

GUIDED PATHWAYS //

STUDENT ONBOARDING

FALL 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Seamlessly supporting students through the onboarding process from admissions to first-term coursework ensures they start college strong. It is, therefore, critical that onboarding be designed from a student lens and with equity at the center. The Florida Student Success Center (Center), housed within the Division of Florida Colleges, is supporting institutional efforts to improve onboarding policies and processes. As part of that effort, Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) conducted surveys, focus groups, and a national landscape scan to identify opportunities and provide recommendations for the Florida College System institutions (FCS institutions).

The research revealed an overarching theme, that onboarding processes at FCS institutions are complex, creating confusion for students, staff, and faculty. Additional findings include:

- FCS institutions are achieving positive outcomes from the implementation of meta-majors and career pathways.
- Students report a strong sense of belonging and affinity for faculty on campus, but one in four still do not have someone on campus who they trust.
- Students have several concerns about the communication they receive during onboarding.
- Students and campus staff are experiencing difficulty with the technology they need to use.
- Advising is top of mind for students, but they have strong, opposing views on how they feel about their advisors.
- Most students have academic maps, yet they still rely on advisors to guide them in course selection, exacerbating advisor capacity constraints.
- State funding has a real and immediate impact on student success.
- The FCS institutions have deep concerns about the state-imposed elimination of developmental education, though required developmental education is still prevalent.

Fortunately, there is substantial research and myriad case studies that establish best practice for addressing these types of challenges. Drawing from this body of evidence, SRS recommends that the FCS institutions create a step-by-step onboarding system that is holistic, student-centered and equity-focused, including the features listed on the following page.

RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNICATIONS



FCS institutions should enhance their communication and support model for onboarding by using asset-based language, providing students with an interactive checklist, providing equity-focused customer service training to all front-line staff, and establishing a single point of contact for students during onboarding, either through coaches or a one-stop shop.

TECHNOLOGY



FCS institutions should solicit student feedback on current websites and portals, edit to meet student needs, and include a mandatory technology start-up workshop at orientation to ensure students can navigate all technologies needed for success.

ADVISING



FCS institutions should embrace and scale the alignment of advising to meta-majors, employ a caseload model to maximize student support, and group students by meta-majors during orientation.



The Florida Student Success Center should support institutions in providing advisors with robust, equity-focused professional development. FCS institutions should assess student outcomes for advisors to ensure every student has a positive and productive advisor relationship.



FCS institutions should embrace and scale default or “one-click” registration processes that guide students directly to the courses they need to stay on their academic map, plan course offerings to meet demand based on those academic maps, and utilize the freed-up advising workload to help address capacity issues.

POLICY



The Student Success Center and the Florida College System should continue to explore multiple sources for potential funding to address capacity challenges and support implementation of new onboarding strategies.



The Florida College System and Student Success Center should support the colleges with substantial technical assistance to help with a modified approach to implementing SB 1720. FCS institutions should replace prerequisite, noncredit developmental education courses with a corequisite support model to enroll students directly into college-level math and English and provide supplemental support in the same term.

BELONGING



The recommendations above will help to continuously improve the strong belonging results seen in this study. A caseload advising model, robust professional development for advisors, and having a dedicated onboarding coach are all strategies that will give students additional opportunities to make meaningful connections with campus personnel and maintain relationships built on trust and understanding.

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INTRODUCTION



The Florida Student Success Center, housed within the Division of Florida Colleges, is currently facilitating the Florida Pathways Institute (FPI), a statewide guided pathways implementation effort designed to scale pathways to dramatically boost completion and improve the social and economic mobility of graduates at Florida College System institutions (FCS institutions). As a part of this effort, the Center is focused on providing institutions with technical assistance to implement transformative, non-academic student success policies, structures, and strategies in the onboarding process. In order to equip colleges to engage in redesign that is aligned to both national best practice and institutional context, the Center selected Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) to conduct a national and Florida-specific inquiry and discovery process.

SRS defines onboarding as the efforts spanning the time a student applies to a college, registers for courses, and attends their first semester of courses. Seamlessly supporting students through onboarding ensures they start strong, having already developed a sense of trust in the college. Failure to do so introduces risk that students will get lost in the process and not enroll at all or not be retained after the first or second semester. It is, therefore, critical that onboarding be designed from a student lens and with equity at the center.

