



# RESEARCH BRIEFS

## Academic Advising for Transfer and Transfer-Intending Students: Examining Initiatives and Assessments

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**Catherine Hartman,**

National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, *University of South Carolina*

**Keah Tandon,**

University 101 Programs, *University of South Carolina*

### Background

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Academic advising plays a pivotal role in multiple areas of student success, including student learning, student-faculty interactions, and progress toward academic and career goals (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Hunter & White, 2004; Zhang, 2016). Institutions frequently rely on advising to meet key success outcomes across students' experiences within higher education (Hartman & Young, 2021; Skipper, 2019), including student transfer. Advisors support transfer and transfer-intending students by providing them with guidance and support as they navigate creating academic and transfer plans, interpret credit transfer and applicability policies, and apply for financial aid, among other activities (Fay et al., 2022). While advising is

an important component for supporting students' intentions to transfer and their movement from one institution to another, few studies have explored what activities and initiatives institutions use to support advising for transfer and transfer-intending students, including how advising is delivered to these students. Further, little is known about how institutional staff evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their advising-related initiatives for transfer and transfer-intending students. This dearth of information led us to investigate the following research questions in this study: What initiatives are institutions using to support transfer-related advising, and how do institutional staff assess these efforts?



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## Methods

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To answer the research questions, we drew upon data from the National Survey of Transfer Student Initiatives (NSTSI), distributed by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. NSTSI was designed to gather general information about institutional attention to transfer and transfer-intending students and contained extended modules on academic advising, orientation, and college student/transfer student success courses. The survey was created in Qualtrics, an online survey software, and was disseminated to professionals in transfer-related roles at all degree-granting two- and four-year schools across the U.S. and its territories to complete from September to December 2021. Institutions were identified using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The research team intentionally included individuals from two- and four-year institution types in order to better understand how schools support the goals and success of students intending to transfer (e.g., from a two-year school to a four-year school) and those who successfully complete their transfer. After gathering a list of institutions from IPEDS, the research team then used the Higher Education Directory to identify staff in transfer-related positions in order to invite an individual at each institution to complete the survey. Example position titles included transfer-year experience coordinator or director, director of transfer admissions and articulation, director of a transfer center, provost, and vice provost of academics. If the team was unable to find contact information for a relevant staff member through the Higher Education Directory, they then reviewed the website of the specific institution to identify an individual and their email address. Ultimately, 2574 individuals were invited to participate, and 169 responded to the survey (response rate of 6.6%). Of the 169 total participants, 58 (34% of the sample) worked at two-year schools, and 111 worked at four-year institutions (66% of the sample), including both public and private sectors. Seven for-profit institutions participated (4% of the sample), which included six four-year schools and one two-year, technical college. In addition, the number of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) in the sample are underrepresented; one participant worked at a four-year, private Historically Black University. We analyzed the survey data in SPSS and Microsoft Excel, using descriptive methods to identify trends in how institutions provided and assessed advising for transfer and transfer-intending students.

## Findings

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We found that institutions used a variety of methods to advise both transfer and transfer-intending students (or those whose goal was to eventually transfer out of their institution and into another). In addition, staff use multiple forms of assessment to understand the effectiveness of these efforts, but there are many opportunities for assessment, which we detail in the below sections.

## Institutional Advising Efforts Related to Transfer

Nearly all institutions in our overall sample offered academic advising to transfer and transfer-intending students. Specifically, 98% of two-year institutions offered advising to students while 94% of four-year institutions did the same. Additionally, the majority of institutions required transfer and transfer-intending students to participate in advising (63% of two-year schools; 74% of four-year schools). While advising was required for students at most schools, the timing of when advising services were offered differed. Some colleges and universities (38% of two-year; 48% of four-year schools) first offered advising to transfer and transfer-intending students who confirmed their acceptance at the institution, while others offered advising to prospective students, prior to their admittance (29% of two-year; 32% of four-year schools).

Institutions also varied in terms of how transfer and transfer-intending students were assigned advisors and also how frequently students met with advisors or utilized advising services. We found that most institutions assigned incoming transfer or transfer-intending students to an advisor (85% of two-year; 93% of four-year schools). Additionally, among schools that assigned advisors to students, most reported that students were required to meet with their advisor once per term during their first year at their institution (31% of two-year; 35% of four-year schools). Following this, the next most common response among two-year institutions that assigned advisors was that advisor-student meetings were optional (23%), while the next most common response among four-year schools (15%) indicated that students must meet with their advisor twice or more per term during their first year. After transfer and transfer-intending students complete their first year, their required engagement with assigned advisors differed: 39% of two-year schools did not require that students meet with their assigned advisor, while 44% of four-year schools required such meetings once per term.

