

RESEARCH BRIEF

CASE STUDY

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From Goals to Graduation to Post-Completion Success: Why Every Student Needs an Educational Plan

CASE STUDY 1:

Educational Planning Leads the Way to Transfer and Completion at Tallahassee State College

By Ellen Wasserman

When Tallahassee State College (TSC) reimagined its career exploration and long-term academic planning processes in 2019, leaders hoped to create a stronger foundation for completing degrees or successfully transferring for the 16,000 students enrolled. Five years of refinement later, the App2Cap onboarding and advising model has transformed the student experience. Instead of leaving students to chart their own course, the college now helps them identify their purpose and map out an educational pathway that leads to a career of interest.

What makes TSC's approach distinctive is how it accommodated that level of individualized planning at scale for such a large study body. Rather than adding a new planning tool or asking advisors to do more, TSC redesigned the work itself by dividing responsibilities among specialized staff, streamlining routine tasks and using technology to give students more control over their own progress. Then, through App2Cap, the college brought those pieces together into an integrated system that connects students from application through graduation. The result is a system in which advisors with large caseloads can spend more of their time on the conversations and guidance that students need most.

This case study of Tallahassee State College is based on interviews with 13 administrators, staff, and faculty conducted via Zoom in April 2026. In the sections that follow, we describe how organizational changes, including a major redesign of onboarding and advising, allowed TSC to scale individualized educational planning for its students.

The Road to Change

TSC has a long history of using data to identify areas that need improvement, then responding with bold strategies to change the student experience. In 2019, student experience data was telling a story leaders couldn't ignore: The onboarding process was confusing, and the program pathways unclear. This negatively impacted persistence and degree completion, resulting in low overall student satisfaction with the college.

Administrators recognized the need for changes. "What we thought students were experiencing was not what they were experiencing," said Sheri Rowland, vice president for student affairs. "We looked at our retention and completion rates, and we were perfectly designed for the outcomes we were seeing. And we didn't like the outcomes. So, if we don't like what we're seeing in the data, what do we need to do to change that?"

Though the college had adopted numerous strategies to support student success, administrators recognized that students were not getting the support they needed to clarify their career goals and understand the different programs that can help them achieve their goals. Given its proximity to Florida State University (FSU) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), most TSC students pursue transfer pathways. But students did not have the guidance they needed to transfer smoothly into a program without unnecessary credits. Further, because TSC's onboarding and advising processes were mostly transactional, there was little follow up to make sure students took the courses they needed to stay on track.

When TSC looked closely at ways to improve the early stages of the student experience, leaders found that students had to provide numerous documents before they could register for classes, creating a roadblock that drained their interest and motivation. Advising was mostly a registration process with a "take-a-number" system, and students often waited for hours in long lines to register with an advisor.

TSC found the answer in 2021 when it launched the App2Cap advising model, which ties together recruitment, admissions, academic advising, career exploration, and registration into a single, coherent onboarding process. App2Cap is a clear, structured process that centralizes customized educational planning for all new students. The goal was including all courses that students need to complete a degree in their program and for advisors to monitor their progress. TSC's continuous innovation approach made it possible to scale educational planning at a large college.

How Planning Works for Students

TSC had already adopted a strategic plan that prioritized programs leading to careers in high-value fields. As a result, a student's career aspirations are at the center of the educational planning process.

The process begins with admissions navigators who work with caseloads of applicants assigned to them alphabetically. They reach out to students within hours of receiving applications to welcome them and provide them with individualized next steps of the admissions process. Rather than waiting until students provide transcripts and proof of residency, the navigators check the student's residency status in a state database and give them a checklist of items to submit and tasks to complete over the course of several weeks. This allows students to proceed immediately into career and academic discussions with an advisor and register for classes. "We don't want that lead to go cold, and that's where we all work together," said one administrator. "We don't wait until everything is complete in order to move them along into the process."

Navigators ask students to confirm their intended program of study aligned to transfer or workforce programs based on their career aspirations. Those planning to transfer are assigned to a career and academic advisor, and those who choose a workforce program or one of TSC's bachelor's degree programs are assigned to a pathways advisor. Navigators also set up students in Workday, the student information system, where they will access their student record and educational plan.

