

RESEARCH BRIEFS Mapping High-Impact Practices to Advising

The Role of Advising in High-Impact Practices

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Background

As noted in the first research brief of this series, highimpact practices (HIPs) represent 11 key educational experiences that engage undergraduates in experiential and deep learning opportunities (Kuh, 2008). When HIPs are developed and delivered with fidelity to the eight conditions that research shows are the primary reason for their impact and effectiveness, they are associated with a host of positive outcomes for both the student and the institution, including higher retention rates and greater student engagement (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

Previous research on the relationship between advising and HIPs has primarily focused on advancing and elevating the understanding of advising as a high-impact practice, which has yielded promising findings and strong evidence for this relationship (e.g., Keup, 2022; Keup & Young, 2022; Kinzie et al., 2024). However, the connection between HIPs and advising can be found in other ways. This brief will focus on highlighting the presence and influence of advising in high-impact practices, with particular emphasis on two HIPs that are prevalent in practice and for which national data exists: (a) first-year experiences/first-year seminars (FYE/FYS) and (b) senior capstone experiences. The timing of these curricular interventions as "bookends" of the collegiate experience, with FYE/FYS engaging students in their first year, if not their first term, and capstones representing the culminating educational engagement for undergraduates, also heightens their significance as critical opportunities for fostering student engagement and learning.

Research Question

Despite the various ways advising can be embedded within student supports at an institution, it is understudied in connection with key campus experiences (Keup, 2019), including first-year experiences and seminars and senior capstones. Many data sources have examined FYE/FYS, capstones, HIPs, and advising, yet very few have examined the relationships between these constructs. This research brief presents findings from national data to provide evidence on how advising shows up in HIPs, particularly firstyear experiences and seminars and capstone experiences, and to illustrate how future research can continue to investigate the relationship between HIPs and advising. More specifically, the current study explored the question: What role does advising have in the high-impact practices of first-year experiences and seminars and senior capstone experiences?







Methods

Program-level surveys of institutional initiatives from hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities served as the primary data source to examine the role of advising in highimpact practices. Recent administrations of the National Survey of First-Year Experiences generated responses from 537 campuses across the country in 2017 and data from 334 institutions in 2023. While not nationally representative, the data sets included two- and four-year colleges and universities, public and private campuses, and a wide range of institutional sizes. This range of data allowed for a comprehensive portrait of the prevalence, purpose, structural and instructional characteristics, and assessment of first-year seminars.

Additionally, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition administers the National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences to evaluate and understand "campus efforts to support student success in the senior year" (Young et al., 2017, p. 13). The survey particularly focuses on creating a national portrait of senior capstones and other culminating experiences of undergraduates. In all, 383 campuses reported on their purposes, structural and instructional characteristics, practices and pedagogies, and evaluation of this HIP. Further, the empirical findings from these surveys were then coupled with themes drawn from case studies produced by the Advising Success Network (ASN) and the National Resource Center, creating a picture of holistic advising within capstone and culminating experiences.

The data on first-year seminars and capstones and culminating experiences were evaluated with the intent to examine and extract specific findings related to the role of advising in these HIPs. No new analyses were conducted; rather, existing results from the data were interrogated and categorized to highlight and synthesize findings across these existing sources of data to answer the current research question.

Finally, student-level data from recent administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) were used to triangulate the findings from the program-level surveys. As noted in the first research brief in this series, that data set included responses from more than 72,000 first-year students and 87,000 seniors who participated in the 2020 and 2022 NSSE and NSSE's Academic Advising Topical Module at 320 four-year colleges and universities.

Findings

As Troxel (2019) noted, "the role of academic advisors both faculty and those with advising as their primary role—is to provide guidance and support through a student's academic program from enrollment to graduation" (p. 33). First-year experiences, including seminars, along with senior capstones and other culminating experiences, are vital hubs for advising activity and illustrate the important role of advising within these high-impact practices.

First-Year Experiences and Seminars

Enrolling in college for the first time represents a significant transition in the life cycle of most individuals. Whether students are starting their higher education journey directly from secondary education or entering after a gap year, stop out, or for retraining after a decadeslong career, the college matriculation process is filled with anticipation, challenges, and opportunities.