In addition, a variety of faculty and staff members directly administer advising for transfer and transfer-intending students across institutions. At two-year schools, we found that most advisors worked in student affairs (59%), followed by faculty and staff who work in academic departments (33%). At four-year schools, academic advising is most frequently directly administered by academic departments (48%) followed by staff who work in academic affairs (32%). In terms of which parties serve as advisors, professionally trained advisors are most common (80% of two-year; 70% of four-year schools), and faculty are second most common (52% of two-year; 68% of four-year schools). The majority of two-year institutions reported that their advisors received training about student transfer (70%), yet only 45% of four-year institutions indicated the same. In addition to differences in advising staff and development, the modality of advising also differed across schools. Most institutions (96% of the overall sample) offered advising in a one-on-one format, indicating individual meetings between students and advisors. We also found that

fewer than half of all schools offered group advising. Online advising was also a frequently offered form of advising, with more two-year schools (70%) providing this to students than four-year schools (62%).

## Assessment of Advising-Related Efforts

In terms of how institutions assess advising-related efforts for transfer and transfer-intending students, the majority of institutions were involved in evaluation and continuous improvement (72% of two-year; 63% of four-year schools). Respondents also indicated that their colleges and universities were engaged in ongoing professional development and training for advisors at the time the survey was disseminated (80% of two-year; 62% of four-year schools). In addition, campuswide assessment and planning related to advising were also reported to be ways to engage in continuous improvement among schools (48% of two-year; 38% of four-year schools).

Multiple institutions reported conducting formal assessment or evaluation of advising services within the last four years at the time of survey dissemination (48% of all institutions). However, among respondents from four-year institutions, 45% indicated that their institution had not recently formally assessed advising, indicating opportunities for schools to engage in these activities. Among schools who had completed a formal assessment, analysis of institutional data was the most common form (64% of two-year; 80% of four-year schools), and use of survey instrument(s) was second most common form (55% of two-year; 60% of four-year schools). Other common forms of assessments included program reviews and focus groups with staff.

Respondents also reported a variety of outcomes measured through assessment. The most frequently reported outcome measure was academic planning (68% of two-year; 70% of four-year schools). In addition, 60% of four-year institutions examined on-time (i.e., four-year or six-year) graduation rates, indicating a focus on retention, persistence, and graduation. Academic success strategies were another common outcome across institution types (36% of two-year; 45% of four-year schools) as well as knowledge of institutional or campus resources and services (36% of two-year schools; 45% of four-year schools).

## Implications

Ultimately, data from NSTSI indicate that institutions used different approaches to transfer and transfer-intending advising, which may impact the experiences of students as they move between institutions. Based on these findings, we offer implications and recommendations below for researchers and practitioners as they continue their work in supporting transfer at both two- and four-year institutions:

- **Increase student engagement with advising:** Intentionally assigning students to advisors based on

students' expressed academic and career goals and requiring student-advisor meetings may be significant ways to increase transfer and transfer-intending student engagement (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). These are especially important actions, as advisors are key in helping to connect students to academic and support resources, foster students' transfer plans, and support their academic progress.

- **Provide professional development for advisors on transfer and transfer-intending students:** Because of the important role that advisors play with students' academic progress, institutions must not only find ways to increase students' interactions with advising services but also deliver on their commitments to supporting transfer and transfer-intending students. Through this institutional commitment, leaders can work to ensure that advisors are aware not only of challenges that transfer and transfer-intending students face but also the strengths and knowledge that students bring with them into educational spaces. As such, professional development and training activities (whether internal or external to the institution) are important for advisors' learning and development. In addition to recognizing students' wealth and needs, training opportunities may be sought or designed in ways to help advisors consider variation among transfer students, including how the needs of new, incoming transfer students may differ from those that are intending to eventually transfer in order to promote smooth transitions and pathways for all students. Furthermore, while designating specialized transfer advisors to work with transfer and transfer-intending students may be useful, professional development and training should be offered to all advisors so that staff are aware of transfer processes, transfer student experiences, and common questions and issues. Doing so can help prepare advisors for students who may switch from a transfer-specific advisor to a non-transfer-specific professionally trained or faculty advisor; this can also help to sustain a deeper institutional commitment to supporting transfer.
- **Offer alternate forms of advising:** Offering students alternate forms of advising that are designed to best fit their needs is not only beneficial to the students but can also increase student engagement with advising. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic required that many students meet with advisors virtually, offering flexibility and convenience in ways that students may not have previously encountered but now prefer based on their availability and responsibilities. Virtual advising may also be a useful way for transfer-intending students to meet with staff at institutions they are considering applying to, thus allowing students to connect with and form relationships with staff prior to transferring (Cepeda et al., 2021).

- **Conduct regular assessments of transfer and transfer-intending advising initiatives:** In order to best support advising and transfer student success, routine assessment of these efforts is important. Analyzing existing departmental and/or institutional data may be a useful method to determine progress over time. Collecting interview and focus group data from students, faculty, and staff may also be helpful to determine whether and how institutional advising goals are being met.

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## Author Information

Catherine Hartman,  
National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, *University of South Carolina*,  
[ch70@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:ch70@mailbox.sc.edu)

Keah Tandon,  
University 101 Programs, *University of South Carolina*,  
[tandonk@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:tandonk@mailbox.sc.edu)

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