One of the most important tasks on students' checklist is taking the SuperStrong career assessment, which lets them consider their interests and explore career and academic pathways aligned to the intended program. The results prepare students for the educational planning meeting with their career and academic advisor to refine the major within their program and plan courses for their degree.

When new students log into their Workday portal, they see their assigned advisor and can reach out to schedule the first advising appointment. Advising for all new students is a two-step process.

First, students meet with advisors in a virtual session called a "Supergroup" to register for first-term courses. Supergroups replace the long registration lines that new students previously encountered with a quick and focused process to confirm their program choice, resolve any holds on their accounts, and register them for their first term. An advisor meets with five to six students in a breakout room to register for courses. For transfer students, this would usually include English, math aligned to their intended university major, a social sciences core requirement, and a course of interest in their program of study. The advisor instructs students how to register in their Workday portal and encourages them to schedule their next advising appointment with their assigned advisor to develop their full educational plan.

The second step, strongly encouraged in the first semester, is a one-on-one meeting with the student's advisor, who will remain with the student until graduation. Students benefit from having one advisor who monitors their long-term progress and reaches out when they need support, said Rowland "We are encouraging our other colleagues, no matter caseload size, to go to case management, because we've found there has been [a] huge shift in our student satisfaction and experience."

During this initial 30- to 60-minute session, students and advisors discuss career interests, create a full educational plan of courses in the Workday system, and begin to develop a rapport. The advisors, trained to use an appreciative advising approach centered on relationship building, ask students about their lives and responsibilities, their day-to-day schedule, and their availability for classes.

Dual enrollment students, a growing population at TSC, have access to Workday and work with a dedicated advisor. High school counselors can also access their cohorts of students in Workday and view student progression towards degree requirements.

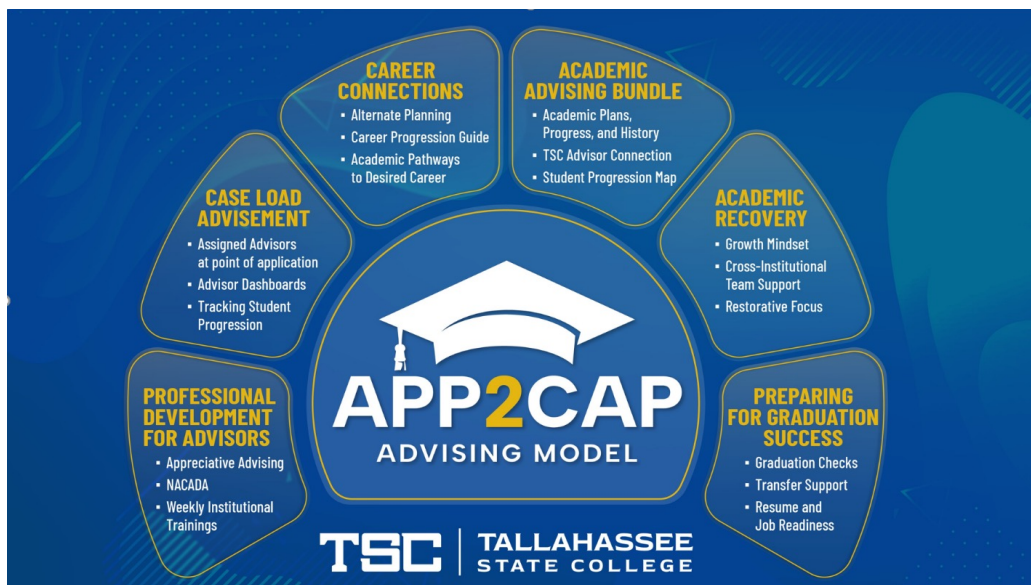
How TSC Scaled Educational Planning

TSC's new approach to educational planning started small and grew consistently over five years to become central to the student experience and a driving force for a reimagined onboarding and advising process. The App2Cap model began with transfer-intending degree students, about 75% to 80% of whom transfer to FSU or FAMU. A few years later, the college added pathways advisors for workforce and bachelor's degree programs at the college. Initially, 30% of new students with zero to 30 credits had an educational plan. Today, after five years of implementation and adjustment to the planning process, more than 90% have educational plans.

