they already saw themselves as successful. These dynamics served as barriers that inhibited students' engagement with MAAPS and limited the initiative's overall impact.

Nevertheless, many students complimented the proactive communications sent by MAAPS advisors, noting how this approach was distinct from the university's general advising. In certain cases, these targeted and timely messages prompted students to meet with a specialist in person and invest in that relationship. These students found value in working with a MAAPS advisor, as specialists helped them navigate academic and personal challenges. However, proactive communications alone were not enough to overcome limitations to the fundamental design and implementation of MAAPS. These findings provide important implications for future proactive advising initiatives, which we address later in this manuscript.

Deciding to Forgo MAAPS Advising

Most participants did not accept the invitation to meet with their specialist or had limited interactions with the MAAPS team. Three themes explained students' decisions to forgo MAAPS advising. The first was general confusion about the purpose of the MAAPS initiative and how it differed from primary advisors' services. Students were invited to the program by email but did not realize they were intentionally selected for this opportunity. The ambiguous and impersonal nature of these mass mailings led many students to ignore the invitation, believing it was "a scam" (Katie) or that MAAPS was not uniquely tailored for their needs. Among those participants who accepted the invitation to meet with their MAAPS specialist, several quickly concluded that the program was duplicative of existing support systems. Vicki admitted she has "always been a pretty stressed person," so when she received an invitation from her MAAPS specialist, she thought, "Oh, another advisor. That could be good." However, when the first meeting focused almost exclusively on reviewing her course schedule and replicating conversations with her primary advisor, she determined "I had everything that I needed" and stopped visiting the MAAPS office. Others thought MAAPS advisors lacked content expertise in their major, not realizing specialists were trained to provide more holistic support. For example, Jessica, an animal science major, visited her specialist about once a year but preferred to work with her primary academic advisor because they were more knowledgeable about the courses and faculty in her college.

A second theme that explained students' limited engagement with MAAPS was that students voiced the importance of working with advisors (formal and informal) who shared their identities and backgrounds. Again, these students valued the outreach from MAAPS advisors but stressed how helpful it was to confide in people (such as university staff, peers, or family members) who personally understood their experiences. For example, Katie was part of a comprehensive scholars program dedicated to first-generation students and Students of Color like herself. Consequently, she arrived at the university with a strong support network and leaned on that team throughout her time in college. Katie appreciated the MAAPS advisors but "felt more comfortable with [the scholars program coaches] because they could relate more to [her] in terms of life experiences."

Similarly, Adrianne was a Black student enrolled in a STEM field, who often consulted her older sister (also pursuing a STEM degree) or a faculty advisor (another Person of Color) when she needed advice or encouragement. These mentors were particularly supportive regarding her experiences as one of the only Black women in her classes. Reflecting on her feelings in the classroom, Adrianne explained:

> I always felt like people were going to have their ideas about me. That I probably come from a background where I was already set up to fail, or that I didn't have much to contribute, or I was just a fluke. Stuff like that. So when I failed, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like, "See? You're not equipped to do well."

Although Adrianne regularly encountered micro-aggressions on campus, the messages she received from her college and the university at-large seemed to discount the hostile dynamics she was personally experiencing. When Adrianne and her friends tried to make the college aware of "instances of gross racism from academic advisors," the response was "you just interpreted it wrong" and "we don't see color." These considerations led Adrianne to lean on her sister as a source of emotional and academic support while voicing frustrations about her interactions with the university's advising services. Adrianne never accepted the invitation to meet with MAAPS advisors because she "didn't see the

benefit of it" and did not attribute much of her success to interactions with academic advisors.

Third, students believed they were already successful and did not need additional help from the university. As Katie put it, "I just felt like things were going well for me and that I didn't need a lot of assistance from the success specialist." Nishant described his thought process after receiving his first invitation to MAAPS advising:

> [The specialist] tried reaching out, at least at the start of the school year. Or maybe even at the start of every semester. It would be like, "Hey, schedule an appointment, I'm always free. We can talk, we can chat, or whatever." I would just see the email and be like, "I'm busy; I don't have time for this." Clearly, I've got my [self] together. I'm doing well, getting A's. I appreciate the university putting the effort to assign me one, but I was like, I don't need this.

Adrianne voiced a similar opinion when she said, "I thought I had everything figured out in college, so I never felt like I wanted to [visit my MAAPS specialist]." She continued, "I just had this idea that if you *weren't* successful, then leverage them." In cases where students clearly articulated their degree plans, navigated university bureaucracy, and achieved their academic goals, the decision to forgo MAAPS advising appeared justified. However, we also heard cases where students who declined invitations from their specialists criticized the university for failing to provide the holistic support MAAPS was designed to offer. Thus, in some cases, students' self-assurance was a barrier that prevented them from seeking what may have been valuable help.

