

“I Wasn’t Just the Person at the Appointment”: Proactive, Student-Centered Advising in Support of First-Generation and Limited-Income College Students

REPORT AUTHORS

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In 2016, Ohio State implemented Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS), a multi-institutional proactive advising project supported by the University Innovation Alliance (UIA). The intervention was designed to support the retention, progression, and academic achievement of limited-income and first-generation students, details of which can be found in Alamuddin et al. (2019a).

The intervention was designed to support the retention, progression, and academic achievement of limited-income and first-generation students, details of which can be found in Alamuddin et al. (2019a). Research suggests proactive advising is positively associated with increased GPA and retention (Abelman & Molina, 2002). A proactive, human-centered advising approach may be particularly meaningful for minority and first-generation students (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Swecker et al., 2013).

First-generation students and those from limited-income backgrounds encounter challenges throughout their college journey resulting from systemic inequities. This includes high levels of stress caused by lack of institutional support (Garriott & Nisle, 2018), fear of failure (Spencer & Castano, 2007), and messages which suggest that they do not belong on campus (Jury et al., 2019). Additionally, Students of Color from low-SES backgrounds experience heightened feelings of marginalization and exclusion (Oikonomidoy et al., 2020). Exacerbating these challenges, students from low-SES and first-generation backgrounds are more likely to avoid sharing their concerns with close friends and family (Barry et al., 2009) or seeking institutional help (Rivera, 2019). As such, successfully navigating college can be challenging for these students, particularly those with multiple minority identities.

Despite research that suggests proactive advising can mitigate these challenges, this may not always be true in practice. A prior randomized control trial (RCT) study compared academic achievement measures of students offered the MAAPS intervention (in addition to the university's primary academic advising services) with students who worked exclusively with their primary advisors. Researchers found significant differences between groups at only one

institution (Alamuddin et al., 2018, 2019). However, survey and focus group data did suggest that some students may have gained beneficial skills and experiences from MAAPS (Alamuddin et al., 2019b).

We wondered how MAAPS advising at Ohio State might have meaningfully served Ohio State students and how lessons learned could be used to improve advising more broadly. This qualitative study explored students' experiences with MAAPS advisors, extending research presented in a previous brief (Van Jura et al., 2021). We found that while some students appreciated the proactive communication from MAAPS advisors, many did not pursue MAAPS advising, either because they did not feel they needed it or because they had existing support systems. With these initial findings in mind, we analyzed our data through the lens of the following research questions: 1) What factors limited help-seeking behaviors, including students' participation in the MAAPS advising intervention; 2) What advising supports do students feel they need to be academically and personally successful; and 3) What help-seeking behaviors appear most comfortable to students?

Methods

This study was guided by a constructivist qualitative methodological approach (Crotty, 1998). Participants were offered the MAAPS intervention in Fall 2016, earned over 90 credit hours at the time of recruitment, and had not invoked FERPA. Each was Pell-eligible and/or self-identified as a first-generation college student. Ten students, listed in Table 1, engaged in an hour-long semi-structured interview with the second author. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed and analyzed using a two-stage, thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | First-Gen Status | Race/Ethnicity | Sex |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| Adrienne | First-Gen | Black / African American | Female |
| Anshu | Continuing-Gen | Asian | Male |
| Jake | First-Gen | White | Male |
| Jessica | First-Gen | White | Female |
| Katie | First-Gen | Asian | Female |
| Leah | Continuing-Gen | Multiracial | Female |
| Marissa | First-Gen | White | Female |
| Nishant | First-Gen | Asian | Male |
| Scott | First-Gen | Asian | Male |
| Vicki | Continuing-Gen | White | Female |

Findings

All participants experienced stressors related to navigating college. For first-generation students, the pressure to do well was particularly pronounced. This pressure fueled students' drive to succeed on their own. As Nishant explained, "I guess being the first one in the family to do it, I guess you might have more to prove, per se. You might have more of a chip on your shoulder per se, because you want to finish, get to the finish line just to say you did it." Findings revealed how advisors could assist students on this path to academic success as well as what barriers to help-seeking might block students' way.

