

# Advising Redesign as a Foundation for Transformative Change

## The Building Blocks of Transformative Change

Colleges around the country are attempting fundamental redesigns of their academic programs and student support services in an effort to help their students do well in school and graduate. But college leaders need to understand how transformative change takes root in higher education to give the reforms a better chance of success.

Advising redesign is one such fundamental reform. Increasingly, colleges looking to strengthen their student support services are working to do so through technology-mediated advising reform, which makes use of technology to promote, support, and sustain long-term, intensive advising relationships. This type of reform enables college personnel to engage in advising and student support relationships that (a) approach student support as a teaching function, (b) enable regular check-ins with students, and (c) connect students to the information and services they need when they need them in order to keep students on track to graduation.<sup>1</sup>

CCRC's multiyear study of the adoption of technology-mediated advising reforms by community colleges and open-access universities provides insight into the building blocks of transformative change, illuminating how an in-depth redesign of an entire institutional domain can fundamentally alter how education and educational services are delivered and experienced.<sup>2</sup>

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**Technology-mediated advising reform, which makes use of technology to promote, support, and sustain long-term, intensive advising relationships.**

This is part two of CCRC's practitioner packet on technology-mediated advising reform. For an overview of what these reforms involve and evidence on their effectiveness, see [What We Know About Technology-Mediated Advising Reform](#) (part one). For a review of the technological and cultural conditions needed to support successful implementation of advising reforms, see [Creating the Conditions for Advising Redesign](#) (part three).

## What Changes Need to Occur Across an Organization for Transformative Change to Take Place?

For change to be transformative, it must occur along several dimensions within an organization: structural, process, and attitudinal.<sup>3</sup>

- **Structural:** Changes to the organization or design of systems and business practices.
- **Process:** Changes in individual engagement, behaviors, and interactions with systems and business practices.
- **Attitudinal:** Changes in core underlying attitudes, values, and beliefs.

## How Do the Dimensions of Transformative Change Interact?

Changes to individual ways of working and to institutional structures and policies must develop together to create the type of deep change that can be called transformative.

For example, the goal of advising redesign is transformation from a model in which the advisor essentially serves as a registration clerk to one in which advising is sustained, strategic, integrated, proactive, and personalized (SSIPP). The SSIPP approach to advising cannot be fully realized without new institutional structures and norms (for example, student assignment to specific advisors, policies that encourage or require regular touchpoints, and the expectation that advisors will be responsible for specific students from entry to graduation). At the same time, SSIPP advising requires new behaviors at the individual level (such as regularly reaching out to students, engaging in conversations about challenges to completion, and entering case notes into advising software). As individual-level changes take root, they embed themselves in the culture of the college, becoming “how we do things here.”

This type of shift in deep-seated attitudes and norms indicates that a transformative reform has become institutionalized—a marker of successful change. Such a broad shift in structures, processes, and attitudes across stakeholders and departments is what ultimately influences students’ experiences and can potentially shift student engagement, behavior, and outcomes.

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## What Do Colleges’ Experiences With Advising Reforms Reveal About Transformative Change?