METHODOLOGY



SRS began by conducting a national landscape scan of evidence-based, non-academic onboarding policies and practices that support the guided pathways framework. This scan provided context for the research design and identified institutional case studies. SRS used findings from the landscape scan to inform focus group protocols, survey questions, and the resulting recommendations.

FOCUS GROUPS

SRS staff attended the Florida Pathways Institute II event on October 19-20, 2021 to conduct focus groups with institutional stakeholders from seven institutions, a group of FPI Navigators, and two students.

Participating institutions:

- Florida SouthWestern State College
- Florida State College at Jacksonville
- Palm Beach State College
- Pasco-Hernando State College
- Seminole State College of Florida
- South Florida State College
- State College of Florida

Participating students represented Pasco-Hernando State College and St. Petersburg College.

SURVEYS

SRS designed and distributed two surveys to get a broader understanding of the diverse perspectives of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and other key institutional stakeholders from the broader group of 12 FPI institutions. The first survey was designed for students and used student-focused language and concepts; the questions focused on students' onboarding experiences.

The survey for institutional faculty, staff, and administrators was designed to gain an understanding of their perspectives on current onboarding practices, including what is going well, what can improve, and what new strategies, structures, and policies could be implemented.

The Florida Student Success Center distributed the surveys to their institutions on October 29, 2021. One reminder was sent, and the surveys were closed on November 10, 2021.

STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSES

The majority of respondents came from two institutions, Palm Beach State College and Seminole State College of Florida. SRS, therefore, compared results for the population of respondents overall with those of each institution to ensure findings specific to one college were not incorrectly generalized for all colleges.

Race. White students accounted for 41 percent of the respondents. Respondents identifying as Hispanic or Latinx made up 24 percent of the survey population, followed by those identifying as Black or African American, who made up 18 percent.

Other demographics. The student survey respondents were more likely to be female, with 68 percent of respondents identifying as a woman. Respondents skewed slightly younger, with those 24 years of age or younger representing 54 percent and those over the age of 24 representing 44 percent. (Two percent of respondents left the question blank.)

STUDENT RESPONSES

BROWARD COLLEGE	2
COLLEGE OF THE FLORIDA KEYS	27
FLORIDA SOUTHWESTERN STATE COLLEGE	1
LAKE-SUMTER STATE COLLEGE	1
NONE OF THESE	7
PALM BEACH STATE COLLEGE	131
SEMINOLE STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA	224
SOUTH FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE	74
(BLANK)	8
TOTAL	475

Characteristics. Just over half of respondents have completed two or fewer semesters in college. There was a near-even split between those who attend full-time and those who attend part-time. About one-third of respondents are caretakers for others. Just over half use financial aid to pay for college. Those who work either full-time or part-time represented 65 percent of the respondents, and they worked primarily for off-campus employers.





INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY RESPONSES

The 251 respondents represented six different colleges, with the majority coming from Seminole State College of Florida and South Florida State College.

INSTITUTION RESPONSES

COLLEGE OF THE FLORIDA KEYS	35
EASTERN FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE	1
LAKE-SUMTER STATE COLLEGE	44
PALM BEACH STATE COLLEGE	16
SEMINOLE STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA	72
SOUTH FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE	71
(BLANK)	12
TOTAL	251

Role and tenure. Nearly half of institutional survey respondents serve in faculty roles, with those identifying as staff members making up just over one-third and the rest serving in administration. More than three-quarters of the respondents have been serving in higher education for eleven years or more.

Demographics. In terms of demographics, many institutional survey respondents elected not to provide information about their race, age, and/or gender identity. This was true of 18 percent of respondents as it relates to race, 16 percent as it relates to gender identity, and 13 percent as it relates to age. Of those who did report their demographic data, the majority were women (77%), aged 45-64 (66%), and white (78%).

ANALYSIS

SRS conducted a comprehensive thematic analysis on all qualitative data, including the open-ended survey responses, as well as a quantitative analysis on the survey results. Answers to each student survey question were examined by race, age, gender identity, and enrollment status to identify whether students with different demographics answered differently.

In general, responses did not have substantial variation based on any of these factors, though this report notes when there was variation above five percentage points for a particular group. Using the national landscape scan, the data analyses, relevant research, and staff expertise, SRS crafted the following report with comprehensive findings and recommendations for consideration.

