Advising & Student Support Playbook

Evidence-based practices to help advising teams improve course success, persistence, and on-time completion

CIVITAS ® **LEARNING**

Advising really works. But, it's not easy work.

When we reviewed more than 1,000 initiatives and programs across the country at more than 55 colleges and universities, we found that advising has the highest impact on improving student success.

Applying an apples-to-apples matching methodology, advising clearly lifts persistence by 5.8 percentage points overall[1].

Now, in the continued wake of COVID-19, emerging data show that advising matters more than ever.

When we looked closer, we found:

4 year public
A 6.36 percentage point increase in persistence

2 year public
An 8.13 percentage point increase in persistence

N count for 4 year private institutions was too small to be statistically significant

Advising has a higher lift for students early in their academic career. And, for more vulnerable students, it has an even greater measured persistence lift.

It consistently ranks as a top-performing investment because when it works, it works really well. Yet, despite all of our collective best intentions, 47% of advising programs studied aren't improving student outcomes... This means that an advising best practice won't guarantee improved outcomes. But, knowing what works for your students on your campus does. We'll dig into that more in a bit.

Perhaps most importantly, in a study with the Center for Generational Kinetics, 80% of students stated that they are most confident turning to an advisor for support[2]. *Students know advising works, too.*

In our work to help advisors and student success leaders support their students, we've learned things that can inform your practice – and hopefully, help you make an even greater impact on the students, regardless of the modality, circumstance, or distance.

Our analysis found the following:

0 terms completed
A 7.08 percentage point increase in persistence

1 to 3 terms completed
A 6.25 percentage point increase in persistence

Highest predicted risk
A 9.4 percentage point increase in persistence

Part-time students
A 6.95 percentage point increase in persistence

– SEVEN TIPS TO INSPIRE YOUR STUDENTS –

Know there's more than what meets the eye.

Identify new opportunities to support students and get them across the finish line.

A student's GPA doesn't tell the whole story. We looked at 4 million students from 62 institutions, and we learned that 98% of institutions are losing more students above a 2.0 GPA than below it. 44% of the non-persisting students had above a 3.0 GPA[3].

Even if a student is close to completion, they may still be battling unseen challenges to cross the finish line. In a separate study of 53 colleges and universities, we found that nearly 1 in 5 students who leave without a degree have reached 75% of the credit threshold. And, more than 1 in 10 students who leave without a degree have completed 90% of the credit threshold[4].

When students face challenges during their academic journey, it's often not just academics that make it more difficult for them to persist or graduate. It's non-academic, or "extra academic," challenges that make learning one of many things they're thinking about. They're dealing with housing and food insecurity. Family commitments. Work obligations. Life and logistics. These are just some of the challenges our students increasingly face, and they need our help.

Advisors should be able to focus on helping students with these challenges. That becomes much easier when advisors and student success teams are equipped with a holistic understanding of each individual student. Focusing care is also easier when an advisor can be prepared for a constructive advising session or appointment because advising notes and student information is consolidated into a unified view.

When supporting your students, be sure to seek out opportunities to conduct proactive outreach (or interventions) – or *Engagement Opportunities*, to deliver just-in-time support to your students. Backed by data and successful outreach across the country, these are proven techniques to help you see – and serve – each and every student

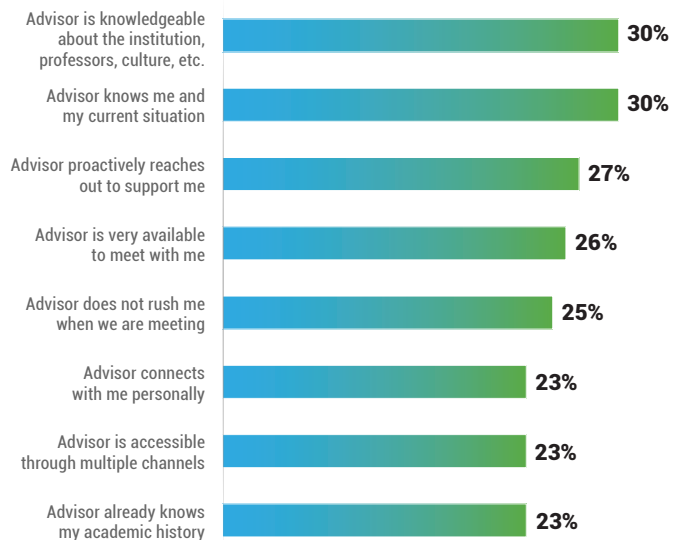## Meet students where they are.