The Benefits of Proactive Outreach

Because MAAPS participation was not mandatory, email communications played a key role in shaping students' awareness of the initiative and whether they decided to meet with an advisor. However, even students who did not meet with their MAAPS advisors cited proactive outreach as a strength of the program. They appreciated how MAAPS advisors initiated contact at key points in the semester to check-in, shared important reminders, and continued to invite students to visit their office for a consultation. This was notably different from the institution's general advising approach.

Leah never met with her specialist face-to-face but believed MAAPS still had a positive impact on her college experience because of the regular messages she received. She explained, "I wouldn't have known about a lot of the resources we had [at the institution], except for her emails." These resources included a writing lab, tutoring support, career fairs, and explanations of important dates and deadlines. Conversely, participants felt the general advising structure at their university required students to initiate communication if they needed guidance. As Vicki described it,

> If you needed help with advising or anything like that, you definitely had to reach out and get it yourself. Because you only really see them when you need them. Which was fine for me, but I can imagine other people would've been more shy about it.

Participants who accepted their invitation to work with the MAAPS team emphasized how these targeted and frequent outreach messages led to a more personable and accessible advising experience than the university's general advising services. Anshu first heard from his specialist after a particularly challenging semester when he was in the midst of changing majors. He explained how he received a timely email saying, "I'm your student success specialist; we're trying this out. Reach out to me if you need help." For Anshu, the specialist offered a more engaging, one-on-one means of support compared to his experiences with primary advising. Marissa, a student who transitioned from an open-access, regional campus to the State University flagship campus, compared her communications with the MAAPS team to her prior campus's confusing and frustrating advising structure. Soon after she arrived on the flagship campus, "I remember [my MAAPS specialist] emailing me to say, 'Hey, welcome to [main campus]. I'm doing walk-ins. You can come say hi.'" This communication prompted Marissa to visit the MAAPS office and develop an ongoing relationship with her specialist. When we asked Jake which advisors he used most often (MAAPS or the advisors in his college), he said MAAPS because "I knew I didn't have to wait a few days for an appointment. I could just get immediate contact."

MAAPS Helped Students Navigate Hardships

Students who met with their specialists and developed a working relationship came to view these staff as valuable resources who supported their academic and personal success. The specialists helped them navigate hardships at pivotal moments in their college careers. MAAPS specialists provided holistic support that went beyond planning students' schedules. Anshu noted that around the time he changed majors, he felt great uncertainty about his academic progress. His specialist encouraged him to "talk it out," which "helped [him] get some clarity on why [he] [changed majors] and why [his] grades dropped." Anshu's specialist helped him identify the need to improve his time management and provided strategies for getting organized. "That was really helpful," he mused. "That, I feel, was life advice more than academic advice."

Similarly, Jake turned to his MAAPS specialist for help during a time when he felt overwhelmed by his STEM coursework:

> [I felt] like I was drowning. I was putting hours of work into [my classes], and the grades were not reflecting that... I felt scared because... I was about to enter my third year, and I felt like I was going to waste my time and money because I'm technically supposed to be halfway done, but I'm failing halfway through.

Jake took these concerns to his specialist, admitting he was not sure he could continue at the university. The specialist:

> ...reassured me that it is my choice whether to stay or leave, but he encouraged me to continue to take classes and that a lot of people retake courses, especially in STEM, and my case was not an anomaly; it's a very normal experience for people to have.

Marissa echoed appreciation for the reassurance her MAAPS specialist provided, especially at the beginning of college before she was accepted into her major. "I definitely would have freaked out a lot more in my first couple of years when I messed up in those classes," she explained. "I still freaked out, but it was nice hearing [from a MAAPs specialist], 'It's ok that you made some mistakes. You're still going to graduate. Just stay with it.'" These comments illustrated the perspective and encouragement MAAPS advising provided, especially when students faced uncertainty or doubted their ability to succeed at college. At these critical junctures, specialists helped students persist through challenging academic and personal experiences.

Discussion

Proactive advisors can provide valuable support to students from low-SES backgrounds at critical moments in their academic careers. Yet findings from this study reveal how elements of the MAAPS intervention limited student engagement with proactive advising when their participation was not mandatory.

Participants recounted various hardships they experienced throughout their college careers. These challenges were curricular (failing a class or being placed on academic probation), intrapersonal (questioning one's sense of belonging), and organizational (navigating a large, decentralized, bureaucratic institution). MAAPS advisors provided instrumental support to some of the participants in this study, especially at the beginning of college when students were adjusting to campus life or mid-term when students recognized that they were struggling academically. These findings align with prior recommendations concerning the best times for advisors to send intrusive messages (Schwebel et al., 2008; Varney, 2013). Those students who regularly visited their MAAPS advisor stressed that the program played an important role in their decision to stay at the university and helped shape their overall academic success (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Vander Schee, 2007). Students also described how interactions with MAAPS advisors were notably different from primary advisors, praising proactive communications, the ease of scheduling a one-on-one appointment, and that MAAPS appointments took a more developmental approach (Schwebel et al., 2008; Varney, 2013). Such positive impressions support claims that proactive advising is a practice that can facilitate students' engagement with their institution (Valentine & Price, 2021), help them navigate hardships at key junctures in their college experience (Varney, 2013), and that this resource may be especially beneficial to students from low-SES backgrounds depending on how the program is designed and administered (Alamuddin et al., 2018).