THE OVERARCHING CHALLENGE



ONBOARDING PROCESSES AT FCS INSTITUTIONS ARE COMPLEX, CREATING CONFUSION FOR STUDENTS, STAFF, AND FACULTY.

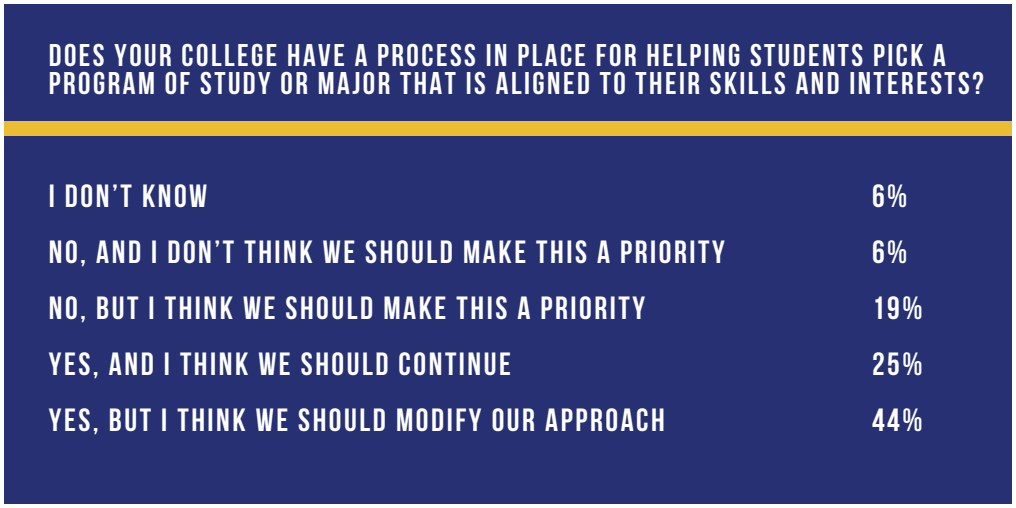
The most prevalent theme to emerge from the research was broad, relating to the overall complexity of onboarding processes. While challenges were identified with each separate piece of the process from admissions through the first semester of classes, the participants reported a lack of a holistic approach, as well as inadequate coordination among the various parts of the onboarding process.

Faculty, staff, and students were transparent about the challenges students face when navigating application, admissions, financial aid, orientation, and course scheduling processes. Respondents identified that the steps required to complete many of the onboarding processes were burdensome, confusing, and difficult to accomplish within the allotted time horizon. The processes most cited were the submission of documentation to prove residency, submission of the forms necessary to apply for financial aid, and figuring out which classes they need and how to register for them. Of these, the most frequent concern and frustration was related to securing financial aid. One student responded, “Filling out all of the necessary forms for scholarships and student loans [was my biggest challenge]. This process could be streamlined. There is a lot of miscommunication between departments. It seems very outdated.”

Faculty in focus groups also voiced this sentiment. As one faculty member put it, “I think the processes themselves, some of which I think are probably self-imposed, and not by the students, by us as an institution, some of which are legislatively, statutorily imposed, really create lots of potential hurdles and pain points for students." One focus group participant, when asked what they would change if they had a magic wand, said that they would have a clear, streamlined onboarding process that was step-by-step for students.

One example frequently cited by focus groups and survey respondents was the process for residency verification. This process was described as difficult and cumbersome, and was often referenced when respondents were asked to reflect on barriers in the onboarding process. Respondents were not entirely sure, however, how much of that process is directly controlled by state law and how much was institutional policy and process.

Further, the institutional survey revealed a lack of common understanding within each campus about their onboarding process. Faculty, staff, and administration were asked whether five specific onboarding processes were in place at their campus. (E.g., "Does your college have a process in place for helping students pick a program of study or major that is aligned to their skills and interests?") Between 10 and 20 percent of respondents answered "I don't know," depending on the question. Those from the same campuses who answered with more certainty still answered differently from one another. Conflicting answers were found across all institutions, though some institutions had more substantial disagreements than others. For example, when asked the question referenced above, respondents from one college answered the following way:



Clearly, onboarding processes are sufficiently complex and siloed that even institutional stakeholders do not have a common understanding of them. Reducing complexity in the process overall will help students navigate it more easily and help faculty and staff understand it and be able to explain it to students.

