



Student Advising: An Evidence-Based Practice

Student advising is a term used to refer to an array of resources, supports, and guidance provided to students by a non-parental adult with the aim of enhancing successful transition to college, postsecondary training, or employment. Student advising can—and often is—provided by trained guidance counselors who have traditionally focused on supporting students with high school course selection, and the college admissions process. Increasingly, schools are broadening both the focus and delivery of student advising supports to boost the post-secondary readiness of their increasingly diverse student body.

As outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), high school guidance counselors fulfill a range of roles in providing a comprehensive counseling program and advisement to students (ASCA, n.d.a). The ASCA national model for school counseling defines an advising approach that “includes developmentally appropriate curriculum focused on the mindsets and behaviors¹ all students need for postsecondary readiness and success” (ASCA, n.d.b). ASCA’s model of comprehensive advising encompasses a focus on three areas of student learning and growth: academic, career, and social-emotional (ASCA, n.d.b). This type of advising typically includes engaging students in problem solving, goal setting, and decision making as they assume responsibility for their own progress and future success (ASCA, n.d.b; Earl, 1988). Advocates for this kind of comprehensive advising model argue that it reflects a developmental approach to student support that is more holistic and integrated than advising models focused more exclusively on guiding students’ academic course selection and college admissions (McGill, 2016; Winston & Sandor, 1984; Steele, 2016; Wilcox, 2016; Gordon, 2006).

With student-to-counselor ratios averaging more than 482 to one (Fuschillo, 2018), these days student advising supports are taking many forms, and are being delivered not just by certified and licensed guidance counselors but also by a wide range of other adults, from classroom teachers to student advocates, academic and career coaches, and community mentors. In addition to one-to-one advising, a growing number of schools are also offering group advisories, where students meet regularly with a facilitator and a group of peers to discuss their learning and postsecondary plans (Schanfield, 2010).

Student advising can be provided by a range of adults:

- Advisors
- Advocates
- Mentors
- Academic and career coaches
- Guidance counselors

¹ ASCA references several mindsets and behaviors targeted through college and career advising, including: self-confidence; sense of belonging; positive attitude toward work and learning; learning strategies, self-management, and social skills.

This document was authored by Wendy Surr of the Midwest Comprehensive Center.

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In their report *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn* (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004), the authors suggest that this restructuring of roles within schools is likely to benefit students. The authors argue that providing student advising supports through a wider range of school staff who have regular daily contact with students ensures that the supports are delivered by adults who have the opportunity to get to know students well and can therefore more fully integrate supports throughout a students' school day. As the authors explain,

Every student needs to be known well by at least one adult who can monitor progress and communicate to specialists and parents when difficulties emerge, who can identify needs for special services and talents that should be recognized and developed, and who can listen to, encourage, and advocate for the student. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 159)



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Schools interested in promoting students' college and career readiness will want to adopt effective practices, starting with confirming the evidence base for those practices. Section 8101(21)(A) of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2015) allows states to take a lead role in identifying suitable evidence-based practices. As outlined in Table 1, the U.S. Department of Education has established four levels (strong, moderate, promising, and “demonstrates a rationale”) to denote the strength of the evidence base (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) for a particular intervention, educational strategy, or practice.

This resource includes an overview of the theories and research that underlie student advising, highlights promising advising practices, and concludes with the results of a research evidence review² for student advising that indicates that there is promising (Tier 3) evidence for this practice (Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2019).

Table 1: Four Tiers of Evidence

Tier 1: Strong Evidence

At least one experimental study that shows a statistically significant and positive effect without being overridden by other statistically negative evidence. Study must have a large, multisite sample with overlap in both setting and population.

Tier 2: Moderate Evidence

At least one quasi-experimental study that shows a statistically significant and positive effect without being overridden by other statistically negative evidence. Must have a large, multisite sample with overlap in either population or setting.

Tier 3: Promising Evidence

At least one correlational study with statistical controls that shows a significant and positive effect without being overridden by other statistically negative evidence.