Hinderances to Help-Seeking

Students' perceptions of the support they would receive, as well as of their own abilities and institutional knowledge, influenced their willingness to seek help. For some students, the desire for support was tempered by an uncertainty as to where to turn. Leah felt the help she needed was likely available at Ohio State, but she "just really didn't know about it." Vicki, a limited-income, continuing generation student, specifically wished for additional assistance around the financial aspects of attending college such as understanding her financial aid award and how to budget. At times, a determination to succeed on their own also impeded help-seeking. Jake exemplified this attitude when he shared, "I have the 'I'll just figure it out myself' mentality."

More often, however, participants were self-conscious about seeking assistance and expressed feelings of intimidation or embarrassment. Scott was concerned a TA might "laugh in his face" if he asked "a stupid question." Vicki, who did not think she needed support around adjusting to college, assumed she was assigned a MAAPS advisor because she had a Pell grant. Her comments emphasize the importance of framing interventions in assets-based language rather than suggesting students are deficient in some way.

Participants also worried they would seek help only to find it ineffective or worse—insensitive to their identities. Some students had received "bad advice" from an advisor in the past. Others like Scott had heard rumors that some advisors were unwilling to assist students. Adrienne assumed most administrators would not understand her experiences as a Black woman and worried she would encounter microaggressions from advisors:

I always just felt like people were already going to have their ideas about me, that I probably came from a background where I was already set up to fail, or that I didn't have much to contribute, or maybe I was just a fluke, or stuff like that. So, when I failed, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy like, "See? You're not equipped to do well."

Adrienne's experiences were compounded by "friends who have instances of gross racism from academic advisors" and she voiced frustration that advisors counseled peers of color out of STEM fields at the first sign of academic hardship. Ultimately, however, Adrienne understood she would "never let my doubts stop me from doing something. I will have them, and they will persist, but I just knew overall I can do anything." It was crucial, however, that students had an affirming place to turn in moments of doubt.

Marissa, who was more self-conscious of how her timeline towards graduation and the judgment she perceived about being "a year behind [her] peers," exemplified the importance of an encouraging advisor. Notably, she did not feel uncomfortable or judged by her MAAPS advisor. Instead, he offered reassurance:

It was nice hearing from somebody in power with authority at the college say, you screwing up a little bit your first semester here is not – you don't need to drop out of college and go home or anything. A lot of people mess up their first year of college because they don't know what to expect. And since I'm a first-gen college student, I never had the, you're going to go to college and all of a sudden that's going to get really hard, talk.

¹Students are considered fourth-year students if they have completed over 90 credit hours. Some, however, were in their fifth year at the university, and others had started graduate programs.

Marissa's narrative also highlights the significance of having a positive experience when students do accept help. Participants who benefited most from the MAAPS initiative were those who not only accepted the offer for help, but took time to build a trusting, counselor-oriented relationship with their advisor, such that they could discuss their holistic needs at the university. Unfortunately, such relationship building was compromised by high rates of turnover, particularly among MAAPS advisors. Scott, for example, stopped seeing his specialist after he was switched to a new advisor, illustrating the importance of consistency.

Sources of Support

Participants shared where they did feel comfortable turning for help, most often to friends or family. Although first-generation students did not necessarily have parents who could help them navigate academics and university bureaucracy, they nevertheless had champions in their corner. Nishant highlighted how family was a source of strength as a first-generation student, sharing "I think [my family] pushed me, so I think that was one thing I had going for me that other people don't." Students also named their learning communities or study groups. Marissa mentioned Disability Services and her campus learning center. Jessica felt most comfortable with her research advisor with whom she had developed a "mentor-mentee" relationship. These insights further emphasize the importance of viewing first-generation and limited-income student experience through an assets-based lens.

