



Lessons on Advising and Coaching in Colleges and Workforce Development Programs

Research- and Practice-Informed Strategies for Program Administrators

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As people strive to succeed in postsecondary education and employment, they can face considerable challenges. Various academic, work, and personal issues can interfere with a student's ability to stay in school and graduate and with a worker's ability to find a job, stay employed, and advance. Community and technical colleges commonly provide advising and coaching to support students in navigating these obstacles. Workforce development programs and other programs designed to help people find and retain jobs often include coaching as a component as well.

The nonprofit research organization MDRC—a leader in developing and applying evidence to improve policies and programs that serve people with low incomes—has decades of experience evaluating programs that include advising and coaching. MDRC also designs advising and coaching interventions and provides technical assistance to colleges, university systems, state agencies, and workforce development programs. Through this work, MDRC has found that advising and coaching are central to many programs that improve college and workforce outcomes, but how these services are implemented matters.¹ Drawing from MDRC's research, program design, and technical assistance work, this brief shares lessons for



college and workforce program administrators about advising and coaching. The lessons are synthetic, across advising and coaching and across the two policy domains. The brief also provides illustrative examples from colleges and workforce programs.

What Are Advising and Coaching?

In colleges, the objectives of academic advising and coaching are distinct, but often overlap. Academic advising provides information about and helps students take action on matters such as college policies and procedures, degree requirements, educational goals, and registration for courses. Advising sometimes also takes into account issues in students' lives outside of school (often called “developmental academic advising”).² Coaching for college students can include attention to academic issues but tends to focus on nonacademic issues such as personal and professional goals, strengths and skills, and factors that may interfere with school, such as work and family responsibilities.³ Advising and coaching services for college students are typically provided by college staff members or, occasionally, by outside organizations.⁴ In workforce development programs and other programs designed to help people secure employment, coaches can help participants prepare for and search for jobs and can provide support to help people stay employed and advance. Broadly speaking, colleges and workforce programs provide advising and coaching to help individuals as they try to build skills and knowledge, obtain credentials, and secure and retain meaningful employment.

Strong advising and coaching services—whether they are for college students, job seekers, or workers—use a holistic approach, involve proactive outreach and frequent meetings, are built upon a strong relationship between staff members and participants, and use data to track participation.

What Do Effective Advising and Coaching Look Like?

Generally, MDRC has found that strong advising and coaching services—whether they are for college students, job seekers, or workers—use a holistic approach, involve proactive outreach and frequent meetings, are built upon a strong relationship between staff members and participants, and use data to track participation. These lessons, along with illustrative examples, are discussed below.

- **A holistic approach to advising and coaching helps address participants' varied needs and recognizes the interconnectedness of different parts of people's lives.**

Advising and coaching approaches that are holistic—that address a range of interconnected issues—are more effective than approaches that provide more narrowly-focused support. For example, in the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), a multifaceted program that has been found to dramatically increase graduation rates, advisers are trained to provide guidance on a wide variety of topics.⁵ In addition to covering aca-

demographic issues such as choosing classes and picking a major, ASAP advisers help students with soft skills such as study habits and time management; balancing home, work, and school demands; and extracurricular activities and campus life. Students in the program reported discussing a wide range of topics with their adviser and almost all said they had “most or all” of the support they needed to succeed in school.⁶ The CUNY ASAP approach has been successfully replicated in multiple colleges nationwide.⁷

MyGoals for Employment Success (MyGoals), a workforce program intended to help recipients of government housing subsidies who are not employed, serves as another example of the positive outcomes associated with a holistic approach to coaching. MyGoals, which was designed by MDRC, provides coaching focused on executive skills (the cognitive skills used to execute tasks) paired with financial incentives to help participants find work and increase their economic mobility and security. The coaching focuses on 12 specific executive skills within a framework that emphasizes goal setting across multiple domains of life: employment and career management, education and training, financial management, and personal and family well-being. Employment is the main focus, but the framework reflects that employment is connected to the other domains. Emerging findings from an evaluation of MyGoals — conducted while participants were still in the program — show that the program had positive effects on participants’ goal setting and their likelihood of participating in education and training programs.⁸