TSC achieved that scale by rethinking the traditional advising model. Rather than expecting advisors to handle every step of the process, the college reconsidered who does what, when students need different kinds of support, and where technology can make the work more efficient.

That division of labor is especially important because the shift to case management advising resulted in large caseloads of 750 to 1,000 students for 14 of TSC's 19 advisors who are assigned to associate in arts degree programs. Making individualized planning work with caseloads that large required the pieces of App2Cap to function as an integrated system. TSC accomplished this by uniting several key steps into a coordinated approach.

App2Cap Advising Model



Source. Tallahassee State College (PowerPoint).

Note. This case study does not discuss the Academic Recovery and Preparing for Graduation Success components.

Hiring Navigators for Early Engagement and Onboarding

Creating the admissions navigator role changed the enrollment process from one dominated by required documentation to one that welcomes and engages students from the moment of application. Navigators validate student's intended programs of study aligned to transfer or workforce programs based on their career aspirations. Allowing students to register before they submit their documentation engages them with knowledgeable and caring staff members from the beginning.

Using Supergroups for Registration

Initial virtual advising and registration Supergroups make it possible to register hundreds of new students in a short period during the spring and summer. During peak registration times, there are two one-hour Supergroup sessions daily with eight to 10 advisors registering more than 200 students each day.

The key is a highly structured process and specific roles for advisors. At the beginning of the Supergroup session, students watch a video about the differences between transfer and workforce degrees. Then they're assigned to breakout rooms, and an advisor speaks to each student, checking for registration

holds. The advisor teaches students how to register for their first term courses in Workday and then goes around the virtual room helping each student individually while others work on searching for classes. This initial group advising gets most new students through registration and prepares them to register themselves in future semesters. Once fall registration is complete, advisors have time for individual meetings with the new students to develop educational plans and to monitor progress for others in their cohort.

Integrating Planning With Registration

TSC made registration a part of the educational planning process rather than treating it as a separate advising activity. Students' plans live in Workday, where they can see the courses they need and register for them. During their initial Supergroup session, advisors teach students how to use Workday so they can register on their own in subsequent semesters. Once a full educational plan is in place, students can act on it without returning to an advisor each time they register by clicking a bright orange button in Workday that says, "Register from Plan." That self-service approach gives students more control over their progress while freeing advisors to spend more of their time working with students on career exploration, individualized planning, and meeting with students who need additional support.

With self-service registration, students become more independent, taking control of their progress, and navigating college processes that are important to their growth and success. "Design the advising tools to allow for student self-service," Rowland recommended. "Empower your students for self-service tools for those who can. And then you can use your advising time for those who need that additional support."

Offering Consistent Advising From Entry Through Completion

The shift from faculty advisors to professional advisors, and from transactional to caseload management, allows students to have consistent, ongoing career and academic guidance with the same advisor from the first semester through to graduation. Students intending to transfer are randomly assigned a career and academic advisor trained in having in-depth career exploration discussions. Those interested in workforce programs are assigned to a pathway advisor who specializes in their program. Advisors meet regularly with program directors and faculty to stay up to date on changes in program requirements.

Mapping TSC Courses for Transfer

TSC's redesign also included aligning program maps that list the recommended course sequence in a major by semester with the academic maps at FSU and FAMU. To smooth the transfer process for the close to 80% of graduates who transfer to a four-year university in Florida, advisors use these maps to help students select courses and make educational plans in Workday. The top of the students' plan lists the major that the student is planning to transfer into and to which four-year institution they will apply.

TSC has strong partnerships with FSU and FAMU. The ASPIRE-TSC2FSU program provides students with academic advising and maps for majors designed specifically for TSC students with common course numbers that show the recommended courses for two years at TSC followed by two years at FSU. TSC invites students in the ASPIRE program to visit the FSU campus to engage with students and faculty. FAMU's IGNITE program guarantees admission to TSC students who earn an

associate degree at TSC. Students have access to FAMU academic maps and priority advising sessions. Students can also live in off-campus housing with FSU and FAMU students.

For dual enrollment students, a dedicated TSC advisor helps students understand the curriculum maps for programs they're interested in and refers to the FSU ASPIRE course guides to demonstrate how taking courses intentionally at TSC can prepare them for a program at a four-year school.