Tier 4: Demonstrates a Rationale

Strategies that are based on a well-specified theory or logic model informed by research or evaluation that suggests a likelihood of producing positive benefits for students.

ESSA evidence standards:

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceusseinvestment.pdf>

²A review of selected research studies on student advising was conducted by Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest and approved by the Institute of Education Science (IES) in 2019. The results of this review suggest that there is promising evidence for student advising. A summary of the results of this review is provided in Appendix A.

Exploring the Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Rationale for Student Advising

How and why does student advising work? The field of student advising offers a research rationale that draws from various theories to explain the link between student advising and positive outcomes. In particular, three core components are believed to compose an effective advising intervention:

- Social-emotional support: Building of strong, respectful, and caring relationships
- Instrumental support: Provision of information, exploration opportunities, and social capital
- Autonomy support: Strategies and guidance to help students set goals, monitor progress, and develop the agency, ownership, and self-management skills they will need to drive their own learning

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORT: STUDENT ADVISING AS A MEANS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Experts in the field of student advising believe that the nature and quality of the student–adult relationship serves as the foundation for successful student advising (Galassi, Gullledge, & Cox, 1997; Higgins, 2017; Hunter & White, 2004; Rappaport, 2002). In her article *The Advising Relationship Is at the Core of Academic Advising*, author Higgins (2017) argues that advising has the potential to offer students human connection and enabling them to be “acknowledged, listened to, and valued for who they are in the present moment without preconceived judgments” (p. 1). Similarly, authors Hunter and White (2004) argue that “academic advising, well developed and appropriately accessed, is perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interactions with a caring and concerned adult” (p. 22). Finally, authors Burton and McCalla-Wiggins (2009) argue that the relational components necessary for effective academic advising are also essential to career advising.



A vast body of research focused on adult–student relationships points to the critical importance of the quality of these relationships for ensuring student success. Although these studies do not provide direct evidence for the benefits of student advising per se, they help to provide the research rationale for why advisors—whether they be professional counselors, mentors, or classroom teachers—should emphasize relationship building as a core component of their advising approach. For instance, studies that explore the development of personal resiliency (i.e., the capacity to thrive in the face of adversity) highlight the protective role supportive adult–student relationships play in contributing to student well-being and success (Benard, 2004; Kuperminc, Leadbetter, & Blatt, 2001; Wentzel, 1998; Werner, 1989). Studies that more specifically examine the quality of teacher–student relationships in school settings suggest associations between supportive relationships with teachers and increased school engagement (Jennings, 2003), and improved behavior and mental health (Wang, Brinkworth, & Eccles, 2013). One study that examined the effects of a program designed to explicitly build stronger teacher–student relationships while engaging in weekly goal setting and progress monitoring showed improvements in students’ grades (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). This study’s findings suggest that teachers who engage in relationship building in combination with other advising supports may be even more likely

to help promote student success. Finally, an extensive review of the research (Hattie, 2009) concluded that teacher–student relationships were number 11 out of more than 100 factors examined for their ability to predict student learning outcomes.

Student advising can potentially serve as a mechanism for building supportive relationships between students and adults who are serving in an advising role (Wang et al., 2013). One small study of 209 secondary students (Ryzin, 2010) examined differences in student outcomes based on students' level of attachment to their advisors and the duration of those advising relationships. This study found that students who identified their advisors as secondary attachment figures in their lives (someone a student turns to when under stress or in a difficult situation, someone with whom they feel a strong emotional connection and from whom they receive support and encouragement) reported greater engagement in school, more hope, and more positive changes in academic achievement than students who did not nominate their advisors as a secondary attachment figure.

INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT: STUDENT ADVISING AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

How else does student advising contribute to positive outcomes for students? One theory posits that school-based college and career advising represents a form of social capital—particularly for minority, low-income, and other disadvantaged students—to help ensure their postsecondary success. Social capital (Coleman, 1988) refers to one's access to key sources of information, assistance, and resources through existing relational networks. School personnel serving in advising roles who offer students college and career information, provide guidance on course enrollment and postsecondary options, assist with key preparatory tasks such as college and financial aid applications, and provide encouragement and support have the potential to serve as an important source of social capital for at-risk students.



