

Academic Advising: Strategies for Improving Retention and Completion

In this report, Hanover Research analyzes the role of academic advising in community college retention and completion. We examine strategies implemented by community colleges, as well as several approaches proven effective in broader institutional contexts.

Executive Summary

In this report, Hanover Research presents a brief review of literature on academic advising as it relates to student retention and completion. Several approaches are presented, with an emphasis on recent strategies that have been considered successful or promising. The final section of the report examines three community colleges with exemplary academic advising programs, focusing on those that have received external grant funding.

Key findings of this report include the following:

- ❖ Research on the role that academic advising plays in student retention and completion is mixed: On one hand, academic advising is routinely cited in surveys and scholarly literature as one of the most important factors influencing retention and completion. On the other hand, it is difficult to point to comprehensive, empirical studies that offer conclusive evidence of a *direct* impact on student outcomes.
- ❖ Models for academic advising are diverse; current literature indicates that no one set of best practices fits every institution. Instead, scholars stress the necessity of adopting academic advising strategies that respond to the unique needs of an institution and its student population.
- ❖ As academic advising initiatives often overlap and intersect with other academic programs, there appear to be relatively few studies demonstrating the effectiveness of academic advising *in general*. Nonetheless, researchers widely agree that advising has the potential to positively impact student engagement.
- ❖ Studies of academic advising specifically—particularly within the context of other factors (both academic and non-academic) that contribute to student persistence—show that advising may be most successful in achieving results by helping to clarify students' aspirations and commitment to higher education. More specifically, advising may be particularly effective when it focuses on fostering student motivation and establishing clear connections between coursework and career outcomes.
- ❖ A relatively large number of community colleges appear to have implemented advising strategies targeted specifically toward retention. Current practices emphasize intrusive advising, student success courses, early alert systems for at-risk students, and the use of technology to make advising more convenient, accessible, and efficient. These approaches are regularly supported by external grants, particularly from organizations interested in improving community college outcomes, such as the Lumina Foundation and Achieving the Dream.

Section I: Research on Academic Advising, Retention, and Completion

Making community colleges more effective for the millions of Americans they serve is an issue of national importance. In general, however, community colleges are hindered by high attrition rates, and may have considerable work to do in increasing retention and completion rates. A 2010 editorial in *The Christian Science Monitor* highlighted low retention and completion rates in community colleges as an educational policy issue of national significance. By its count, **only 25 percent of community college students finish in three years**, and those who do eventually graduate take an average of five years to complete their degree (“Raise the Community College Graduation Rate,” 2010). Such low rates undoubtedly owe to the myriad challenges that community colleges face, but are also attributable, in some part, to a lack of coordinated effort by community colleges to address persistence issues. In a recent survey of community college administrators conducted by the American College Testing Program (ACT), for instance, approximately 40 percent of respondents indicated there was no person responsible for such coordination in their own institution (ACT, 2010).

Community colleges have long been hindered by high attrition rates. As a result, strategies to improve retention and completion have taken on paramount importance.

Community college students themselves face various hurdles that can make addressing retention and completion additionally challenging. Students often come to college with risk factors that already jeopardize their persistence. According an article by McArthur (2005) published in *The Community College Review*, these factors may include “being a first generation college student, having poor academic skills, being burdened by family and work pressures, being a language minority student, and lacking a consistent connection to the college” (p. 1). In this context, effective academic advising practices may offer one way to combat these factors and help increase students’ chances of graduation.

For students and personnel alike, effective academic advising is a high priority, and is generally viewed as one of the most important factors in promoting successful outcomes. **Recent research indicates that advising is associated with better outcomes**, and that students view advising services as important. For example, in a recent national survey conducted by higher education consultancy firm Noel-Levitz, researchers found that community college students ranked academic advising/counseling *third* in a list of 12 institutional priorities, just below institutional effectiveness and registration effectiveness. Figure 1.1, on the following page, shows priority ranking for advising and other services as indicated by the survey (Noel-Levitz, 2010).

Figure 1.1: Importance of Services: Student and Personnel Rankings

Field	Student Rank	Personnel Rank
Instructional Effectiveness	1	2
Registration Effectiveness	2	10
Academic Advising/Counseling	3	5
Concern for the Individual	4	1
Academic Services	5	8
Admissions and Financial Aid	6	3
Safety and Security	7	6
Student Centeredness	8	7
Campus Climate	9	4
Service Excellence	10	9
Campus Support Services	11	11

Source: Noel-Levitz

While campus personnel place slightly less importance on advising, the Noel-Levitz study concludes that “there is often a strong connection between positive academic advising relationships and retention of students” (p. 7).