- **Proactive outreach and frequent advising and coaching sessions help participants stay on track and access guidance at critical milestones.**

Frequent communication with participants is associated with effective support. Advisers and coaches who proactively initiate contact can provide more effective support than staff members who wait for participants to contact them. Participants may not know how to access support and services — or even that they exist — and they may be reluctant to ask for help. Proactive outreach is especially critical given that many participants who do not take advantage of available services stand to gain considerably from them. Regular contact allows staff members to help with more issues and to follow up about previously discussed topics to ask about progress and changes. Frequent contact also allows staff members to provide sustained support through lengthy or complex challenges and to highlight important upcoming tasks for participants.

In college, monthly contact allows advisers and coaches to have timely conversations with students about registration, course withdrawal deadlines, financial aid procedures, and planning for the next term. In workforce programs, regular coaching can support individuals through the various stages of career exploration, career goal development, job search planning, advancement planning, and retention and advancement. In both environments, recipients of frequent coaching can benefit from opportunities to improve time management and communication skills in real time, rather than waiting until a problem with a professor or a boss has occurred. A study of SUCCESS, a multifaceted student support program, at 11 colleges found a positive association between the frequency of advising sessions and the program’s impacts on the number of credits earned.⁹ A study of programs that provided education, occupational training, and support services to adults with low incomes to prepare them for specific occupations in the healthcare field found that pro-

grams with more frequent coaching had larger impacts on the important educational outcomes of credential attainment and enrollment in training, though they did not have larger impacts on employment.¹⁰

Frequent contact can be facilitated by a number of practices. As noted above, staff members can proactively check in with participants, providing participants with opportunities to connect when they might be hesitant to seek help on their own. Maintaining a low participant-to-staff member ratio gives advisers and coaches more time to meet with participants and makes it easier to follow up when a participant fails to show up to a meeting. Programs can require frequent sessions and can provide incentives to participants who attend sessions. Using data to track frequency, discussed more below, is also critical to ensuring that advisers and coaches initiate contact when students are not meeting with them often enough. In college, the strongest programs provide advising or coaching for the duration of a student's time at the institution, allowing staff members to support students through their trajectory.

Overall, these practices typically cost more than less intensive support. However, when designed and implemented well, strong advising and coaching can at least partly pay for themselves — in college, through increased revenue as a result of higher retention rates, and in the workforce, through decreased turnover and improved employee efficiency.

- **A good relationship between the adviser or coach and the participant can yield stronger support.**

Thoughtful staffing practices can foster stronger relationships. Most importantly, ensuring that each participant meets with the same adviser or coach over time allows repeated contact. Hiring full-time, “dedicated” advisers or coaches — that is, advisers or coaches who work exclusively with a specific program or caseload — allows these staff members to accommodate participants' scheduling needs, and can strengthen relationships between advisers and coaches and other staff members at the program, college, or organization. Hiring staff members with whom participants can relate, such as people with similar backgrounds or life experiences to those of participants, can help create a sense of comfort, acceptance, and belonging, making it easier for participants to share and seek help.

The strategies discussed above — providing holistic support services and meeting regularly with participants — can help build strong relationships between advisers or coaches and participants. Covering multiple topics, including personal issues, can help participants feel supported in many important aspects of their lives. Speaking frequently allows staff members and participants to dig deeper into key issues, get to know each other better, and build trust. As part of a project on improving first-year college students' experiences, conducted by MDRC and colleges in Washington and New Jersey, students interviewed said that empathy, patience, and genuine connection made them more likely to seek advising support.¹¹

- **Collecting and analyzing data on participants' engagement in advising and coaching and important outcomes helps staff monitor progress and identify the necessary kinds of support.**

Many successful multifaceted college student support programs use a data system to track students' frequency of participation in advising or coaching and in other program services, along with enrollment status, academic progress, and main areas of need. Staff members use the data collected to identify students who are not participating and may need additional outreach, to follow up with students on referrals, and to share progress with other staff members or supervisors.¹²

