**Texas Association of Community Colleges**

# Let Us Know You Care:
# What Matters Most to Community College Students in Pathways Advising

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## Executive Summary

Community colleges serve a crucial role within the higher education landscape, serving nearly half of all students enrolled in postsecondary education, especially minoritized students, who represent a significant proportion of community college enrollments (Krogstad, 2016; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004). In doing so, these important institutions serve as a bridge to educational attainment for many students, especially students of color who have been historically underserved in higher education, providing a means by which all students can realize success (Kasper, 2003). To fulfill their role in supporting students to attain certificates and associate degrees that lead to viable jobs or transfer opportunities to four-year institutions, community colleges have been called upon to engage in significant reforms. The purpose of reform is not only help students realize their goals, but to help them do so while minimizing time-to-degree and mitigating excess credit hours. Guided pathways serves as a framework that institutions can leverage to redesign the student experience and help all students attain their educational goals (Bailey et al., 2015). In addition to making significant systemic and programmatic changes, the guided pathways framework emphasizes the importance of maximizing student success by helping students choose and enter pathway and providing structured supports—such as coherent pathways maps and effective academic advising—to help students stay on their path to completion.

In Texas, guided pathways is realized through the Texas Pathways strategy, defined as "an integrated, system-wide approach to student success based on intentionally designed, clear, coherent, and structured educational experiences" (Texas Success Center [TSC], 2021, p. 4). The Texas Pathways strategy is partly motivated by "inequitable achievement gaps" among the growing Texas population (TSC, 2021, p. 7) and promotes a focus on equity. As reform efforts take hold in Texas community colleges, it is essential to understand students' experiences within the context of redesign efforts.

Academic advising is important to students and their academic success (The Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018), and academic advisors play an essential role in helping students navigate their educational journey. As colleges engage in the important work of implementing academic advising models, programs, and processes that align with guided pathways, it is paramount to understand students' experiences with academic advising to ensure that they are benefitting from efforts. In this study, I use a case study design to examine academic advising within a Texas Pathways context at Texas Community College (TCC)[1], advance findings that highlight students' experiences, and offer recommendations for academic advising.

> ### Research Questions
> 1. How do academic advisors help students choose and enter a path
>    and stay on course to completion?
> 2. What are students' experiences with academic advisors
>    within the Texas Pathways context?
> 3. Do students' experiences with academic advising differ
>    in relation to race/ ethnicity and gender?

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[1] Texas Community College (TCC) is a pseudonym.

**Study Design**

In this case study, I examined students' academic advising experiences at TCC and identified how advising practices impacted students' experiences with and perceptions about academic advising. My overarching goal in this work was to understand more about students' experiences and advance knowledge to help colleges develop advising programs that nurture strong advising relationships to maximize the impact of pathways advising, ensure equity, and amplify student success.

I leveraged a case study design, bound within a single Texas community college, to examine academic advising within a Texas Pathways context. This approach allowed me to interrogate pathways advising in a holistic way (Miles et al., 2014). I used original survey data from 84 respondents in a descriptive way to develop a broad understanding of the overall program structure and students' perceptions about academic advising. I then leveraged qualitative data, collected through semi-structured interviews, to develop a deeper understanding of students' experiences. To gain insight about the types of advising strategies advisors employ and how they impacted students' experiences, I analyzed and compared smaller case-studies that consisted of a student and their assigned advisor (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I interviewed 12 students and eight advisors. Because my data was robust and interrelated, I present quantitative and qualitative findings in an interwoven manner by using descriptive data to introduce a trend and share example quotes from interviews to add depth to the numbers.

**Findings**

*Relational advising structures*. Based on survey data, 61% of students indicated that they had an assigned advisor. Ninety-eight percent of students indicated that they met with their advisor in person for a one-on-one meeting and 54% reported that their advising meeting lasted between 16 and 30 minutes. The overall program structure at TCC aligns with the pathways framework in that students are assigned to an academic advisor by their designated area of study, which aligns with a program pathway. Students I interviewed in the study, who had positive experiences with their assigned advisor, welcomed and appreciated this structure because it gave them an opportunity to have an ongoing relationship with someone who could provide guidance when needed and made them feel as though someone "knows [their] story." The time advisors spent in meetings was also important because students felt as though advisors "cared about their students" and didn't rush "to get the meeting over." Notably, however, students reported that the process of learning about and connecting with their advisor for the first time could be "overwhelming."