A review of other large-scale studies indicates a general consensus regarding the importance of academic advising. Researchers Muraskin and Wilner (2004) have found that persisting students tend to express higher satisfaction with counseling services than those who drop out (as cited in Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). However, in the 2010 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), 58 percent of students reported using academic advising services *sometimes* or *often*, indicating that a high percentage (roughly one-third) of students had minimal or no contact with academic advisors (CCSE, 2010).

Additional research indicates that individuals responsible for tracking student retention and completion view advising as one of the most important factors in promoting student persistence. A recent study on retention practices conducted by ACT included a question in which chief academic affairs officers were asked which factors they felt had the strongest effect on student retention at community colleges. Respondents, who represented 305 community colleges, were asked to rate factors that had the strongest effects on student retention and attrition at their institution. Notably, four of the top 15 effective retention practices highlighted by respondents related specifically to advising, namely (ACT, 2010, pp. 3, 7):

- ✓ Increasing the number of academic advisors
- ✓ Advising interventions with selected student populations
- ✓ Availability of an academic advising center
- ✓ Integration of advising with first-year transition programs

A similar question in the same survey asked respondents to select, from a list of 94 practices, the top three that they felt contributed to retention. Notably, three of the

top nine responses related to advising. Figure 1.2, below, lists these nine practices, with those related to advising in bold (ACT, 2010, p. 10):

Figure 1.2.: Top-Rated Practices Contributing to Retention in Community Colleges

Practice or Intervention	Percent of Respondents Selecting as one of Top 3 Most Effective Practices
Mandated placement in courses based on test scores	36%
Required remedial/developmental coursework	20%
Comprehensive learning assistance centers/lab	14%
Academic advising centers	12%
Early warning systems	12%
Freshman seminar/success course	10%
Summer orientation	10%
Training for faculty academic advisors	10%

Source: ACT

As shown in the figure above, while advising is considered to be important, the survey found that course placement, developmental coursework, and the availability of academic assistance centers (e.g., tutoring) were more important in the eyes of the chief academic affairs officers surveyed. In summary, academic advising is an important factor in promoting retention, but other strategies are perceived by some community college administrators as more effective in sustaining and improving student persistence. While advising is widely regarded as playing an influential role in community college retention and completion, ***empirical evidence supporting academic advising as a decisive factor in persistence is somewhat less conclusive.*** According to Pietras (2010), research on academic advising has tended to focus on student satisfaction with academic advising, in lieu of assessing quality and usefulness (e.g., a direct and sustained correlation with student outcomes).

The difficulty of establishing the effectiveness of academic advising in general may be due to the diversity of models, strategies, and approaches currently utilized. Accordingly, to speak about advising in general is of limited utility, insofar as ‘academic advising’ may refer to a wide body of practices. For example, according to a widely-cited study by Habley (1993), **there are at least seven organizational models for community college academic advising services**, each with its own merits and drawbacks. Rather than prescribing a model, Habley suggests a series of best practices that are transferable between multiple institutions. These best practices, compiled through a literature review and survey data, are as follows (p. 43):

- ❖ “The design of the academic advising program must be compatible with the institutional organizational structure and student needs;
- ❖ A specific individual must be designated by the institution to direct or coordinate the academic advising program;
- ❖ The institution must have a clear written statement of philosophy pertaining to academic advising that includes program goals and sets forth expectations of advisers and advisees;
- ❖ Academic advising should be offered only by personnel who have received systematic skills training;
- ❖ There must be systematic and regular research on and evaluation of the overall academic advising program;
- ❖ Academic advising should be offered only by personnel whose performance is systematically evaluated;
- ❖ Academic advising should be offered only by personnel who are rewarded for skillful performance.”

Given the proliferation of academic advising models, the best research related to effectiveness is likely provided through macro- level studies focused on aggregating and summarizing existent research. In their comprehensive literature review, released by the Lumina Foundation, Alfonso and Bailey (2005), reference several such studies:

- ❖ Tinto (1993) suggested that institutions should foster both social integration—measured by factors such as student integration with faculty and participation in extracurricular activities—and academic integration, measured by indicators of academic achievement, to increase retention.
- ❖ In separate studies, both Grubb (2003) and Summers (2003) found that early intervention in the form of either counseling or other support services could improve persistence and academic performance among academically weak community college students.