One example of a program that makes effective use of data is the Detroit Promise Path, which offers college students multiple forms of support including coaching. Administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber, the Detroit Promise Path uses a management information system or MIS (a software-based framework for collecting and analyzing organizational data) to track interactions with students and run reports on student participation in coaching and the completion of milestones such as course registration. Coaches use the MIS to communicate directly with students by text message and email, and messages are automatically logged into their data reporting, reducing time spent on data entry and allowing coaches to run regular reports on students who need more outreach. For example, a coach might send a text reminder to all students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, and then, a few weeks later, send an email reminder to students who have not yet completed it.¹³

In workforce programs, it is similarly beneficial to use data regularly to monitor participants' progress and track important changes in the labor market. For example, in the WorkAdvance model — a program model developed by the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) and MDRC that helps participants obtain jobs providing good wages, benefits, and advancement opportunities — program providers use data for several purposes. Data about attrition in initial enrollment steps gives staff members insight into how to improve outreach methods and ultimately enroll people who can benefit from the program.¹⁴ Additionally, staff members track labor market data to stay abreast of current trends that may affect job training and placement, and track internal data to assess participants' progress in training, job placement, and career advancement.¹⁵

Advising and coaching provide critical support to students, job seekers, and workers. By adopting the lessons discussed above, colleges and workforce agencies can more effectively help people gain credentials and engage in the labor market. Additional guidance on implementing evidence-based advising and coaching strategies can be found in the resources listed in Box 1, all of which are freely available.

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Box 1. Additional Resources

The following freely available resources provide more evidence-based information about advising and coaching strategies that help people succeed.

- **Tools for Postsecondary Schools Toolkit**

Jálynn Castleman-Smith, Elena Serna-Wallender, Alyssa Ratledge, Rebekah O'Donoghue, and Sumner Perera, "Tools for Postsecondary Schools Toolkit" (MDRC, 2023, website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/tools-postsecondary-schools-toolkit>).

- **How to Design and Implement Advising Services in Community Colleges**

Andrea Vasquez and Susan Scrivener, "How to Design and Implement Advising Services in Community Colleges: Lessons from Two Decades of Research and Technical Assistance" (MDRC, 2020, website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/how-design-and-implement-advising-services-community-colleges>).

- **Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators**

Institute of Education Sciences, *Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students: A Practice Guide for Educators* (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, website: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/28>).

- **Empirical Support for the InsideTrack Coaching Model: Findings from an Integrative Review of the Literature**

Amady Sogodogo, Heather Harris, and Mandalyn Gilles, "Empirical Support for the InsideTrack Coaching Model: Findings from an Integrative Review of the Literature," *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 15, no. 2 (2025): 173–192 (website: <https://www.emerald.com/ijmce/article/15/2/173/1332798/Empirical-support-for-the-InsideTrack-coaching>).

- **Adapting Employment Coaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Practical Advice from Richard Guare and Colin Guare**

Annie Utterback, Gloriela Iguina-Colón, and Donna Wharton-Fields, "Adapting Employment Coaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Practical Advice from Richard Guare and Colin Guare" (MDRC, 2020, website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/adapting-employment-coaching-during-covid-19-pandemic>).

- **Executive Skills Coaching Plus Incentives in a Workforce Program**

Nina Castells and James A. Riccio, "Executive Skills Coaching Plus Incentives in a Workforce Program: Introducing the MyGoals Demonstration" (MDRC, 2020, website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/executive-skills-coaching-plus-incentives-workforce-program>).

