

# Designing a System for Strategic Advising

## Why Is Advising Important for Community College Students?

Students attending community colleges are faced with a variety of complex procedures and decisions. They must not only navigate financial aid applications and registration but also choose the type of credential they will pursue, their major (often from among hundreds) and the courses they will enroll in (often from among thousands). At the same time, they must take into account how course choices serve their long-term goals as well as their immediate logistical needs; for instance, some courses may count for financial aid purposes but not for graduation, or for graduation but not transfer.

For many community college students—a significant portion of whom are the first in their family to attend college—these tasks appear to be insurmountable hurdles. The sheer number of choices students face can lead them to stumble. Students may waste time and money on unnecessary courses; they may miss a financial aid deadline. These stumbles can contribute to a sense that they do not “belong” in college.

Advisors help students make choices in a complex environment, often by explaining the costs and benefits of each available option, and they guide students to additional resources that will help them make good decisions.

This is part two of CCRC’s nonacademic student supports practitioner packet. For an overview of nonacademic supports, see [What We Know About Nonacademic Student Supports](#) (part one). To learn more about how student success courses can be designed to make a more long-lasting impact on students’ college outcomes, see [Student Success Courses for Sustained Impact](#) (part three).

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## What Does Good Advising Look Like?

Ideally, academic and career advising is a multiphase process that occurs over a prolonged period of time. College advisors integrate academic and career counseling by guiding students through an exploration of their strengths, skills, and interests, followed by a structured investigation into various occupations and careers that match these strengths, skills, and interests. Finally, advisors work with students to develop an academic plan that will help them progress toward the professional goals they have identified.<sup>1</sup>

This process is called the “developmental” approach to guidance and counseling, and it ultimately constitutes a form of teaching. As students go through the process of identifying their strengths and interests and the occupations that appear to match them, they also develop skills in connecting self-knowledge to decision-making.<sup>2</sup> For developmental advising to be effective, sustained one-on-one interaction between the student and the advisor is necessary, not merely in the first semester but throughout the college career.

## What Are the Realities of Advising at Community Colleges?

The intensive and personalized approach to advising may be ideal, but few community college students experience it. Due to financial constraints, most community colleges have high student-advisor ratios, sometimes as high as 1,600 students to one advisor.<sup>3</sup> As a result, student interactions with advisors are often rushed and infrequent. In a recent review, we identified four key ways in which community college advising diverges from the developmental approach to advising.

HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADVISING DIFFERS FROM THE IDEAL <sup>4</sup>	
FRAGMENTED SERVICES	NO SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT
<p>Academic advising focuses more on next semester’s registration plan than on long-term goals. Career counseling is often conducted in a different location by separate staff and is usually focused on job placement, resume reviewing, and practicing for job interviews.</p> <p>Other supports such as financial aid, personal counseling, and student success courses tend to be scattered at various offices across the campus. The division of these support services can be confusing and frustrating for students, particularly if they are trying to clarify long-term academic and career goals.</p>	<p>Because of high student–counselor ratios, colleges rarely assign students a single advisor. Students often wait several hours to see an advisor and seldom see the same advisor twice in a row.</p> <p>Different advisors frequently offer conflicting advice, either because they have differing philosophies or because they have different understandings of program-specific rules. Conflicting advice may reinforce students’ perception that the college’s requirements are arbitrary, or that advisors are unreliable.</p>
FOCUS ON INFORMATION PROVISION	EMPHASIS ON SERVING INCOMING STUDENTS
<p>Community college advising sessions tend to be infrequent and short, and advisors lack sufficient time to help students explore goals or create an academic plan to meet those goals. Instead, they focus on providing concrete information and may give students various handouts or web page references.</p> <p>Students are often unable to determine what information is most relevant, how to connect various pieces of information together, and how to apply the information to create a sound plan of action.</p>	<p>As a means to curtail high early attrition rates, community colleges tend to focus resources on incoming students. However, the benefits from first-year support services tend to fade after two or three semesters.</p> <p>Evidence suggests that advising should be integrated throughout a student’s college career.</p>

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## What We Know About Enhanced Advising

Community colleges are aware that brief and infrequent advising is not sufficient for many students, and some colleges offer enhanced advising to high-risk students. Enhanced advising often consists of mandatory meetings and longer advising sessions with a single assigned advisor.