Perhaps the most instructive insights from Bailey and Alfonso’s study are those indicating that the social and academic integration model proposed by Tinto can be effective. This suggests **the most effective community college advising programs may be those that support students in *multiple areas***, helping them with academic, social, and personal concerns.

While Bailey and Alfonso focus on advising and its impact, Karp (2011) approaches the issue from the retention and completion side, examining factors that may lead to increased persistence. Analyzing 128 books, journal articles, and reports, Karp's study attempts to move beyond factors that correlate with persistence to uncover the mechanisms that specifically lead to *retention and completion*. Karp writes that community college programs associated with retention tend to involve one or more of the following foci (Karp, 2011, p. 2):

- ❖ Creating social relationships
- ❖ Clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment
- ❖ Developing college know-how
- ❖ Making college life feasible

According to Karp, academic advising can play some role in each of these areas, but advising's most prominent role may be in clarifying aspirations and enhancing students' commitment to education. Students from at-risk backgrounds or non-traditional college-going populations may not have clear ideas of why college is important or the goals they may wish to achieve. Along these lines, Karp notes, research has shown that students able to produce concrete visions of themselves in occupations that require college education, and those able to make realistic plans, are more likely to persist. Thus, insofar as academic advising offers a mentorship function, it may aid in fostering the conditions necessary to encourage student retention.

Recent Areas of Emphasis in Academic Advising

Current trends in persistence-focused academic advising have emphasized **proactive approaches**—namely, addressing issues with student preparation *before* these issues affect performance. When problems do arise, however, colleges must find strategies to effectively support these students, many of whom may not have previously considered utilizing advising services. Figure 1.3, on the following page, outlines several key advising approaches from the literature, including strategies that have been successful in winning external grant support from organizations such as Achieving the Dream and the Lumina Foundation.

Figure 1.3: Successful Advisory Models and Approaches

Approach	Description
Intrusive Advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Intrusive advising is widely recommended for historically at-risk student populations in the professional literature. These groups include academically disadvantaged or underprepared students, disabled students, probationary students, ethnic minorities, first-generation college students and students of low socioeconomic status. ❖ Heisserer and Parette (2002) note intrusive advising programs may include systems to monitor academic performance, periodic phone calls to the student, distribution of informative newsletters, and signed contracts or study plans that outline student goals and means of achieving those goals.

Approach	Description
Student Success Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Success courses blur the line between instruction and advising, by providing advisory services in a classroom setting. According to Bailey and Alfonso (2005), first-year seminars—also known as success courses—have consistently demonstrated effectiveness in helping to provide institutional orientation and academic skills. However, as courses are typically voluntary, they may fail to reach students with the highest risk of attrition. ❖ Success courses allow students to develop personal relationships with an advisory, but are more effective than one-on-one meetings alone. Advisors can delivery basic information to the entire classroom at once, and follow up with more individual issues one-on-one as they arise.
Early Alert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Bailey and Alfonso (2005) also cite early alert/early intervention systems as effective strategies for boosting retention and completion by targeting the most at-risk students. ❖ Early case management and technology to monitor student progress were the most common strategies adopted by colleges participating in the Achieving the Dream initiative. ❖ If students miss a certain number of classes or fail to receive certain grades, they receive a call from a counselor offering assistance. Faculty, advisors and personnel can track student progress to provide a personalized, supportive environment.

Notably, recent survey data compiled through the CCCSE (2010) and ACT (2010) indicates that many students underutilize, or may not even be aware of, academic advising resources offered by their institution. **Leveraging information technology**, as well as the Internet, has thus become increasingly popular as a means of generating awareness of academic advising services. Uses of technology in academic advising are diverse, but may include call centers, internet portals, and platforms for managing advising requests (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005).

Section II: Exemplary Program Models

In this section, Hanover profiles several medium-sized community colleges with exemplary persistence-focused academic advising programs. In selecting colleges for inclusion, we considered a large number of institutions, ultimately focusing on advising initiatives that have received substantial external support. While the presence of external funding may be an indication of need, it is also a likely indicator of program quality and alignment with current best practices.