*Pathway guidance and support.* Most students (81%) who responded to the survey had a degree pathway in mind upon enrolling at TCC and there was only a slight variation across race/ ethnicity and gender. Similarly, only 31% of students reported that their advisor helped them decide on a major. These trends were also evident among the students I interviewed, where 11 out of 12 reported knowing their major prior to meeting with an advisor. Instead of assistance in choosing a pathway or accessing a degree plan, students sought "guidance" in learning about and navigating options within their pathway. Carla[2], a first-generation Latina student who did not have a positive advising experience, shared that she "wished" that her advisor would have "discussed options" and given her the "information and websites" about the

> **81%**
> **Of students had a degree pathway in mind upon enrollment**

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[2] Names for advisors and students used in this report are pseudonyms.

"different [nursing] programs they offer." Ariana, on the other hand, shared how she felt "confident" in her choices because her advisor assured her that she was "with [her] all the way" and was there to "help" and "guide" her through understanding "all the steps" she needed to take to get to her desired "level."

***Caring for the whole student***. Overall, students reported that their advisor cared about their success (78%), was encouraging (71%), and listened to their concerns (80%). These findings also held steady across race/ ethnicity and gender. Students I interviewed who had positive interactions and relationships with their assigned advisor described them "encouraging," "informative," and indicated that they "cared about [their] students." Advisors demonstrated care with they took an interest in "getting to know [students] on a personal level," and worked to "empower" them with the type of information they needed. Iris, another first-generation Latina student had a strong and positive relationship with her advisor, Alexa, which she credits to her advisor's ability to understand her needs. Iris shared how her advisor "helped [her] feel like she was in control of [her] future" because their meetings were always centered around "[her] and [her] goals." Alexa always encouraged Iris to "take accountability" and have "ownership over her decisions." As the youngest in her family, Iris appreciated that Alexa "treated [her] like an adult." Iris also shared how every meeting started off with a discussion about "personal issues affecting [her] real life," and indicated how much she appreciated that she could turn to her advisor to help her strategize on how to overcome obstacles. Although she had a degree plan to follow, she met with her advisor regularly and "relied on her feedback" before enrolling in classes because she "trusted her knowledge" and knew that Alexa would "be there to help with any problems [she] might have."

***Understanding student backgrounds and experience.*** Understanding students' needs and providing them with appropriate support was especially important to helping students stay on their pathway. Although 59% of the students who responded to the survey indicated that their advisor took their background and experience into consideration, this finding was lower than those in the preceding paragraph and results varied across race/ ethnicity. Student interviews revealed themes across two dimensions—college knowledge and lived experiences.

All the students I interviewed engaged in their own research to identify program options and navigate their pathway, but they looked to advisors for validation and additional resources. Students who perceived that their advisor "tells all students the same thing," reported negative interactions and felt as though their questions and concerns were not addressed. Conversely, students reported positive interactions when advisors validated their knowledge and worked to supplement that knowledge with additional resources and information that aligned with their unique needs. For example, Mateo felt like his original advisor treated him like "every other student" and "just gave [him] the same classes and information as everyone else." Mateo wanted to transfer and invested significant time into researching transfer options, but he could not get the information he needed from his advisor. Mateo eventually transitioned to a different advisor who has become "a friend" because he felt as though she "heard" him and understood what he needed. Mateo looked to his advisor, Jemma, to "reiterate" that he was on the right track and appreciated how she reviewed the work he had already done, "walked [him] through the transfer process," and identified "what [he] had been missing." The way in which Jemma identified specific knowledge gaps helped Mateo feel more confident in the transfer process.