Early on, first-time college students usually prioritize:

- creating an efficient and meaningful academic plan and pathway,
- finding a community on campus,
- understanding the logistics and expectations of a new educational environment,
- integrating prior learning and academic competencies into their new courses and curriculum, and
- establishing a sense of connection and belonging.

In response, higher education institutions have crafted intentional initiatives targeted to first-time new students in order to support them in this critical transition; help them establish a solid foundation for academic, personal, and career success; and put them on the path toward persistence and timely completion. Typically titled "first-year experience," these efforts represent institutional practices as well as "a philosophy ... for improving first-year student transitions" that have been part of the fabric of higher education "for most of the past four decades" (Young & Chung, 2019, p. 11).

More specifically, the first-year experience (FYE) is defined as "an intentional [and comprehensive] combination of academic and co-curricular efforts within and across postsecondary institutions" (Koch & Gardner, 2006, p. 2). It is "not a single class, program, or even series of programs; it represents a comprehensive, coordinated, and widereaching effort designed to support student success" (Young & Chung, 2019, p. 12) and represents a constellation of curricular and co-curricular efforts. Nearly all campuses in the United States offer at least one program that would fall under the FYE umbrella, and an overwhelming majority offer several such initiatives and interventions for first-year students (Feldman, 2018; Greenfield et al., 2013; Johnson, forthcoming; Upcraft et al., 2005; Young, 2019).

While often used interchangeably with the first-year experience, first-year seminars represent only one effort within FYE, albeit one that is very common and has a long history (Drake, 1966; Dwyer, 1989; Gordon, 1989; Hunter & Linder, 2005). First-year seminars represent a group of courses "that bring together groups of students with faculty or staff on a regular basis" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). They are "intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students" (Barefoot, 1992, p. 49). These courses' size and the pedagogies they use often contribute to students' sense of belonging and facilitate discovery of the environment, culture, and resources of their new campus community (Greenfield et al., 2013; Hunter & Linder, 2005; Keup & Young, 2018; Young & Skidmore, 2019). Further, higher education scholars associated with HIPs indicate that seminars "place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies" and may even "involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9).

National estimates of the pervasiveness of first-year seminars on campuses range from 74% to 96% (Barefoot et al., 2012; Johnson, forthcoming; Young & Skidmore, 2019). Further, over half require all first-year students to take a seminar, and others require specific sub-populations to take the course, such as students in developmental courses, honors students, first-generation students, or provisionally admitted students (Johnson, forthcoming; Young & Skidmore, 2019).

However, different types of seminars can be broken down into a typology first introduced by Barefoot (1992). This typology includes extended orientation first-year seminars, historically the most frequently offered course and featuring content focused on an "introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues" (Young, 2019, p. 145). The next most common type of FYE is the academic seminar. True to its name, this type of FYS is primarily focused on an "academic theme or discipline, but will often include academic skills components" and may have uniform content across all sections or vary by instructor or section (Young, 2019, p. 145).

Other types of seminars have a more specific emphasis, such as (a) pre-professional courses that focus on preparing students for a specific major, discipline, or career path and (b) basic study skills, which focus on academic preparation and the review and mastery of basic academic skills at the collegiate level. Further, many institutions offer multiple FYS types to suit a diversity of needs across their newstudent population.

Advising in First-Year Experiences and Seminars

A wide range of activities comprise a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting students' transition, learning, development, and success in their first year of college. These FYE initiatives include orientation, common reading experiences, and student success center activities; curricular interventions including learning communities, gateway courses, service learning, and developmental education; and procedural aspects such as placement testing (Feldman, 2018; Greenfield et al., 2013; Upcraft et al., 2005; Young, 2019). Among this vast array of support structures, programming, and educational initiatives and interventions, academic advising is the most commonly reported effort within an institutional FYE (Johnson, forthcoming; Keup, 2019).