As discussed in part one of this practitioner packet, rigorous studies of enhanced advising have tended to focus on programs that are relatively “light touch,”<sup>5</sup> and these studies have found modest short-term effects. However, one experimental study found positive long-term effects from a more intensive approach, in which individual students were assigned for two semesters to “coaches”

who communicated with them frequently.<sup>6</sup> While it would be impossible for colleges to provide such intensive advising services to all students, the study demonstrates that sustained and responsive advising can have significant benefits.<sup>7</sup>

## What Is the Role of E-Advising at Community Colleges?

Colleges are increasingly turning to online advising resources—or e-advising—as a way to reduce costs and streamline their advising services.<sup>8</sup> E-advising can provide information to students cheaply and efficiently, as when email or course management systems are used to remind students of available services. Technology may also expand counselor capacity, as when students create online plans that can be revisited and revised over their college careers, or when orientation sessions are offered to students online. Finally, technology may enhance existing services, for example, by using student records to identify students in need of intrusive assistance.

## What Does the Research Say About E-Advising?

There is some promising, though not rigorous, evidence suggesting that online resources can be a meaningful part of a college advising system and may improve student outcomes. LifeMap, at Valencia Community College, uses online resources to help students identify and develop academic and career plans, in conjunction with in-person services. Descriptive analyses of institutional data indicate that student persistence, credit-earning, and degree-attainment rates have improved since the college implemented the program.<sup>9</sup>

A study on a program in Virginia, the Education Wizard, that provides students with online career and academic information, yielded similarly positive descriptive results. Users had higher grade point averages and a greater likelihood of receiving financial aid than nonusers.<sup>10</sup> Neither of these studies controlled for student characteristics, however.

Technology may be most effective when used as part of a broader advising strategy. For example, the coaching intervention mentioned above relies on email, social networking, and electronic records to identify student needs and to initiate contact.<sup>11</sup> The efficacy of the intervention likely stems from the frequency and intensity of personal advising contacts, but technology makes many of these contacts possible.

## The Limits of E-Advising

Like all interventions, e-advising may be effective only when it is part of a well-designed system. Studies of online resources at community colleges have found that they are often poorly organized, out-of-date, and not well-integrated with related services.<sup>12</sup>

In one CCRC study,<sup>13</sup> which examined e-advising at a Michigan community college, a group of students were asked to answer a set of questions—such as which courses fulfilled requirements for a specific program of study or met general education requirements at a target transfer institution—using only online resources. The students came up with correct answers only 60 percent of the time.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these students reported a preference for face-to-face advising. Students felt advisors would be more able than online resources to give advice that integrated their particular contextual information, and they felt that even if they were able to track down information on their own using online resources, they might not be able to apply it correctly.

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This research suggests that for most students, e-advising can supplement but not supplant the interpersonal interactions inherent in more traditional approaches. While well-designed e-advising systems have the potential to help students identify their interests and/or progress toward degrees at greater rates,<sup>14</sup> they are unlikely to benefit students if they are poorly designed or poorly integrated into an overall system of advising.

## The SSIP Approach for Advising Activities

Given their constrained resources, colleges cannot repair deficiencies in their advising systems by simply hiring more advisors. Instead, colleges may need to undertake a strategic reallocation of resources to develop an integrated approach to academic and career advising. This reallocation could consist of replacing the “one-size-fits-all” approach with an approach that identifies the level of need for individual students and delivers one-on-one advising when it will be most impactful.

In part one of this practitioner packet, *What We Know About Nonacademic Student Supports*, we outlined a general approach to student supports we termed SSIP: Sustained, Strategic, Intrusive and Integrated, and Personalized. Here, we present principles and describe concrete actions colleges can take to enact the SSIP approach for advising activities.

### Career counseling should drive an integrated approach to advising.

Rather than having career counseling and academic counseling take place separately, with different advisors and in different locations, career and academic counseling should be integrated, and students’ career goals should drive academic planning. This focus on students’ career goals does not preclude consideration of transfer options or the liberal arts track. By asking students to think about why they want to enter a transfer-oriented program of study such as liberal arts, it becomes a carefully thought-out choice rather than the “default option” for undecided or unfocused students. Beginning academic planning with a transfer goal in mind will also help ensure that students’ subsequent course-taking is focused on earning credits that will transfer easily and count toward a bachelor’s degree.

### Integrate face-to-face and e-advising systems.

E-advising has a critical role to play in using advising resources more efficiently. However, e-advising systems must be made more user-friendly. In particular, information about program requirements, course requirements, transfer requirements for target institutions, and employment options should be clear, accessible, and consistent. Many for-profit colleges, for instance, employ systems that electronically track every student, contact them via email if they register for courses that do not advance them in their major or will not transfer to their target institution, and offer alternative registration options that would satisfy these goals.

When adopting an e-advising system, community colleges should include advisors in the process to ensure that they fully understand its functionality, believe in its usefulness, and will refer students to it. If effectively designed and integrated with face-to-face support, online resources can help colleges differentiate and serve students with varying advising needs and enable a more strategic distribution of resources.