Notes and References

1. See for example Susan Scrivener and Michael J. Weiss, *More Guidance, Better Results? Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services Program at Two Community Colleges* (MDRC, 2009); Cynthia Miller and Michael J. Weiss, “Increasing Community College Graduation Rates: A Synthesis of Findings on the ASAP Model from Six Colleges Across Two States,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 44, 2 (2022): 210–233; Susan Scrivener and Michael J. Weiss, *Findings and Lessons from a Synthesis of MDRC’s Postsecondary Education Research* (MDRC, 2022); Alyssa Ratledge and Stanley Dai, “The Detroit Promise Path Evaluation: Outcomes After Four Years” (MDRC, 2022); Stanley Dai, Kayla Warner, and Colleen Sommo, “Charting Pathways: Three-Year Findings from the Viking ROADS Demonstration” (MDRC, 2025); Nina Castells, James Riccio, Quinn Moore, and April Wu, “Emerging Lessons from the MyGoals for Employment Success Program,” *Cityscape* 27, 1 (2025): 55–84; Aleksandra Yusim, Kelsey Schaberg, Betsy Tessler, and Alexandra Ubalijoro, *Effects of Sector-Focused Training After 10 Years: Findings from the WorkAdvance Evaluation* (MDRC, 2025).
2. Margaret C. King, “Developmental Academic Advising” (retrieved from NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources, website: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Developmental-Academic-Advising.aspx>, 2005).
3. For more detail on the roles of advising and coaching in college, see Linda Y. Solis, “Academic Coaching: Advising’s Growing Little Sister,” *Academic Advising Today* (September 22, 2024, website: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Academic-Coaching-Advisings-Growing-Little-Sister>) and Inside Track, “Knowing the Differences Between Coaching and Advising Creates a Collaborative Road to Success,” *Inside Track Blog* (<https://www.insidetrack.org/blog/knowing-the-differences-between-coaching-and-advising-creates-a-collaborative-road-to-success>, 2022). Roles and titles vary some across colleges, but this brief uses the terms “advising” and “coaching” to encompass a range of support provided to students.
4. For example, Inside Track, “About Us” (website: <https://www.insidetrack.org/mission-values>, n.d., accessed April 16, 2026) and Bottom Line, “About Us” (website: <https://www.bottomline.org/about-us/>, n.d., accessed April 16, 2026).
5. City University of New York, “Replication” (website: <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-success-initiatives/asap/replication/>, n.d., accessed April 16, 2026); Susan Scrivener, Michael J. Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hannah Fresques, *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students* (MDRC, 2015).
6. Scrivener et al. (2015).
7. Colin Hill, Colleen Sommo, and Kayla Warner, “From Degrees to Dollars: Six-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration” (MDRC, 2023); Dai, Warner, and Sommo (2025).
8. Castells, Riccio, Moore, and Wu (2025). At the interim point at which this evaluation was conducted, no increase in participants’ earnings had been observed. Additional research will continue to track participant outcomes up to and after program completion.
9. Cyrette Saunier, Susan Scrivener, Austin Slaughter, Noor Amanullah, Sukanya Barman, Cynthia Miller, and Colleen Sommo, *Testing a Lower Cost Model of Student Supports: One-Year Findings from the SUCCESS Demonstration* (MDRC, 2025).
10. Jacob Alex Klerman, David Ross Judkins, Sarah Prenovitz, and Robin Koralek, *Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG 2.0) Intermediate-Term Impact Report*, OPRE Report 2023-201 (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

11. Interview results presented in an internal MDRC memo, 2026. For information on the project, see Emily Marano and Caitlin Anzelone, “Collaborating for Change: Early Lessons in Redesigning First-Year Students’ College Experience” (MDRC, 2026).
12. Alyssa Ratledge and Melissa Wavelet, “Improving College Graduation Rates with Multifaceted Student Support Programs: Here’s What Institutions and State Agencies Need to Know” (MDRC, 2021).
13. Alyssa Ratledge and Andrea Vasquez, “Learning from Success: The Detroit Promise Path” (MDRC, 2018).
14. Frieda Molina and Donna Wharton-Fields, “Filling All the Seats in the Room: Using Data to Analyze Enrollment Drop-Off” (MDRC, 2019).
15. Richard Kazis and Frieda Molina, “Implementing the WorkAdvance Model: Lessons for Practitioners” (MDRC, 2016).

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