> **Students reported positive interactions when advisors validated their knowledge**

Another critical theme that I uncovered within the scope of understanding students' backgrounds centered around their lived experiences. Notably, 11 out of the 12 students who participated in an interview were students of color. When I examined the extent to which advisors took their background and experiences into consideration, a theme emerged around racism. Six students reported experiencing racism at some point throughout their educational journey and shared how these experiences impacted their perceptions about higher education. Ariana, a first-generation Latina college student, shared how her history of "being called racial slurs and getting treated different because of the color of [her] skin" caused her to feel "fear and anxiety" around the thought of starting college. Her advisor, Perla, however, helped ease her apprehension by empathizing with her and "sharing a personal story" about her own experiences with racism. Ariana also believed that Perla was someone she could "confide in" and "turn to if [she] went through that sort of thing again." Although several students shared their experiences with racism and how those experiences threatened to jeopardize their educational trajectory, only two students found support from their advisor. From an equity perspective, it is critical for colleges to provide professional development for advisors so they understand the ways that racism may impact students' lives and how it can impede their success. It is also essential to support advisors in developing tools and resources necessary to work with students who experience racism.

**_Relationships matter._** Among the students I interviewed, relationships with advisors were meaningful and having an advisor with whom they connected mattered. In some cases, students felt more comfortable with an advisor who was not formally assigned to them and maintained a relationship with them, even if that meant "traveling to the other side of town" for a meeting. Notably, strong relationships were present when students reported that advisors cared. More specially, relationships were strong when advisors helped students explore their options, demonstrated an interest in their success, provided support, took their experiences and background into consideration, and engaged in regular outreach.

> **Students with strong advisor relationships referred to advisors as:**
> **"a big sister"**
> **"another mom"**
> **"a friend"**
> **"trusted ally"**

Assigning students to an advisor aligned with their pathway was essential to helping students establish a relationship with a supportive resource on campus, however, students wanted to maintain a relationship with an advisor who demonstrated care, and with whom they established a connection. As such, they also desired a formal option to choose their advisor.

**_Outreach._** Another aspect of supporting students on their path to success was ensuring that students were engaged through ongoing outreach. While 64% of White students reported that their advisor reached out them periodically, 61% of Latinx and 100% of Black students indicated that their advisor did not reach out to them.

Students welcomed ongoing outreach from their advisor because they felt as though "somebody cares" and is "looking out for [them]." Some students indicated that they wanted their advisor to send out an email "at least once a week" to "check-in" and "see how everything is going." Students also welcomed "reminders" and information about campus "resources." Students especially appreciated receiving personalized messages from their advisor because it "reminded" them that they "had someone to turn to" when they needed help, which was especially important during the pandemic. Alexa, a seasoned advisor shared how she always tried to "go the extra mile and personalize" messages whenever possible, and this did not go unnoticed. Although students admitted that they did not respond to emails they received, they appreciated knowing that

"somebody cares" and liked having "something in their inbox" they could reference when they did need "a helping hand." A small yet significant related finding about outreach was that students appreciated having important communications directly from their advisor because they could "easily search [their] inbox by [their] advisor's name to find important information and resources." Communications also had the most impact when they came from a single, "trusted" source. At TCC, if students changed area of study, they were assigned to a new advisor, but in some cases, students preferred to continue meeting with their original advisor. In cases like this, although students effectively viewed their preferred advisor as their assigned advisor, they were not formally assigned in the student communications management system and the outreach messages they received came from the advisor that was "listed in the system." Although advisors could send messages to students at any time, if they were not officially assigned to them as part of their caseload, it was difficult for them to keep track of students and engage with them through timely interventions. It was also confusing for students to receive communications from an advisor other than the one with whom they met.

## Recommendations

Based on my research, the following recommendations for community colleges can support advising structures aligned with the guided pathways framework that help students choose and enter a pathway and stay on the path through completion:

- Invest in assigned advisors embedded into pathways and allow students to keep the same advisor through completion
- Streamline processes to connect students with their assigned advisor
- Formalize processes for students to change their assigned advisor and/or for students to transition to a new advisor if staffing changes occur
- Design early and ongoing advising structures that help students explore and understand the options available to them along their pathway to completion, transfer, and/or employment
- Invest in and prioritize a holistic approach to advising in which students' needs and unique lived experiences are centered and ensure that advisors have access to ongoing professional development about emerging trends in student support
- Develop training to help advisors assess students' unique level of college knowledge to personalize and adjust student interactions accordingly
- Supplement degree plans and checklists with planned conversations about the aspirations behind students' goals
- Design and implement structures that nurture equity-mindedness in advising and engage advisors in professional development to enhance their knowledge about equity and racism

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