FCS institutions should reform and streamline their onboarding systems, creating a step-by-step system that is holistic, student-centered and equity-focused. The remainder of this report details specific findings from the research, with recommended remedies that are evidence-based and rooted in principles of equity. Creating a new, holistic approach to onboarding that incorporates these recommended features will ensure that students, especially those historically marginalized in higher education, are effectively guided onto their postsecondary pathways and set up for success.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



COMMUNICATIONS

FINDING: STUDENTS HAVE SEVERAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE COMMUNICATION THEY RECEIVE DURING ONBOARDING.

Students did not feel they had sufficient written direction to navigate the onboarding process, and institutional participants agreed. Many students reported feelings of anxiety and stress, which resulted from not understanding how to complete the steps of onboarding and fearing they would "miss something." This type of anxiety can be fueled by the choice of wording in communication. When higher education jargon is prevalent and the language communicates a deficit mindset about students, it reinforces students' fears about not being ready for college.

When asked what is going well with onboarding, many focus group participants were proud of the new student checklists they created to help students with onboarding. However, none of the students surveyed volunteered information about them. These checklists are often static and placed on college websites, which students reported they have difficulty navigating. Static checklists also do not provide information to college staff who may be trying to help students complete the process, but are unsure what steps are still outstanding.

One significant cause for consternation with communications is the fact that campus departments do not effectively communicate and coordinate among themselves. Faculty in focus groups were quick to acknowledge this shortcoming. Students agreed, reporting instances of getting bounced around from one administrative office to another and not having a single point of contact to help navigate the complex institutional infrastructure that is unknown (and unknowable) to onboarding students. A student reported their biggest challenge at the college this way: "Getting incorrect information from the administration was a challenge. [I got] different answers from different people and an endless circle of 'call this department,' and then being sent to another and another and then back."

Campuses across the country have addressed this phenomenon by consolidating departments and having a "one-stop shop" for services like admissions, financial aid, and registration. For example, the centrally-located Student Success Center at Johnston Community College in North Carolina is equipped to help students with each of the following:

- ADVISING
- CAMPUS TOURS
- CAREER SERVICES
- CONNECT SESSIONS
- COUNSELING
- ACCESSIBILITY SUPPORT
- FINANCIAL AID INFORMATION
- NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION
- PLACEMENT TESTING AND ADMISSIONS ASSISTANCE
- REGISTRATION ASSISTANCE
- TRANSFER SERVICES

When these departments also work together to develop relevant, actionable, and streamlined content for a mandatory new student orientation, the coordination among departments from the student perspective can be dramatically improved.

Another approach commonly deployed in efforts to re-enroll adult students who previously stopped out is to provide a re-enrollment coach (also called a concierge or navigator). These individuals, who are employed by the college, the state, or are volunteers from the community, serve as a single point of contact for students who are interested in returning to college. They assist them with each of the steps required, from admissions to financial aid to program selection. They have established contacts with professionals within various campus departments and serve as the student's liaison to get information and resolve issues.

Additional student feedback about communications centered on the customer service they received from various offices like the bursar, registrar, and financial aid offices. "Sometimes the attitude of the people at those offices is not the most kind. They should understand that students need their support, " said one student. Another student remarked on finding a challenge with online advisors: "Trying to get someone to explain any of the process [was my greatest challenge]. I felt like the online advisors didn't care."

Many focus group participants espoused the need for more college employees to have a student-centered, compassionate approach to their roles. "We have to move from transactional to relational," remarked one focus group participant. The panel session of college presidents at the FPI Onboarding Institute referred to people with this approach as having "an educator's heart," a concept which resonated with multiple focus groups. While an "educator's heart" is not a structural solution that can be scaled, equity-focused customer service training for all front-line employees can help ensure students receive the information they need and feel supported when they ask for help.

RECOMMENDATION: FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD ENHANCE THEIR COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT MODEL FOR ONBOARDING BY USING ASSET-BASED LANGUAGE, PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH AN INTERACTIVE CHECKLIST, PROVIDING EQUITY-FOCUSED CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING TO ALL FRONT-LINE STAFF, AND ESTABLISHING A SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT FOR STUDENTS DURING ONBOARDING, EITHER THROUGH COACHES OR A ONE-STOP SHOP.