For some participants, sororities and scholars groups offered a sense of belonging on campus along with academic support. Katie described her scholars program as an "anchor" which connected her with peers, success coaches, and encouragement. Adrienne characterized academic advisors as people with power to make administrative changes to a class schedule – not coaches or confidants. Instead of meeting with advisors, she would consult with a faculty advisor from National Society of Black Engineers because they had a strong rapport. The individuals, communities, and services named in this section differed from how participants described typical advising in one fundamental way—they were not transactional in nature and instead were predicated on trust and relationship-building.

Holistic, Relational Advising

Students were, however, able to articulate the type of advising relationship they felt was most helpful. They described both MAAPS advisors and primary advisors who took the time to get to know them, actively listened, and helped navigate difficult decisions. Participants used terms like "friendly," "personable," "encouraging," and "exudes positivity." They described advisors who were a calming and reassuring influence. Anshu appreciated that his advisor was willing to admit when he didn't know something and then research the answer. Similarly, Leah valued honesty in the advice she received, noting advisors have "been the biggest of help just telling me everything I need to do. Just breaking it down to me realistically like, 'This is what will happen if you do this, or this is what will happen if you do that.' They've just been very upfront and honest about everything so far." Lastly, it was crucial that advisors be responsive and able to address issues in a timely manner.

Often, MAAPS advisors were best positioned to offer the type of holistic support, personal connection, and accessibility students craved. For example, Jake appreciated that his primary advisor "was very experienced" and "knew what he was doing, but he had a lot of students to look after so it was not as personal and not as helpful as he could have been." In contrast, Marissa described a visit with her MAAPS advisor:

It felt like when I came in, I wasn't just the person who had an appointment with him for 20 minutes. Right? A lot of times when I see advisor in here, it feels like I'm here for an appointment, so I come in and they're like, "Okay, what do you want? All right. Let's figure out what you need and get you out so we can get the next person in." But when I was there, it felt like, "Oh, how are you doing today? That's great. How's school going? That's great. All right." And then we sit down do our thing, "How are your classes going?" It felt like I wasn't just the person at the appointment. It felt like he was checking in, how am I doing personally, which was nice. I appreciated that.

When Melissa failed a course and needed to use grade forgiveness, she was hesitant to speak with her traditional advisor who, instead of having a developmental conversation said, "Well, we'll give you the forms. Just re-sign up for them." Adrienne had a similar experience when she earned a D in a course. "Nobody really reached out to me," she shared, "so I reached out." Adrienne took it upon herself to be proactive about righting her academic course, although she wished her advisors had reached out first. As detailed above, however, this type of help-seeking was accompanied by fear or shame, suggesting the importance of creating advising interventions that feel welcoming and free of judgment.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study indicate limited-income, first-generation, and Students of Color are driven to succeed and are adept at finding sources of support that are comfortable and in alignment with their cultural values; this is unsurprising given research that highlights minority students' community cultural wealth (Pérez, 2017; Yosso, 2005). At present, however, students may be unsure how best to navigate the institution and access advisors with the cultural competencies and time to serve them well. Strayhorn (2015) suggests an approach that reframes the advisor role to one of cultural navigator, taking a holistic view of advising and helping to foster a sense of belonging across campus.

We advocate an identity-conscious, assets-based, student-centered approach to advising which acknowledges students are weary of more transactional methods. Such approaches must also be proactive, as students may be embarrassed to seek help. Advisors can also leverage the sources of support with which students are already comfortable (e.g., their scholars communities, peer groups, and families).

Lastly, this study underscored the importance of relationships and consistency in building trust. High rates of turnover in entry-level student affairs roles are a recognized problem that requires thoughtful solutions, including improved supervision and professional development (Tull, 2006). Advising offices must attend to staffing in such a way that limits inconsistencies in students' advising relationships.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that advising can and should be holistic, proactive, and student-centered. We acknowledge that higher education administrators are stretched thin; budgets are constrained, and caseloads are high. Nevertheless, we encourage advisors to use insights from this report to craft advising models that acknowledge students' needs beyond the strictly academic.

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