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### **Provide services to students based on their level of need.**

The current typical model of community college advising treats all entering students in the same way: New students take placement exams and then meet with an advisor to select courses before the start of the semester. Yet, while some entering students may need intensive, one-on-one advising, others may need only minimal help.<sup>15</sup>

Deploying advising resources strategically frees up counselors to work with the students most in need of personalized and more protracted intervention. Certain students may be well served by e-advising technologies. Other students may need some assistance, but not one-on-one help, and so could benefit from student success courses or other group advising activities. Using advising resources in a targeted manner can contribute to both efficiency and effectiveness.

To identify student needs, colleges could implement a system in which they triage advising on the basis of a survey. In addition to completing standard placement testing processes, incoming students could be asked for their top three interests in terms of programs, as well as their likely transfer schools if applicable, with further questions to probe how firmly decided they are on these options.

The survey could also include questions assessing metacognitive skills. For students with strong metacognitive skills who are firmly decided, intake advising could be handled strictly online. Undecided students or those with weak metacognitive skills could be required to come in for a face-to-face session.

### **Strategically deploy resources to allow for developmental advising over time.**

Students' needs do not disappear after the first semester,<sup>16</sup> and many will need sustained practice to master the skill of reflecting on goals and developing plans to meet them.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore important to provide students with continuing guidance and support.

Once again, technology can be leveraged to help colleges achieve a more sustained distribution of services. For example, colleges can provide enhanced advising for struggling students based on early-warning systems. If a student fails to come to two classes in a row, or fails to turn in a first assignment, professional advisors or student peer advisors could offer support to the student immediately.

This same tracking system can be used to prompt counselors to set up a meeting with students who generally require only "light-touch" advising at key junctures in their college pathway, such as when they register for their second year, when they are approaching 15 credits from credential completion, or if their course choices are straying from their declared major.

### **Integrate metacognitive skill-building practice into academic courses.**

In most community colleges, academic and advising units tend to exist in separate silos, with little communication between faculty and advisors. Instead, colleges should bring advisors and faculty together to establish common learning goals for metacognitive skills relevant to both academic and nonacademic spheres.

For instance, advisors and faculty may agree that they want students to develop better planning skills. Faculty can help students achieve this goal by requiring them to approach a complex academic assignment with explicit planning. The first step of the assignment might be to submit a timeline,

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including the tasks necessary to complete the assignment and when each one will be done. Building planning skills within the course can help students more effectively approach planning when it comes to their broader academic and career goals.

## Conclusion

Community colleges operate with constrained budgets that curtail their ability to provide the ideal form of developmental advising for every student. Evidence suggests that the brief and fragmented advising services students currently receive are insufficient to help many students overcome the challenges they face at college.

To provide students with more sustained and personalized advising, colleges must work to deliver their services more strategically—by identifying high-need students and offering them intensive advising when they enter college and providing “just-in-time” advising to low-need students when they reach critical milestones in their college pathway.

If colleges decide to redesign advising in this way, student success courses can play a critical supporting role. These courses—which are essentially prolonged group advising sessions—can provide a fruitful venue for students to learn and practice skills that are central to college success. In part three of this practitioner packet, *Student Success Courses for Sustained Impact*, we review qualitative and quantitative research findings on student success courses and make recommendations for how these courses can be designed to maximize their potential.

## Endnotes

1. Lent (2005); O’Banion (1972); Super (1990).
2. National Academic Advising Association (2005, 2006).
3. Gallagher (2010).
4. Karp (2013).
5. Scrivener & Weiss (2009).
6. Bettinger & Baker (2011).
7. A related rigorous study of the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program, in which students receive enhanced advising from an assigned advisor, found that ASAP students accumulated more credits and were more likely to persist. It is important to recognize, however, that the program included additional elements, such as financial support, block scheduling, and required full-time enrollment, making it impossible to disaggregate the effects attributable to enhanced advising alone (Scrivener, Weiss, & Sommo, 2012).
8. California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force (2012); Kvavik & Handberg (2000); West Ed & The RP Group (2012a, 2012b).
9. Shugart & Romano (2006).
10. Herndon (2011).
11. Bettinger & Baker (2011).
12. Jaggars, Jacobs, Little, & Frega (2012); Margolin, Miller, & Rosenbaum (2013).
13. Jaggars et al. (2012).
14. Herndon (2011); Karp (2013).
15. Jaggars et al. (2012).
16. Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012); Rucks-Ahidiana & Erhardt (2012).
17. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000); Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesche-Römer (1993).

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