One study exploring counseling as a form of social capital (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011) examined data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 for a nationally representative sample of high school seniors to determine the relationship between contact with a school counselor for college information and applications to college. This study found that students who had contact with a counselor by 10th grade were twice as likely to apply to one college and 3.5 times as likely to apply to two or more colleges as students who did not have contact with a counselor by 10th grade. Researchers and theorists argue that the provision of information and instrumental assistance is a key, pragmatic element of any successful advising relationship.

AUTONOMY SUPPORT: STUDENT ADVISING AS A MEANS FOR PROMOTING STUDENT AGENCY, OWNERSHIP, AND CAPACITY TO DRIVE THEIR OWN LEARNING

A less commonly recognized component of student advising is autonomy support. As explained by Reeve, Nix, and Hamm (2003), “Autonomy support refers to what one person says and does to enhance another’s internal perceived locus of causality, volition, and perceived choice during action” (p. 378). Autonomy support strategies are believed to fuel student agency and ownership of their learning, and help build students’ capacity for goal setting, decision making, and problem-solving skills to ensure future success (Burt, Young-Jones,

Yadon, & Carr, 2013; Leach & Patall, 2016). In her review of research by Lowenstein (2009), Higgins (2017) argues that “through the educational process of advising, an advisor can guide students through meaning-making, skill identification and development, critical thinking, scaffolding of knowledge, and acquisition of transferable skills” (p. 1).

One study (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997) that included 4,537 Canadian high school students in Grades 9 and 10 found that those students who dropped out were more likely to report a lack of autonomy support from teachers, parents, and administrators than were students who stayed in school. This study also found that students’ level of motivation mediated the connection between perceived autonomy support and dropout behavior, with evidence to suggest that low autonomy support was associated with lowered motivation on the part of students.



Highlights of Promising Student Advising Practices

Numerous studies reviewed suggested that positive outcomes might vary depending on the nature, timing, and intensity of advising support. For instance, one large study that was reviewed (Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016) examined associations between specific advising activities and students’ enrollment in college-eligible math courses, college knowledge, and submission of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The results showed a statistically significant association between advising and postsecondary actions by students, particularly by disadvantaged students. For instance, meeting with an advisor at least once per year was associated with a 50% increase in likelihood of submitting a FAFSA. And creating a college- and career-ready plan was associated with increased enrollment in college-eligible math courses for all groups of disadvantaged students, with more than a doubling of likelihood for minority students whose parents did not have bachelor’s degree.⁵

The following lists some of the features practitioners and researchers associate⁴ with effective advising.

- Lower student-to-counselor ratios (Woods & Domina, 2014)
- Adequate dosage and timing of advising sessions—occurring more than once per year, and starting early in a student’s high school career (Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016; Rhodes, 2005)
- Strong, positive, and sustained advisor–student relationships (Ryzin, 2010)
- Autonomy-supportive advising strategies that enable students to satisfy their need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Leach & Patall, 2016)
- “Intrusive” advising—advisors who make proactive efforts to engage with students and help students to set goals, create plans, gauge progress, and strengthen self-management strategies (Abelman & Molina, 2001)

⁵It is important to note that this study employed a correlational design and did not meet the ESSA evidence requirements for promising evidence.

⁴The term “associate” indicates that there is not sufficient evidence to make causal claims regarding the relationship between student advising approaches and student outcomes. Most of these studies were qualitative in nature, or employed correlational or other nonexperimental research designs.

What Is the Evidence Base for Student Advising?