Personalization matters, but it doesn't have to be in-person to be effective.

In our study with the Center for Generational Kinetics, students shared that they want advising connections that are *personalized, proactive and focused*.

So now, especially since most of us are accustomed to meeting virtually, that the modality isn't the most important part. More than anything students want you to know them and their reality. That's more important than sitting across a desk from a student. When you connect with your students, make sure you have their specific information at your fingertips. When preparing for an advising appointment, ask your students to add their required breaks into their schedule (like work, daycare dropoff, sports practice, etc) before the advising session.

This gives you additional context on their extra-academic commitments and frees up time during the conversation to have a discussion instead of taking care of more transactional tasks.

**WHAT WOULD MAKE ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP MORE MEANINGFUL ?
(BY TOTAL, TOP 8 OF 13)**

Advisor is knowledgeable about the institution, professors, culture, etc.	30%
Advisor knows me and my current situation	30%
Advisor proactively reaches out to support me	27%
Advisor is very available to meet with me	26%
Advisor does not rush me when we are meeting	25%
Advisor connects with me personally	23%
Advisor is accessible through multiple channels	23%
Advisor already knows my academic history	23%

Students also said that they don't expect to meet with an advisor every time they need support. They are open to digital interactions as well, so we can re-think outreach and support channels. *56% of students prefer online and digital coaching, like email, text or video conferencing[2].*
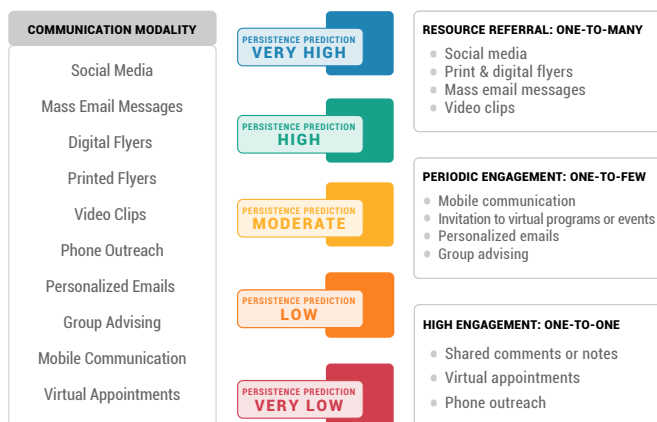
Some students don't need to meet – and in fact, the ones who set appointments might be the students who need the least amount of support. It's often the students who aren't meeting in-person that we need to tune into, and the good news is that they are open to various types of connection and support.

Tune engagement strategy to the level of support your student needs.

In 1986, Daft and Lengel introduced a framework called the *Media Richness Theory (MRT)* which suggests the most effective communication medium is based on the complexity of the message you're trying to communicate. So, the communication channel (or medium) must have the capacity to allow message senders (you and your team) and receivers (your students) to achieve *shared meaning*. It provides a framework that suggests what meaningful action you can take to address an opportunity the right way.