Montgomery County Community College

Student Success Courses, Technology, and Early Alert

Montgomery County Community College operates two campuses—in Bluebell and Pottstown, Pennsylvania—with a total enrollment of 13,919, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (“NCES College Navigator”). In a profile written in *Educause Quarterly*, Schwartz et al. (2010) discuss the ways Montgomery County Community College has utilized data and information technology to support its Student Success Initiative, a program that provides advising, as well as other student services, to develop positive first-year experiences and improve student retention, graduation, and transfer rates. MCCC has partnered with several organizations, including Achieving the Dream, to support its work.

Montgomery County Community College has been recognized for its use of data and IT in supporting its Student Success Initiative.

Prior to implementing the Student Success Initiative, students at MCCC responded unfavorably to questions about their experiences with academic advising on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), which MCCC’s institutional research office administers annually. Students viewed advising services as disorganized and requiring long wait times. During peak registration times, the college’s advising center would receive up to 40 voicemail messages from students at the end of each day. Students might be transferred four to six times during the course of one call, as each department was only able to answer questions relevant to its specific functions (Schwartz et al., 2010).

A major component of improving academic advising at MCCC entailed **finding better ways to manage student demands for services** through the utilization of technology. The advising office adopted a web-based scheduling grid that allows for walk-in meetings, but also provides students with estimates for how long they will have to wait. Staff members can quickly and efficiently help students select appointments that best fit their schedules and areas of study, thus improving the initial contact experience. Students can also make appointments using the College’s online student portal, which also allows them to schedule meetings with tutors and

peer mentors. Finally, a call center with trained operators is available to answer student questions; however, if a representative is unable to fully assist a student, callers can be transferred to speak with an advisor (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Since implementing the system, complaints from students unable to find information have fallen by more than 95 percent, and approximately 80 percent of all student calls are now answered within 30 seconds. In addition to improving the level of service that call-in students receive, the call center has also bolstered student satisfaction with face-to-face advising interactions on MCCC's campuses. More efficient scheduling systems have reduced the total number of students in the queue, allowing primary advising staff to provide more effective assistance during advising sessions (Schwartz et al., 2010).

In 2010, MCCC began using the **Colleague Student Retention Alert**, which allows counselors, advisors, and faculty to track and communicate with at-risk students. The tool was initially implemented as a pilot project tied to the college's success course, which is mandatory for students that place into two or more developmental courses.

Since implementing data-driven academic advising practices, persistence rates have shown significant improvement, particularly among African American students.

Students with excessive absences, poor academic performance, and severe conduct issues generate alerts that are sent to a counselor in the Student Success Center. The counselor may then track and communicate with the student throughout the semester or, if necessary, throughout the student's entire time at the college. Counselors can also use the tool to communicate with specific cohorts of students, such as those in developmental courses (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Since implementing data-driven strategies, the fall-to-spring persistence rate for African American students has increased by 8.2 percent—from 62.8 in 2004 to 71 percent in 2009. **MCCC has also seen increase in its overall fall-to-fall and fall-to-spring persistence rates.** The 2009 fall-to-spring persistence rate was 68.9 percent—an increase of 1.5 percent from the previous year and a 2.9 percent increase over the persistence rate in 2004 (66 percent). Overall fall-to-fall persistence rates experienced only a modest increase—.7 percent—between 2004 and 2009, though more significant improvement was exhibited among African American students. The fall-to-fall persistence rate among African American students increased from 42.7 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in 2009, a gain of 3.3 percentage points (Schwartz et al., 2010).

It should be noted, however, that these increases may not be *exclusively* attributable to advising strategies. Complementary initiatives, such as learning communities, supplemental instruction, and a minority male mentoring program, were implemented

in conjunction with the Student Success Initiative, aimed at bolstering student retention and completion rates (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Bossier Parish Community College

Student Success Courses and Technology

Bossier Parish Community College (BPCC), located in Bossier City, Louisiana, has a total enrollment of 6,473 students (“NCES College Navigator”). The College has implemented several initiatives under the umbrella of a three-year program targeted at improving student persistence. The program, **BPCC First**, is aimed at improving student retention and completion, and has been supported in part with a \$225,000 grant from the Lumina Foundation. Elements of the program are largely based on elements of the Achieving the Dream model, and include a **student success course**, **academic advising** and **progress monitoring** targeted toward first-year students (BPCC, “BPCC First”).