Despite the prevalence of student advising programs offered in secondary schools—and the number of research studies examining this practice—the breadth and rigor of empirical research evidence for student advising is relatively limited (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Among the numerous studies we reviewed on U.S. secondary school student advising, most did not satisfy the rigorous criteria associated with strong or moderate evidence-based practice as established by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) in its recent nonregulatory guidance for assessing evidence-based practices in accordance with ESSA standards. Among the available research we reviewed, only one study (Belasco, 2013) included a large sample and used a rigorous, quasi-experimental research design. A recent review of this study indicates that the Belasco (2013) study “provides promising evidence (Tier III) for high school student postsecondary counseling” (Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2019, p. 2).



The Belasco (2013) study analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, which included a sample of 11,260 Grades 9–12 students from 750 U.S. schools. Researchers examined the effects of student-counselor visits on postsecondary enrollment, enrollment in a 2-year institution, and enrollment in a 4-year institution (compared with not enrolling in a postsecondary institution). The study found a positive effect of advising visits on enrollment in postsecondary education, especially enrollment in a 2-year institution. Students from families of low socioeconomic status (SES)⁵ who visited a counselor at least once were nearly twice as likely to enroll in college as high-SES students who visited a counselor. Low-SES students who visited a counselor twice, once in 10th and once in 12th grade, were more likely to enroll in a 4-year institution than low-SES students who visited their counselor just once.

Appendix A provides a brief description of the evidence review process and criteria, and highlights the study (Belasco, 2013) that met the desired criteria.

Conclusion

There is growing recognition of the importance of advising support for ensuring student postsecondary success—especially for disadvantaged students. This resource provides an overview of the extensive theoretical and empirical research base on student advising and confirms that there is promising evidence that advising can benefit students. Numerous studies reviewed for this resource also suggest that the nature, timing, and intensity of advising matters. Yet few of these studies have used research designs that satisfy the rigorous evidence criteria required by ESSA. Future research, using more rigorous designs, is needed to refine our understanding of the merits of different advising approaches, and to increase the rigor of the evidence base supporting this important practice.

⁵Belasco’s SES variable is measured by a composite variable that includes mother and father’s education, family income, and mother and father’s occupation.

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Appendix A. Evidence Review: Student Advising

To determine the evidence base for student advising, in June 2017, Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest conducted a scan of available research studies on student advising published within peer-reviewed journals using the search term “student college and career advising” to identify sources using ERIC and Google Scholar. Because this initial scan produced a limited number of sources, an additional search was conducted by the Great Lakes and Midwest Regional Deeper Learning research staff. This subsequent search maintained the criteria for peer-reviewed studies but extended the timeline for publications (i.e., earlier than 2002), the location of studies (i.e., not limited to the United States), and employed several additional search terms, including “student autonomy support” and “career counseling.” This search identified several additional studies. However, many of these studies included multiple interventions, lacked sufficient rigor, were more than 30 years old, or were conducted with populations substantially different from those found in K–12 secondary settings. Among these many studies, one was selected that showed merit (i.e., that had a primary focus on student advising, had sufficient sample size, and included student populations generally reflective of secondary student settings). This study, Belasco (2013), was submitted to REL Midwest for review by What Works Clearinghouse-trained reviewers. These reviewers employed an evidence review template based on the non-regulatory guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (2016). As shown in Table A1, this study met the criteria for Tier 3 or higher evidence-based practices. The selected study is summarized in Table A1.

FEATURED STUDY

Table A1. Evidence Review for Belasco (2013)

Study	Level of Evidence	Study Design Highlights	Summary of Study Findings
Belasco, A. S. (2013). Creating college opportunity: School counselors and their influence on postsecondary outcomes. <i>Research in Higher Education</i> , 54(7), 781–804.	Promising evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This study examined the effect of student advisor visits on postsecondary enrollment in a 2-year or 4-year institution Employed a quasi-experimental design Analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Educational Longitudinal Study 2002 Sample included 11,260 Grades 9–12 students from 750 U.S. high schools representing a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who attended at least one advising session were more likely to enroll in higher education, and more likely to attend a 4-year than a 2-year institution. Low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students who visited an advisor at least once had nearly twice the likelihood of college enrollment of high-SES students. Low-SES students who visited their counselors twice were more likely to enroll in a 4-year institution.