When examining the campuswide objectives for FYE reported by institutions across the country, it is perhaps not surprising that academic advising is seen as critical to first-year student success and a pillar of the first-year experience as a high-impact practice. Academic success strategies, academic planning, and major exploration top the list of purposes for developing and delivering an FYE (Keup, 2019). Further, over two-thirds of institutions indicate that introducing students to college-level expectations is a primary objective for their FYE. In addition, about half of this same sample report that career exploration and introduction to a major, discipline, or career path was a goal of the FYE (Keup, 2019).

Advising is not only present in FYE writ large; it is also integrated into other initiatives under the umbrella of FYE. For instance, national data on first-year seminars indicate that academic advisors serve as the instructor of record for first-year seminars at 46% of institutions and often present modules or serve as guest lecturers in FYS when they are not the primary instructor (Young & Skidmore, 2019). Advising is especially pervasive in certain types of first-year seminars, such as those categorized as extended orientation and preprofessional. In another example, advising, as both topic and activity, is typically a component of orientation activities, and advisors are key partners and presenters in summer bridge programs (Greenfield et al., 2013). Additionally, early alert programs, which represent the second-most common FYE initiative, are often administered by, housed in, and delivered by advisors and advising offices (Dial, 2022; Estrada & Latino, 2019; Keup, 2019).

In their pursuit of FYE objectives, academic advisors play various roles and fulfill a range of responsibilities. Some are the more standard duties that long have been acknowledged as in the domain of academic advising (e.g., course selection, academic planning and progression, major exploration and selection, consideration of careers).

However, we now understand these responsibilities do not happen in a vacuum and are related to a host of other important experiences that occur in first-year advising interactions. These include identity exploration and development, competency building, early triage for mental health issues and emotional distress, and stewardship of financial resources invested in higher education. Further, academic advising in the first year represents an early and important opportunity to create a connection between the student and the institution to facilitate integration and engagement. It also serves as an important node in the network of FYE courses, services, and initiatives, particularly between academic and student affairs (Keup, 2019; Young & Keup, 2019).

Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provide an annual gauge of the quality of interaction between students and advisors in the first year of college. On average, 53% of first-year students rate the quality of their interaction with academic advisors as "very good" or "excellent." More consequentially to the connection and retention goals expected of top-quality FYE programs (Greenfield et al., 2013; Young, 2019), students who rated their advisors highly in terms of being available when needed, providing prompt and accurate information, and listening actively were much more likely to express intent to return the following year compared with students who experienced lowquality advising (94% vs. 77%; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2020). Despite the positive association between first-year students who rated their advising experience highly and the retention goals of the FYE, only about half of all firstyear students rate their advising experience highly.

NSSE's Academic Advising Topical Module results provide more evidence of standard advising practices in the first year. As Kinzie, et al., (2024) described, 2 out of 3 first-year students report having an advisor available when needed and that they provide prompt and accurate information. However, more holistic and proactive advising practices, including having advisors who reached out about academic progress or performance or who asked questions about students' educational background and needs, occur less frequently in the first year. Results also show limited discussion between first-year students and advisors about participation in cocurriculars and special opportunities, including HIPs such as internships and study abroad. Unfortunately, fewer than 40% of first-year students experience these more holistic, engaging advising practices. Low levels of interaction between advisors and first-year students on holistic and proactive advising practices suggest advising practices could be enhanced in the first year of college.

Senior Capstone and Culminating Experiences

For students, the senior year of college represents an interesting tension and transition in their life cycle. Along with navigating and managing the culmination of their undergraduate experience, they are preparing for the "new beginnings" of life beyond the baccalaureate degree, when recent graduates will launch their careers, pursue advanced degrees and certifications, and engage in various communities (Bridges, 2001, 2004; Hunter et al., 2012). In sum, students are wrapping up their academic, personal, and interpersonal journeys through college while preparing for graduation and the range of "responsibilities that come with gaining a postsecondary education" (Torres & LePeau, 2013, p. 14).

Capstone experiences offer a structure for institutions to support students as they bring closure, integration, and coherence to their undergraduate journey. They also help students practice and prepare their employability skills and industry knowledge for their careers and/or graduate school (Brownell & Swaner, 2011; Henscheid, 2012; Ketcham et al., 2023; Kinzie, 2012). Designated as a high-impact practice, capstone experiences are defined as "culminating experiences requir[ing] students nearing the end of their college years to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they've learned" such as "a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of 'best work,' or an exhibit of artwork" (Kuh, 2008, p. 11). Nearly ubiquitous on four-year campuses, these experiences are also growing in prominence at community and technical colleges (Young et al., 2017).