TECHNOLOGY

FINDING: STUDENTS AND CAMPUS STAFF ARE EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY WITH THE TECHNOLOGY THEY NEED TO USE.

Many students, faculty, and staff pointed to the multiple programs, websites, and systems with which students must engage as a frustration. Many students expressed this sentiment in open-ended survey responses. Even younger students, who would be most expected to be adept at using technology, reported difficulty with getting logged in and acclimated to all the programs they are expected to utilize. A student reported struggling with the institution's web portal and requested an "in-person orientation that explains the [institution's portal] page. It took me a while to fully understand where to find everything. I also know a few new students that struggle with this."

Focus groups reported that technology added significant time constraints on already-overburdened staff and faculty, as learning new systems is time consuming. These groups also stated that staff and faculty often create work-arounds for technology that does not work the way the institution needs it to work, thus leaving the institution with an onboarding technology solution that is not solving for anything and is not scalable. A focus group participant said,

> **"PEOPLE OUTPERFORM THE PROCESS. BY WORKING AROUND THE PROBLEM, YOU DON'T REALLY FIND A SOLUTION TO MAKE IT SCALABLE."**

It is outside of the purview of this report to make direct recommendations about technology systems and vendors. However, we do recommend that new student orientation be designed to address students' technology struggles. Orientation should give students hands-on support while they establish their credentials for campus systems and gain general understanding of their navigation. If orientation is asynchronous, students should receive personal invitations via text and email to attend a virtual, synchronous technology workshop to supplement their orientation curriculum. Making this process mandatory will ensure all students participate, and reduce the amount of non-use or ineffective use of these technologies.

RECOMMENDATION: FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD SOLICIT STUDENT FEEDBACK ON CURRENT WEBSITES AND PORTALS, EDIT TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS, AND INCLUDE A MANDATORY TECHNOLOGY START-UP WORKSHOP AT ORIENTATION TO ENSURE STUDENTS CAN NAVIGATE ALL TECHNOLOGIES NEEDED FOR SUCCESS.

ADVISING

FINDING: FCS INSTITUTIONS ARE ACHIEVING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF META-MAJORS AND CAREER PATHWAYS.

FCS institutions are national leaders in creating structures that help students select a program of study aligned to their career goals. Neither students nor faculty and staff mentioned career pathways as a challenge or barrier, related to onboarding or overall. In fact, student survey responses validate that the pathways in place are helping them select a program of study with a high confidence in their career prospects.

Overall, 60 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough information to select a major or program of study. Full-time students were more likely to agree with the statement (68%) compared to part-time students (53%), indicating that the pathways approach may be working better for students with greater credit intensity.

Students understand the alignment between their academics and their future career path. In fact, 85 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are in a program that is aligned to their career interests, and that result is even stronger for men (93%) and students over the age of 24 (91%). Seventy-one percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understand the career paths available to them based on their program of study.

Students are also overwhelmingly confident about their prospects for success. Over 90 percent of respondents were confident they would be successful in college, confident they would be able to enter their chosen career path after graduation, and confident about their future career success.

Some of the institutional focus groups participants shared that they have reinforced their meta-major approach by integrating it with academic advising. Specifically, they assign advisors to a particular meta-major, train the advisors to be specialists in the associated academic and career pathways, and assign them to students enrolled in that meta-major. Some also reported grouping their orientation sessions by meta-majors to help students make connections to both advisors and other students who have similar interests. Others expressed interest in this approach.

60%

OF STUDENTS AGREE THEY HAD ENOUGH INFORMATION TO SELECT A PROGRAM OF STUDY

85%

OF STUDENTS ARE IN PROGRAM OF STUDY THAT ALIGNS TO THEIR CAREER INTERESTS

71%

OF STUDENTS UNDERSTAND CAREERS AVAILABLE TO THEM BASED ON THEIR CHOSEN PROGRAM

OVER

90%

OF STUDENTS WERE CONFIDENT THEY WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IN COLLEGE, ENTER THEIR CHOSEN CAREER PATH, AND WILL HAVE SUCCESS IN THAT CAREER

A case study of Cleveland State Community College found that after implementing meta-majors (referred to as career communities) with corequisite support in gateway courses, the institution doubled the percentage of students completing college-level math within the first year of enrollment and witnessed increased credit momentum (Jenkins et al., 2018). A second case study of Jackson College similarly found increased early indicators of student success including credit accumulation and gateway course completion as a result of a strong career pathways structure (Bailey, Smith Jagger, and Jenkins, 2015).