### CCRC’s Study of Six Colleges

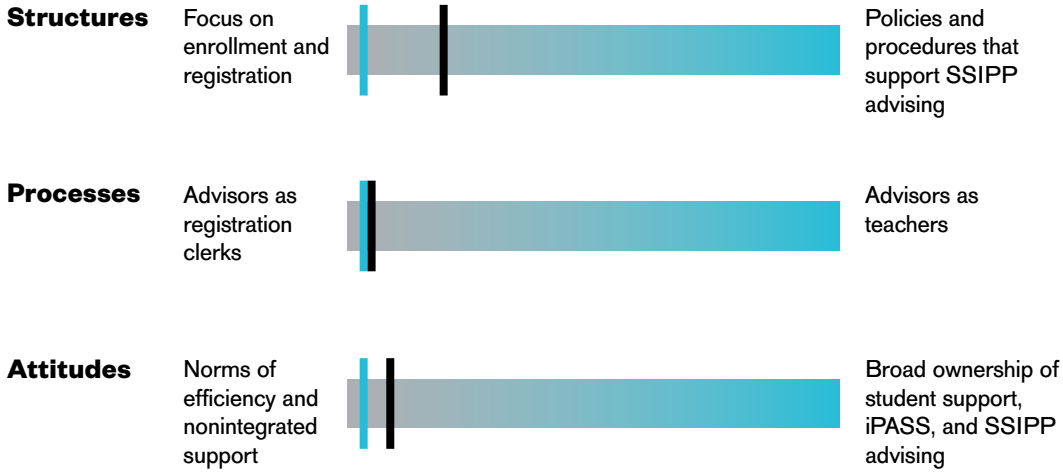
CCRC studied six colleges over 18 months as they implemented advising reforms rooted in technology to determine if they succeeded in transforming student experiences. We measured changes in structures, behaviors, and attitudes and plotted them along a continuum for each college.

We assessed the extent to which advising structures encouraged sustained, long-term advising relationships and timely intervention; the extent to which personnel engaged with students within a teaching frame (processes); and the extent to which institutional norms emphasized holistic student support (attitudes).

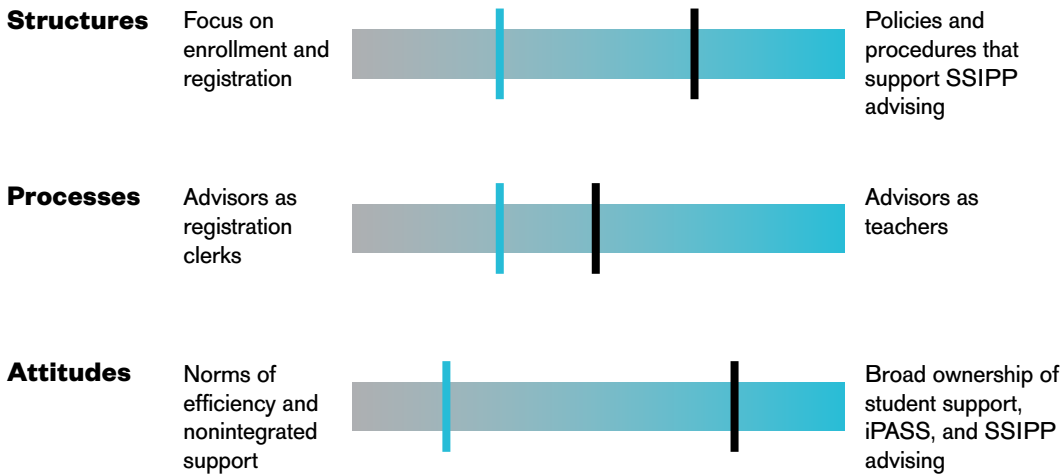
For example, a college in which advising was structured as a drop-in, voluntary activity (“advising-as-registration”) might be assessed as far from the ideal in terms of structure. In contrast, a college in which students are assigned the same advisor for the entirety of their collegiate career and have mandatory mid-semester meetings might be placed on the SSIPP end of the continuum.

Though all six colleges succeeded in deploying advising technologies, only three were able to use the technology to spark a transformation in advising, with clearly identifiable and often quite tangible shifts in structures, processes, and attitudes. Crescent Community College and Harbor University provide two contrasting examples of the degree of change exhibited by colleges in our study,<sup>4</sup> as illustrated by the figures below. The college’s status at the time of CCRC researchers’ 2013 pre-implementation visit is indicated by the blue bar, and its status at the time of the 2015 post-implementation visit is indicated by the black bar.