Such experiences span a wide range. In 2017, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition created a typology to capture and categorize the variety, which included

- a capstone course housed in a department or discipline but also perhaps embedded in the general education curriculum;
- 2. comprehensive or certification exams;
- performances or exhibitions, frequently used in the arts;
- 4. a culminating project or portfolio; and
- 5. experiential learning opportunities (Young et al., 2017)

In addition, as many seniors take on elected, appointed, or paid peer leader and student paraprofessional roles, such forms of student engagement often represent the characteristics of culminating and capstone experiences (Young et al., 2017). Further, although capstone experiences are heavily connected to curricular requirements, many experiences that take place outside the classroom during students' senior year also require them to engage in reflection, integrated learning, and career preparation. Ideally, these various curricular capstones and co-curricular culminating experiences are a coordinated and connected set of initiatives that comprise a meaningful senior-year experience (SYE) for students (Hunter et al., 2012).

Regardless of format, type, or position within the curriculum or co-curriculum, capstone experiences and SYE nearly always rely upon some type of assistance from an instructor, advisor, mentor, and/or supervisor to support students in their development, delivery, and decision-making therein. Advisors of these initiatives help bring the experience to fruition and completion, as well as assisting students as they make meaning of the experience personally, academically, and professionally. As such, it seems clear that advising is a critical component of capstone and culminating experiences and is worthy of closer examination within this HIP.

Advising in the Senior Year

Academic advisors serve a prominent role on campus in helping students plan courses and complete their degrees; however, seniors need more input regarding postgraduation plans and fulfilling capstone experiences. With a different outlook from first-year students, seniors draw advising support from a variety of individuals and tend to focus more on completing coursework, planning a career, and finishing senior projects (NSSE, 2020, para. 1). Thus, as students advance in their higher education trajectory, advising could also encompass academic completion, career advising, financial planning and wellness, and goal setting, both at and beyond college.

Interactions with an advisor or faculty member not only assist students but also fulfill campus objectives for seniors. For example, national data identify several highpriority institutional objectives for seniors for which advising is a critical component, including career preparation, employment or job placement of graduates, degree completion, graduate or professional school enrollment and preparation (Young et al., 2017).

Given the range of roles advisors play and the resources they represent for students nearing the completion of their undergraduate journey, it is not surprising that national data show 94% of seniors at four-year colleges and universities report having met and engaged in discussion with an "academic advisor, faculty member, or a success or academic coach" at least once during the school year. Over half (53%) met with them five or more times (NSSE, 2019).

Further, advising in the senior year is not the specific domain of faculty and staff with an "advisor" title. In general, about 65% of faculty report talking with students about career plans, and 37% talk with students about non-coursework activities (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.).

Yet, as noted, little research has examined the nexus between advising and capstone experiences. This represents a profound missed opportunity, as several types of capstone and culminating experiences involve advisement, supervision, mentorship, coaching, or apprenticeship. For instance, national data from two- and four-year institutions indicate most capstones embedded in academic departments include faculty or instructor oversight and guidance. These experiences include senior theses (reported at 69% of institutions in recent national data), arts exhibitions or performances (66%), integrative portfolios (49%), integrative or applied learning projects (47%), and service-learning projects (30%) (Young et al., 2017).

Additionally, many seniors engage in culminating experiences that represent pre-professional preparation with advisement and supervision embedded therein, such as with internships (69%), student teaching (66%), and other forms of supervised practice, most notably in the health professions (Young et al., 2019). Further, many co-curricular capstone experiences represent opportunities for guidance and advisement by faculty, staff, and other professionals, including leadership experiences (43%), engagement with career center staff and programming (25%), and preprofessional organizations (18%) (Young et al., 2019). Although the frequency of these interactions is a critical metric, the perceived quality of the interactions is perhaps more accurately documented by the 80% of students at four-year institutions who found such feedback from faculty members, staff members, and site supervisors highly beneficial (NSSE, 2021).