The integration of advising and meta-majors also facilitates another best practice: a caseload approach to advising. In this model, advisors are assigned to a set of students for the duration of their program, allowing them to get to know them and provide more personalized support. It also helps the student establish trust and be comfortable reaching out when help is needed.

While many Florida students responding to the survey indicated that they had an assigned advisor, 30 percent replied that they either found an advisor on their own or talk to whoever is available, and 6 percent do not use advising services at all. When connecting students to advisors through meta-majors, it is not only possible, but logical, for students to stay with the same assigned advisor throughout their program of study, unless they drastically change their career path.

At Southwestern Community College, after implementing a caseload management model, students reported increased levels of satisfaction with their advisors (Klempin, Kalamkarian, Pellegrino, and Barnett (2019)). A case study examining Zane State Community College found that a caseload management approach allowed the institution to transition from professional advisors to success coaches, engage faculty advisors earlier in the process, and provide students with better facilitation and long-term planning (Klempin, Pellegrino, Lopez, Barnett, and Lawton, 2019).

RECOMMENDATION: FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD EMBRACE AND SCALE THE ALIGNMENT OF ADVISING TO META-MAJORS, EMPLOY A CASELOAD MODEL TO MAXIMIZE STUDENT SUPPORT, AND GROUP STUDENTS BY META-MAJORS DURING ORIENTATION.



ADVISING

FINDING: ADVISING IS TOP OF MIND FOR STUDENTS, BUT THEY HAVE STRONG, OPPOSING VIEWS ON HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THEIR ADVISORS.

Student feedback reinforced in multiple ways that they understand the importance of advising. Open-ended survey questions about what their college does well and what it could improve yielded a substantial number of responses about advising, indicating that students see advising as a core component of their relationship with their college. In response to a crafted survey question, students indicated that they want advisors to serve multiple functions. While nearly all students believed that advisors should help with course selection, two-thirds also wanted assistance with career planning and navigating the policies and processes of the college.

Conversely, only one-third of survey respondents felt that advisors should assist students with resources for basic needs, despite the fact that students were least likely to know where to get this particular type of support.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ARE THINGS THAT YOU FEEL AN ADVISOR SHOULD HELP WITH? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

COURSE SELECTION AND SCHEDULING	93%
COLLEGE POLICIES AND PROCESSES (E.G., FINANCIAL AID, REGISTRATION HOLDS)	64%
CAREER PLANNING ACTIVITIES	64%
RESOURCES FOR BASIC NEEDS (E.G., FOOD PANTRY, EMERGENCY HOUSING)	36%

The open-ended survey revealed an interesting phenomena related to students' perceptions of their advisors. Students generally reported either a strong affinity for their advisor or a strong sense of mistrust.

ONE STUDENT SAID:

"THE ADVISORS ARE EXTREMELY HELPFUL AND SEEM TO BE TRULY CONCERNED ABOUT MY SUCCESS."

WHILE ANOTHER SAID:

"MY BIGGEST CHALLENGE I FACED WAS THE FIRST COUNSELOR I HAD. SHE DIDN'T LISTEN TO ME WHEN I TOLD HER WHAT WERE MY CAREER GOALS. SHE GAVE ME CLASSES TO GET A PERMIT FOR AN ACCOUNTANT DESPITE ME VOICING WANTING TO ACHIEVE BEING A SPEECH PATHOLOGIST."



As with communication overall, it is critical that advisors have training not only on the academic requirements, but also on the general tenets of customer service, asset-based language, and effectively working with students from different backgrounds. Using data to monitor advisor effectiveness is another tool that can help ensure consistency across student experiences. Regularly checking metrics like retention and graduation rates by advisor helps colleges identify when additional professional development is needed.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education identified an opportunity to provide advisors with professional development to enhance their capacity to serve students, particularly students with diverse needs and backgrounds. They developed and launched a free, online, four-part advisor training to equip advisors with core concepts of equity and anti-racism, math pathways, purpose-setting and career planning, and advising in a virtual space. To date, hundreds of advisors have completed the training, showing a strong demand for and appreciation of this type of professional development.