USE DATA TO INFORM YOUR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY:

COMMUNICATION MODALITY		
Social Media	**PERSISTENCE PREDICTION VERY HIGH**	**RESOURCE REFERRAL: ONE-TO-MANY** • Social media • Print & digital flyers • Mass email messages • Video clips
Mass Email Messages		
Digital Flyers	**PERSISTENCE PREDICTION HIGH**	
Printed Flyers		
Video Clips	**PERSISTENCE PREDICTION MODERATE**	**PERIODIC ENGAGEMENT: ONE-TO-FEW** • Mobile communication • Invitation to virtual programs or events • Personalized emails • Group advising
Phone Outreach		
Personalized Emails	**PERSISTENCE PREDICTION LOW**	
Group Advising		**HIGH ENGAGEMENT: ONE-TO-ONE** • Shared comments or notes • Virtual appointments • Phone outreach
Mobile Communication		
Virtual Appointments	**PERSISTENCE PREDICTION VERY LOW**	

When you're equipped with a persistence prediction for your students, here's how you would apply the framework and allocate resources. There are paths to do this successfully with a group of students (one-to-many) or through 1:1 (one-to-one) interventions.

As students face new challenges throughout each term, there is opportunity to adjust your engagement strategy as the students persistence prediction shifts. Students experience risk (and opportunity) as the weeks progress, and it's important to have visibility into those changes.

Those may be the moments when your outreach matters most. As a student success professional, your experience in higher education, your knowledge of your students, and your availability of resources will guide your choice in the type and medium of intervention that can most effectively influence your students success and change their trajectory. Because, that's really what this is all about.
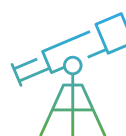
Be proactive — and deliberate.

Doing more or adding more people often isn't a solution.

To offset or mitigate capacity constraints, be proactive. While adding more staff can be helpful, it's not always the right fix – or an option. It can't be the only way you scale.

We know those that benefit the most from advising are also the least likely to voluntarily engage with advisors. Proactive outreach is needed in order to make a dent in outcomes for those students.

We also know advisor meetings are incredibly valuable, although there simply isn't bandwidth to require an advisor meeting with every student. Advisors can't just do more. Here are a few proven strategies to overcome this:

- *Develop the right proactive outreach calendar for your campus. Regular, timely nudges or outreach can make easier for you to open up channels with your students.*

- *Engage throughout the term instead of only around registration*

- *Identify the student groups that most need your support. Let that help you prioritize your day. Look closer at your advising process and student experience. Are there embedded barriers that limit student progression and on-time completion? What can be streamlined?*

Leverage your team.

One person, team, or program alone cannot sustainably improve student outcomes.

We're in this together, so let's work like we're in it together. Even the best superheros have a team or a sidekick. Isolated efforts and interventions simply won't deliver sustainable outcome improvements.

To provide the care our students need, we must:

- *Coordinate around a consistent source of truth*

- *Monitor activity and outputs to iterate real-time*

- *Share notes and context while managing FERPA requirements*

- *Close the loop on faculty feedback*

- *Assess effectiveness on outcomes*

The most effective advising programs and initiatives apply a coordinated approach to student care and support. The reality is that there's an entire student success network that can be powered with the context they need and the workflow they want. Don't design your support to match your advising technology. Make sure your technology is flexible to support the process your students and staff need.

Use automation with caution.

Don't let an alert send student outreach without your input.

We studied a handful of colleges and universities with existing automated advising solutions. These campuses used multiple types of flags – alerts, kudos, attendance – consistently across their campuses.

Consider this an early warning about early warnings – the way you communicate to your students matters. Automated alerts simply do not make the most of human intelligence and your experience.

As you consider your own outreach and nudging strategies, plan to move from transactional messages to communication designed to transform behavior. And, don't let an alert automate student outreach without your input.

Considering the increased vulnerability of all student, this is critically important now. Be sure to consider:

- *When you send a message.*
  Just-in-time or consistent outreach shows that you're looking out for them.

- *How you say what you say.*
  Your students can feel your intent, so let it shine.

- *What you recommend.*
  A little bit of personalization goes a long way.

When we looked at automated advising programs – 49 in total – 90% had a statistically significant negative impact on persistence. The other five programs? There was no statistically significant impact.

Some examples of these alerts include automatic messages or alerts to students based on attendance concern, low class participation, not registering, low grade concern, other academic concern, in danger of failing, not logging into online courses, course withdrawal, and insufficient academic progress.