The importance of faculty, staff, and site supervisors in capstone and culminating experiences as mentors for students regarding career pathways and the workforce cannot be overstated. It is important to understand, however, that advising begins to merge with mentorship during the senior year and in curricular capstones and co-curricular culminating experiences because seniors rely on the knowledge and experiences of faculty in those spaces when moving into the next phase of life.

For instance, interactions of faculty, advisors, and mentors with students were most heavily present in pre-professional majors at four-year institutions, such as communications, health professions, education, and media and public relations (Yuhas & BrckaLorenz, 2017). This finding highlights the importance of faculty advising and mentoring of seniors in their career decisions and professional pathways. Additional research by Kinzie and Akyuz (2021) further illustrates that faculty are pivotal in students deciding their next step: "One student noted how 'my wonderful professors helped me learn more about graduate school and the field I am looking into'" (para. 7).

This same research study showed that seniors at fouryear institutions encountered problems when transitioning to virtual instruction and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic because they did not have access to faculty in their senior-year experience. One student shared frustration with not being able to "stay after class and develop relationships with instructors who had real-life experiences and who could provide advice and direction" (Kinzie & Akyuz, 2021, para. 5).

When faculty connect seniors with professionals in the world, they aid in creating student networks, building confidence, crafting career opportunities, and introducing students as full-fledged members of their professional community.

Advisors, faculty, mentors, site supervisors, student support staff, and career coaches represent a critical component in high-impact capstone and culminating experiences. Yet, colleges and universities are often tethered to limited and outdated definitions of "advisors," thus overlooking the importance and impact of faculty, staff, mentors, career service professionals, coaches, and supervisors within capstones and culminating experiences as "advising" in the senior year. These findings are a clarion call for educators and institutions to re-examine how they operationalize "advisors" and support advising activities to truly engage a more holistic vision of advising in the senior year and within capstones and culminating activities.

The focus of holistic advising is to create inclusive and relevant forms of support. Thus, educators must allow for advising's focus to evolve with the student across the undergraduate experience. Among seniors, data highlighted in this research brief indicated their priorities for advisement are focused on making meaning of the undergraduate experience and on preparation for life after college professionally, academically, and personally. Advisement provided by capstone experiences—whether from a traditional advisor or a mentor, site supervisor, coach, staff member, or faculty member—is an important and valuable source of support for students in these senior-year experiences and transitions.

Conclusions and Implications

Advising plays a key role in students' successful transition into and out of college. The two HIPs featured in this brief the first-year experience/first-year seminars and senior capstones—provide solid bookends for undergraduate education and are enhanced when advising is intentionally integrated into their design and implementation. Although there is strong evidence of the relationship between excellent advising that is proactive, holistic, and focused on encouraging substantive interaction between students and many people who perform as advisors in these two HIPs, our exploration reveals where advising in HIPs can be bolstered. Based on these findings, some specific recommendations for practice include:

- Institutions must delineate between transactional and holistic advising to frame a consistent definition for students, faculty, and staff. Through this delineation, institutions can embrace a holistic definition of "advising" that recognizes the impact advisors, faculty, staff, peers, coaches, and site supervisors have on the academic, personal, and career development of students. This is especially important as students engage in the "bookend" experiences of the undergraduate journey: firstyear experiences/seminars and senior capstones and culminating experiences.
- Institutions should ensure that advising is embedded within the student support system and built into the goals and learning outcomes of offices. Administrators coordinating capstone experiences should re-evaluate the importance of advising within the experience and the best practices for facilitating advising interactions between students and supervising personnel.
- Practitioners, faculty members, orientation professionals, first-year seminar instructors, and site supervisors can reflect on their current advisement strategies and how to continue advising students throughout the first-year and capstone experiences, while also being academic guides and mentors.
- When working with the differing needs of senior students, institutions should provide developmental training to aid capstone supervising personnel in the best advising practices. Training can create a consistent advising experience and ensure faculty, staff, peer leaders, and site supervisors feel more comfortable as advisors (Byrd-White, 2021).

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About Research Briefs

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