TSC transfer staff stay up to date on changes within the university academic maps and meet with program directors to ensure the same changes are reflected in the TSC curriculum maps. This ongoing coordination means that career and academic advisors can ensure students take the right courses at TSC for seamless transfer to the universities.

To further support career exploration, TSC developed the Career Exploration Virtual Reality Lab, which offers virtual simulations for 150 careers, many of which align with programs at the college for high demand career fields and serves as the centerpiece for the TSC Career Academy. After trying some simulations, students meet with a career services advisor to discuss a comparison of job outlooks and salaries for fields of interest before developing their academic plan. This has been especially helpful for adult learners considering new careers.

Empowering Students Through Self-Service Technology

Some aspects of educational planning were occurring before TSC adopted Workday, but investing in technology helped streamline processes and allowed advisors to maintain a personalized approach even with large caseloads. Workday contains the individual student educational plans accessible by advisors, students, and faculty, and keeps in one place all relevant information, including curriculum maps. Advisor dashboards allow advisors to monitor student progress and see any changes that students make in their plans that prompts an outreach. Additionally, advisors can use Workday for degree audits and to monitor their cohorts and track milestones for potential outreach. Students can view and adjust their plans, see course eligibility, and monitor their own progress.

Providing Professional Development and Adjusting Compensation

Robust training and ongoing professional development opportunities ground the TSC advisors in effective advising techniques. Advisors hold memberships in NACADA, a global professional development organization for academic advising, and receive training on appreciative advising and the 3I model for career advising. They also received internal support, such as a three-tiered career progression guide that moves from an inquire phase to informing and integrating knowledge and experience. This structured process includes questions to ask students, activities to recommend, and resources to share. To maintain a high level of communication among the team, the advisors meet as a full group weekly to discuss issues, share practices, and support their peers' ongoing learning.

Also central to the success: a salary study and salary grade adjustment that TSC leaders conducted to make advisor compensation competitive with local state colleges and universities. This enhances the advisors' new expanded role and positively affects how they handle the often-intensive job of individualized educational planning.

Sustaining and Further Improving the Model

These changes have resulted in positive gains for the college. Registration occurs earlier in the cycle due to changes in the enrollment process and student's ability to register directly from their educational plan. Headcount has increased: In fall 2024, there was a 4% increase in the number of students enrolling, and that increased to 7.2% in fall of 2025. The college has experienced 12 straight semesters of growth, and graduation rates had a net gain from fall 2024 to fall 2025 of 20.9%.

TSC staff and administrators attribute the App2Cap framework and the redesigned onboarding and educational planning to an increase in on-time completions and fewer unnecessary credits. TSC has experienced high student satisfaction with onboarding and advising, with more than 92% of students satisfied with their student services experience. Transfer rates to four-year colleges for associate degree students are 77%, higher than the Florida state average (63%), and fall-to-fall retention of first time-in-college students is close to 60%. Educational planning has become a standard part of every student's experience at the college. "New students say, 'I'm here to get my academic plan,'" said one administrator. "The word is getting around among students about the value of the plans."

TSC plans to continue strengthening the educational planning process, using metrics like the percent of students with plans, momentum measures such as credits earned, and completion and transfer outcomes to monitor student outcomes and adjust as needed. For example, financial planning has yet to be fully integrated but is a growing emphasis as advisors receive training to discuss cost, financial aid implications, and course withdrawal risks with students.

In addition, TSC would like to expand the use of virtual reality technology to more students during career advising. Finally, improving internal data systems for tracking the effectiveness of educational planning will allow TSC to substantiate its value for students and the college. "Constant evaluation of the procedures and policies is a big thing," an advisor said. "There are definitely changes that have happened and changes that continue to happen in places that we're still hoping to go. Colleges need to be willing to evolve."

Conclusion

TSC's experience shows that scaling individualized planning requires redesigning the work around helping students develop and follow a plan. By reorganizing onboarding, defining distinct roles for staff, investing in professional advisors, and using technology to streamline routine tasks and encourage student self-service, the college has made individualized career and educational planning possible for nearly all students, even with very large advising caseloads. The model's strength lies in how those pieces work together, creating a system that helps students understand where they're going and make each step along the way count. The result is a system designed to move students through college with a clear sense of where they're going and how they will get there.

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