Relatedly, it was important to question why so many participants declined the invitation to partake

in MAAPS advising. Aside from confusion about the differences between MAAPS specialists and primary advisors, one reason was that students viewed MAAPS advising as duplicative. They believed they already had the support necessary to be successful in college. Katie captured this idea when she described how working with her scholars program, primary advisors, and MAAPS specialists reached a point that became overwhelming; "I just [felt] like I had so much support. I'm like, all right, this is too much now… Let them focus on other students [who need the help]." Others noted how important it is to work with staff who personally understand what it feels like to navigate campus as a student with systemically-minoritized identities.

Implications for Practice

Taken together, these findings suggest that although an institution may offer an array of resources to students from low-SES backgrounds, it is not always clear who feels overburdened by outreach efforts and who is neglected. Therefore, when designing future proactive advising models, it may be helpful to assess how students perceive their current engagement with the university and direct resources to those students whose support system is lacking. A coordinated care approach that leverages early alerts, referrals, and a centralized record-keeping system may help universities accomplish this aim. Further, findings illustrate how vital it is to ensure university staff reflects multiple dimensions of identity and that advisors are prepared to support students from diverse backgrounds (Museus & Ravello, 2010).

The fact that MAAPS was designed to function as separate from the university's primary advising services and that students were not required to participate contributed to participants not utilizing this resource because the structure seemed confusing. Scholars have noted when proactive advising is presented as optional, students are less inclined to participate (Donaldson et al., 2016). The findings from this study support this assertion and illustrate how the nature of intrusive communication plays a key role in soliciting student involvement in optional programs (Finnie et al., 2017; Schwebel et al., 2008). Participants noted how their first impression of the MAAPS initiative was critical to determining whether they chose to work with their specialist, but these email messages were often impersonal and unclear. Several students filtered these invitations as spam, not realizing why they were explicitly selected to participate. Even among those who did accept the invitation and regularly met with their specialist, students often did not grasp the mission of MAAPS advising or understand how this resource was designed to be distinct from the services offered by primary academic advisors. In other words, students came into meetings with their MAAPS specialists expecting transactional encounters akin to their experiences with primary advisors, while MAAPS staff were trained to provide more holistic and transformational support. Administrators must better educate students about the purpose and benefits of proactive advising and ensure that advisors are then prepared to meet students' academic and personal needs.

Finally, proactive advising efforts may be more effective if offered by the student's primary advisor. Unlike a parallel approach, this model provides students with a clearly-identified, consistent, and often mandatory point-of-contact. If proactive advising models are designed to operate parallel to primary advisors, these staff should receive extensive training, possess intimate familiarity with the curriculum, maintain a low student-to-advisor ratio, use their initial meeting with students to schedule future visits for the rest of the semester, and close the communication loop between themselves, students, and primary advisors (Ohrt, 2016; Rodgers et al., 2014).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that future research may address. First, findings reflect the experiences of students at a single institution. Prior research has suggested that institutional characteristics and the specific design and implementation of a program all play important roles in shaping the efficacy of proactive advising (Alamuddin et al., 2018). Certain findings may be transferable to other institutions, but these insights cannot be generalized to all proactive advising models. Second, all participants in this study were students who had earned at least 90 credit hours, meaning they were fourth years or above. Four participants had begun graduate or professional programs at the university at the time of their interview. Such sampling criteria mean that findings do not reflect the experiences of students who received the intervention but did not persist at the institution. Third, the MAAPS intervention

only included first-generation students and students from limited-income backgrounds.

Consequently, we were unable to analyze participants' gains or experiences in MAAPS in relation to a comparison group of socially-advantaged peers. Finally, turnover among MAAPS advisors may have shaped participants' perceptions of the initiative, as students who developed a relationship with their MAAPS advisor often stopped scheduling appointments if their specialist left and they were assigned to a new specialist. Scholars have noted how stability is key to the success of proactive advising, as students prefer to work with a dedicated staff member once they have established the strong, trusting relationships that comprise the core of a proactive approach (Valentine & Price, 2020).

Conclusion

This study affirms that proactive advising is an adaptive approach that universities can leverage to better support students from low-SES backgrounds. However, the design and administration of proactive advising play key roles in shaping students' perceptions of these services. In the case of the MAAPS intervention, proactive advisors had the potential to serve as valuable members of students' support network, but many found the program confusing, duplicative of existing resources, or preferred to work with advisors who shared common identities and backgrounds. These findings provide valuable recommendations for the design and administration of future proactive advising initiatives.

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