RECOMMENDATION: THE FLORIDA STUDENT SUCCESS CENTER SHOULD SUPPORT INSTITUTIONS IN PROVIDING ADVISORS WITH ROBUST, EQUITY-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD ASSESS STUDENT OUTCOMES FOR ADVISORS TO ENSURE EVERY STUDENT HAS A POSITIVE AND PRODUCTIVE ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP.

ADVISING

FINDING: MOST STUDENTS HAVE ACADEMIC MAPS, YET THEY STILL RELY ON ADVISORS TO GUIDE THEM IN COURSE SELECTION, EXACERBATING ADVISOR CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS.

The need for additional capacity for advising was another prevalent theme that emerged from focus groups and surveys. Open-ended survey questions about institutional barriers to student success frequently included a reference to not having enough advisors, needing to improve advisor-student ratio, a desire to offer better advisor pay and recruit more talent, and a lack of funding to do all of these things. “It's challenging for [advisors] to get through the number of students that we have. It required them to do two to three sessions of [orientation] everyday, as well as see other students and do transcripts."

“IT'S CHALLENGING FOR [ADVISORS] TO GET THROUGH THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS THAT WE HAVE. IT REQUIRED THEM TO DO TWO TO THREE SESSIONS OF [ORIENTATION] EVERYDAY, AS WELL AS SEE OTHER STUDENTS AND DO TRANSCRIPTS."

One student even noticed the capacity challenge, saying, “I do like my advisor a lot, although I think she's overwhelmed with a lot of work. I think that she needs help.” A respondent on the institution survey noted, “I think our advisors are overstretched and that hinders their ability to provide the level of service they would like to.”

One factor driving these challenges is that students are largely relying on advisors for assistance with course selection and scheduling. However, 71 percent of students also reported that they have an academic map that outlines the courses they need to take each semester, which would theoretically alleviate this particular demand on advisors.

These two facts taken together indicate one or more disconnects. Students may not be using the academic map to pick their courses. This could be because they do not fully understand the purpose of the academic map, neglect to consult it before registering, or that the map itself does not contain sufficient information to help them navigate all the choices they need to make. Alternatively, students may be trying to register for courses based on their map but finding those courses unavailable. This would indicate that data from the academic maps are not readily available to the college to help with planned course offerings.

Both issues can be resolved by strengthening the connection and automation between the maps and the process of registering for classes. A default scheduling approach feeds data from the academic map into the student's registration portal either as a pure default or with one to two mouse-clicks. Since the system already contains the information about which courses are on the map for that term, students do not have to identify and select which courses they want to take, only which times and professors they prefer. This connection between maps and registration also dramatically improves departments' ability to plan course offerings based on demand, because there is a strong likelihood that students will take exactly what their maps contain. This ensures all students have the courses they need when they need them, and reduces likelihood that a course will need to be canceled for low enrollment.

The University of Hawaii STAR system is a home-grown solution created to support and streamline student decision-making. Students can interact with their academic maps through the software, dragging and dropping courses into and out of their plan from a master course list. The system gives them feedback, such as warning them that their map has an unmet prerequisite or advising them not to take four math courses in the same semester. When they enter the registration portal in STAR, it pre-populates the courses from their customized academic map and prompts them to select the section that they want. After implementation, the percentage of "off-track" courses students were taking decreased from 25% to just 4% (Complete College America, 2017). While this homegrown software is highly integrated, many institutions have found other ways to successfully use their academic map data to feed default registration in systems like Banner and PeopleSoft.

Alleviating the burden on advisors to assist students with course selection may not fully resolve capacity issues, but it will free up some of advisors' time, inevitably allowing them to serve more students or establish deeper connections with the students they advise.

RECOMMENDATION: FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD EMBRACE AND SCALE DEFAULT OR "ONE-CLICK" REGISTRATION PROCESSES THAT GUIDE STUDENTS DIRECTLY TO THE COURSES THEY NEED TO STAY ON THEIR ACADEMIC MAP, PLAN COURSE OFFERINGS TO MEET DEMAND BASED ON THOSE ACADEMIC MAPS, AND UTILIZE THE FREED-UP ADVISING WORKLOAD TO HELP ADDRESS CAPACITY ISSUES.

POLICY

FINDING: STATE FUNDING HAS A REAL AND IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON STUDENT SUCCESS.