What if the message changed from this…

Subject Line: Absence Reminder

As a reminder, if you miss more than 6 classes, this will be an automatic failure of this class.

You have already missed 2 classes. You are close to failing this class due to excessive absences. Please let me know if you have any questions.

TYPICAL ALERT MESSAGING:
-1% TO -10% (PP) DROPS IN PERSISTENCE

To a more personalized message like this?

Subject Line: Are You Okay?

I noticed that you missed 2 classes and I am checking in to see if you are okay.

Often students who have missed class worry that they can't catch up. You can! I'm here to help. Respond to this email and we can discuss how to get back on track.

Thank you for being my student.

POSITIVE MINDSET MESSAGING:
+1% TO +10% (PP) LIFTS IN PERSISTENCE

When typical alert messaging was sent to students, we saw -1 to -10 percentage point drops in persistence. On the other hand, when the message changed to something rooted in a positive mindset... There was a 1 to 10 percentage point lift in persistence.

Of course, automating things where possible can scale the work of advisors, faculty, and student success teams. But, it should never replace perspective and expertise. While there's no replacement for the human side of this work, there is another way to make a difference for more students.

Automated or transactional messaging can have an adverse effect, especially when the outreach lacks personalization or growth-mindset-based messaging.

Keep learning about what students at your campus need.

Know what works for whom.

When the University of Central Oklahoma studied the impact of their Student Transformative Learning Record , they found that it delivered a 12-15 percentage point lift in persistence overall. This helped them confidently report on and scale the grant-funded program — and now, other schools across the country are doing the same. Other examples include The

University of Missouri – Kansas City where Supplemental Instruction was found to lift persistence by 7.8 percentage point lift for students who attend 3 or more times — equivalent to $600K ROI. Austin Community College studied the impact of their ACCelerator program , which bolsters persistence for their students to the tune of 3 percentage points, with a 4X increase for DevEd students.

The list of what's known to work goes on across our community of practice. Because of that information, more higher ed leaders and advising teams are able to make more informed decisions about how to serve the increasingly diverse needs of students at their campus.

What could you do differently if you knew exactly what works best for your students?

As your programs, policies and students change – you need to make sure you're adjusting and refining your approach as well. To get more students across the stage, we can't just keep doing what probably worked before. We all have to lean in and look closer at what's working for whom or risk stagnating outcomes for our institution and our students.

Conclusion

Every day, you turn on your computer and/or go into your office to improve student success. It's hard work, but it's noble work. The good news overall, advising work is having an impact.

But, we can't assume what makes a difference for one student on one campus will have the same impact for another student somewhere else. Collectively, we must move past a one-size-fits-all approach; we have to look closer and learn together.

There is a path to improved outcomes, and it's found in some of the proven tips and new techniques we shared here. Even the best advising best practice won't guarantee improved outcomes. But, knowing what works for *your students on your campus does*. When we look closer, it's clear that improving visibility across campus and prioritizing the student experience makes all the difference.

References:

All reports and research can be accessed for free at:
www.civitaslearning.com/research

[1] *What Really Works: A Review of Student Success Initiatives*
(Civitas Learning, 2019)

[2] *State of Students Report*
(Center for Generational Kinetics and Civitas Learning, 2018)

[3] *Community Insights Report, Issue 2*
(Civitas Learning, 2016)

[4] *Community Insights Report, Issue 4*
(Civitas Learning, 2018)

Editorial Note: Civitas Learning originally published this resource in Fall 2019 as *Inspire Your Students: Proven Tips for Advising Success.* In response to COVID-19's continued wake, it was updated with new research and practices in 2020.

About Civitas Learning:

We help colleges and universities harness the power of their student data to improve student success. We embed actionable insights and applied analytics into connected workflow applications to support the student journey. Equipped with our platform, leaders, advisors and faculty have the tools they need to measurably and sustainably improve enrollment, course success, persistence, graduation and equity.

Today, we support more than 400 colleges and universities, reaching nearly 9 million students. Together with our growing community of customers, we are making the most of the world's learning data to help a million more students graduate.

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