### Crescent Community College (No Transformation)



### Harbor University (Transformation)



## Small Change Versus Transformation: Two Case Studies

**Crescent Community College.** Crescent is a large, suburban community college with significantly under-resourced advising services. In 2013, most students were initially advised at a centralized advising center, where they met with generalist advisors on a drop-in basis or by appointment. Wait times for in-person advising were as long as seven hours. Subpopulations of students were sometimes advised through special programs.

Overall, before the college's advising redesign, advising at Crescent primarily focused on course selection and planning, rather than longer term goal setting or case management. The college changed its structures to leverage new program-planning and early-alert technology. Crescent hired additional advisors; shifted their job responsibilities so that they were all generalists; merged disparate student development divisions into a single function focused on retention, advising, transfer, and disability services; and standardized advising documents.

However, interviews with staff members and students in 2015 indicated that advising processes did not shift along with structures. Advisors viewed the reform as a technical upgrade that enabled them to do what they were already doing more quickly, but they did not change how they advised students. Most of those we interviewed in 2015 continued to focus on clarifying students' course-taking choices and ensuring their completion of degree requirements. The lack of fundamental change was most clear when speaking with students. In 2013, students were frustrated with long wait times and the college's formulaic and impersonal approach to advising. In 2015, students still found advising sessions formulaic.

**Harbor University.** Harbor University—a historically Black college located in a nearby city—experienced notable transformation over the course of the project. At the time of our first site visit, its advising services were incoherently structured. Each of the college's 10 schools followed different processes for delegating advising responsibilities to retention coordinators and other staff and faculty advisors. Staff and students were frustrated with this variation and found the multiple layers of advising confusing to navigate.

As part of its advising redesign project, Harbor implemented a risk targeting and intervention system, as well as an advising appointment and communication system. The launch of these tools led the college to engage in substantial and positive structural change. The university shifted to a single advising model, with all incoming students assigned a retention coordinator who "handed off" advisees to a faculty advisor upon completion of 24 credits. This consistency helped students develop a relationship with one or two individuals who were responsible for their success, while enabling the college to keep careful tabs on which students needed additional support. The university also leveraged its early warning tool by creating a clear process for faculty to submit alerts when students were struggling and a streamlined system for addressing alerts and communicating back to faculty.

With regard to attitudes, the university engaged in a clear rebranding of its retention work to focus on student success and completion. Project personnel and university administrators were relentless in their communication to faculty and staff that holistic student support in the name of completion was a key element of the university's approach to education.

Despite these substantial changes, in 2015, structural and attitudinal changes were not yet matched consistently by changes in behaviors. While we observed changed processes on the part of some end users, others indicated that they were still learning the systems or had not yet

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**Harbor University engaged in a clear rebranding of its retention work to focus on student success and completion.**

adopted them in their daily practice. We did see evidence of process change on the part of students, for instance in how they responded to alerts. Students indicated seeking out instructors to discuss issues raised in the early-alert messages, and had even coined a new verb for receiving an alert: “being Starfished,” in reference to the name of the tool. Though process change was less dramatic than structural and attitudinal change, we saw strong evidence of transformative change occurring at Harbor University.

## **Conclusion**

What made the difference between the colleges that changed fundamentally and those that did not? The next section of this packet, *Creating the Conditions for Advising Redesign*, discusses aspects of readiness for technology adoption that colleges should attend to and considers the conditions that allow change to take hold.

## Endnotes

1. For more details, see *What We Know About Technology-Mediated Advising Reform*, part one of this packet.
2. The information in this summary is based on a paper by Karp, Kalamkarian, Klempin, and Fletcher (2016) that describes the multiyear study.
3. Our framework builds on the work on Kezar's (2013) three focuses of organizational functioning.
4. College names are pseudonyms.

## Sources

Karp, M. M., Kalamkarian, H. S., Klempin, S., & Fletcher, J. (2016). *How colleges use integrated planning and advising for student success (iPASS) to transform student advising* (CCRC Working Paper No. 89). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

Kezar, A. (2013). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading, and enacting change*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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