Technology plays a significant role in the initiative, with BPCC developing advising platforms that integrate student information systems, tools for conducting and supporting degree audits, student conferences, student records, referrals, and the exchange of information with colleagues. There is also a significant element of professional development in the first-year initiative, with mandatory workshop modules for faculty and staff on advising techniques, as well as training modules for advisors. Another planned part of the initiative will include profiling different testing programs to help students explore and determine their career interests (BPCC, “BPCC First Core Team”)

BPCC First, aimed at improving student retention and completion rates, received funding support from the Lumina Foundation.

BPCC First was implemented in 2008, primarily as a response to declining retention rates. The percentage of first-year students returning for the second year dropped to 44.89 percent in 2006, from 52.42 percent in 2005, a decline primarily attributed to students’ lack of academic preparation and time management/study skills. Moreover, focus groups conducted in the early planning stages of the program found that “Many students ... reported that some of the barriers they experienced were lack of advising [and] lack of knowledgeable advisors” (BPCC, “Priority Area and Intervention”).

The ultimate aim of the program was to foster a 2 percent increase in fall-to-fall retention among full-time associate degree-seekers; however, due to the relatively recent implementation of BPCC first, conclusive data related to retention and completion is not yet available. However, **preliminary indicators have been positive**. As a result of the success course, developmental students displayed higher than average scores on CSSSE’s Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE),

including measurements of connectedness, aspirations, academic planning, college readiness, engagement, and support that were above those of non-developmental BSCC students, the general BSCC student population, and students from BSCC's peer group. Students in the success course were also able to answer questions about how to access student services and campus offices—such as tutoring, advising, counseling, and the library—as well as non-academic resources (such as campus organizations) at a higher rate than other students. Visits to the campus tutoring and advising offices also increased dramatically, doubling or tripling for some months over pre-project totals (Wheeler, 2010, pp. 25-27).

Durham Technical Community College

Student Success Courses and Early Alert

Durham Technical Community College (Durham Tech) is a community college with 5,933 students located in Durham, North Carolina (“NCES College Navigator”). The College has taken a proactive approach to student advising by emphasizing student success courses and early alert programs. The College received Achieving the Dream support to improve teaching, and initially utilized funds to create Communities of

Durham Tech's student support courses have led to increased rates of persistence among participating students.

Learning, Inquiry, and Practice (CLIP), consisting of research groups and a faculty journal on teaching and learning. CLIP gave rise to the creation of student success courses, which, after several years, have produced improved results in student persistence among participants.

Starting in 2007 and implemented over three academic years, Durham Tech's success course has seen strong results in promoting student persistence. Among cohorts of students who took the success course and passed it during their first fall term, persistence rates were 75-86 percent. **These rates stood in marked contrast to overall rates of persistence during the same period, which averaged 65.5 percent.** Successful completion of the course was a significant determinant of persistence; among groups of students that took the course but did *not* pass, persistence rates were 39-55 percent (Achieving the Dream, “Promising Practices,” p. 25).

Early Alert is another advising initiative that Durham Tech has pursued using ATD support. The program enrolls approximately 70 percent of entering students and 30 percent of the total student population; however, plans are underway to integrate Early Alert with the required orientation for all first-time college students. Eventually, the College aims to provide all at-risk students with assigned advisors *before* they enroll in classes. Early data on student completion and performance show that students identified as at-risk have been significantly more successful when assisted by the Early Alert program. During the first three semesters, students who participated

in these intervention programs were shown to have shown significantly higher course completion rates, persistence rates, and GPAs.

Remarkably, 97 percent of students referred by Early Alert who received two or more contact hours in fall 2007 advanced to the spring 2008 semester. **Students receiving any amount of contact with an advisor after referral re-enrolled at a rate of 70 percent** – a figure *seven points* higher than students identified as at-risk but not served by an advisor. On a longer-term basis, results of the program are strong but not remarkable. In an analysis of annual persistence rates (fall 2007-fall 2008), Early Alert students receiving two hours or more of advising persisted at a rate of 55 percent. Students who received any amount of contact time persisted at a rate of 43 percent, whereas referred students who did not receive advising re-enrolled at a rate of only 40 percent (Achieving the Dream, “Durham Technical”).

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