When survey respondents and focus groups were asked open-ended questions about state policy, many focused on the state's role in funding its public institutions. Most often, the sentiment expressed was that the college needed to make investments in additional advisors or faculty, and that this additional funding should be allocated by the state. Some focus group participants even stated they are in "survival mode" and expressed resentment that other institutions receive large monetary gifts and can bring in "armies of advisors."

Others expressed a desire for the state to simplify state financial aid, make it more accessible to more students, and support additional affordability strategies like the scaled use of open educational resources. One respondent noted that the way the colleges are funded makes it necessary to prioritize enrollment over student success.



It is outside of the purview of this report to make direct recommendations about state appropriations levels and formula. However, it is recommended that the Florida College System explore several avenues to infuse additional resources to support capacity enhancement and innovation at the FCS institutions. In addition to state funding, institutions have already received a significant amount of dollars through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), funded through three rounds of COVID-19 relief legislation. The institutional portion of these funds can be used for payroll. Further investments may be made by the federal government upon passage of the American Families Plan, which includes funding specifically for student success.

Beyond government funds, many philanthropies make investments in student success projects at the postsecondary level, particularly when those projects and institutions place equity at the center, as evidenced by the important work of the Florida Student Success Center. The Student Success Center is well positioned to solicit philanthropic funding to provide hands-on, actionable technical assistance to help all the colleges implement new strategies. This approach will be most impactful in situations where the work is not likely to happen organically, either because it is not a high priority for colleges or they are skeptical about the strategy itself despite a strong evidence base.

The West Virginia Legislature passed House Bill 2853 in 2019, which calls for state agencies to encourage and facilitate use of open education resources (OER), a proven strategy for reducing students' financial burden (Keadle, 2020). The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and Council for Community and Technical Colleges used a combination of state and philanthropic dollars to create a program called Open Learning WV, which accelerates the creation and adoption of OER across its institutions. The program provides $1,000 grants to faculty who use OER course materials. To date, in only two semesters, the Open Learning WV program has saved students over a quarter of a million dollars.

RECOMMENDATION: THE STUDENT SUCCESS CENTER AND THE FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM SHOULD CONTINUE TO EXPLORE MULTIPLE SOURCES FOR POTENTIAL FUNDING TO ADDRESS CAPACITY CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW ONBOARDING STRATEGIES.

POLICY

FINDING: THE FCS INSTITUTIONS HAVE DEEP CONCERNS ABOUT THE STATE-IMPOSED ELIMINATION OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION, THOUGH REQUIRED DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION IS STILL PREVALENT.

Senate Bill 1720, enacted in May 2013, fundamentally changed the Florida College System's requirements as it relates to developmental education. On a fundamental level, it shifted the decision-making power from the institution to the student, giving students the right to choose whether or not they take a placement test and whether or not they enroll in a developmental course. It imposed a requirement on the colleges to provide admissions counseling to every student enrolled, advising them of their rights and options. At the same time, the legislature pulled back funding in the amount equal to the estimated cost of the developmental system.

The legislation specifically called for a different approach to helping students succeed in college-level math and English courses, including accelerated course structures, modular instruction, and corequisite instructional support that is offered in the same term as the gateway course.

Developmental education was a frequently-discussed topic in focus groups and open-ended survey responses. Faculty and staff overwhelmingly disagreed with the state policy established by SB 1720, describing it in terms like "detrimental" and "harsh." They felt strongly that many students need developmental courses to be able to succeed at their college and that the courses were working as intended, guiding students into successful completion of college-level math and English.

Despite expressing consternation about what they describe as the elimination of developmental education, the same college leaders acknowledged that they are still offering a significant number of developmental education courses. Many colleges had eliminated some of their courses, and others had implemented some level of corequisite support, but it is clear that prerequisite developmental education is still very prevalent in the FCS institutions.

Student survey responses and the student focus group also revealed that students are not being advised of their rights under SB 1720. Of those respondents who placed into a developmental course, only one in ten knew they could opt out of them if they did not want to take them. More than half of developmental students believed developmental courses were their only option, while 34 percent were aware they could skip developmental courses if they passed a separate placement test.

The experience of students in the focus group reinforce these findings. One student reported that her spouse was placed into developmental courses and did not know that he could opt out. She said, “My husband is a software engineering major and he hates math. He absolutely despises it, and when he found out he had to take developmental mathematics it almost made him drop out because he's like ‘I don't want to add any more math classes than I have to.’"

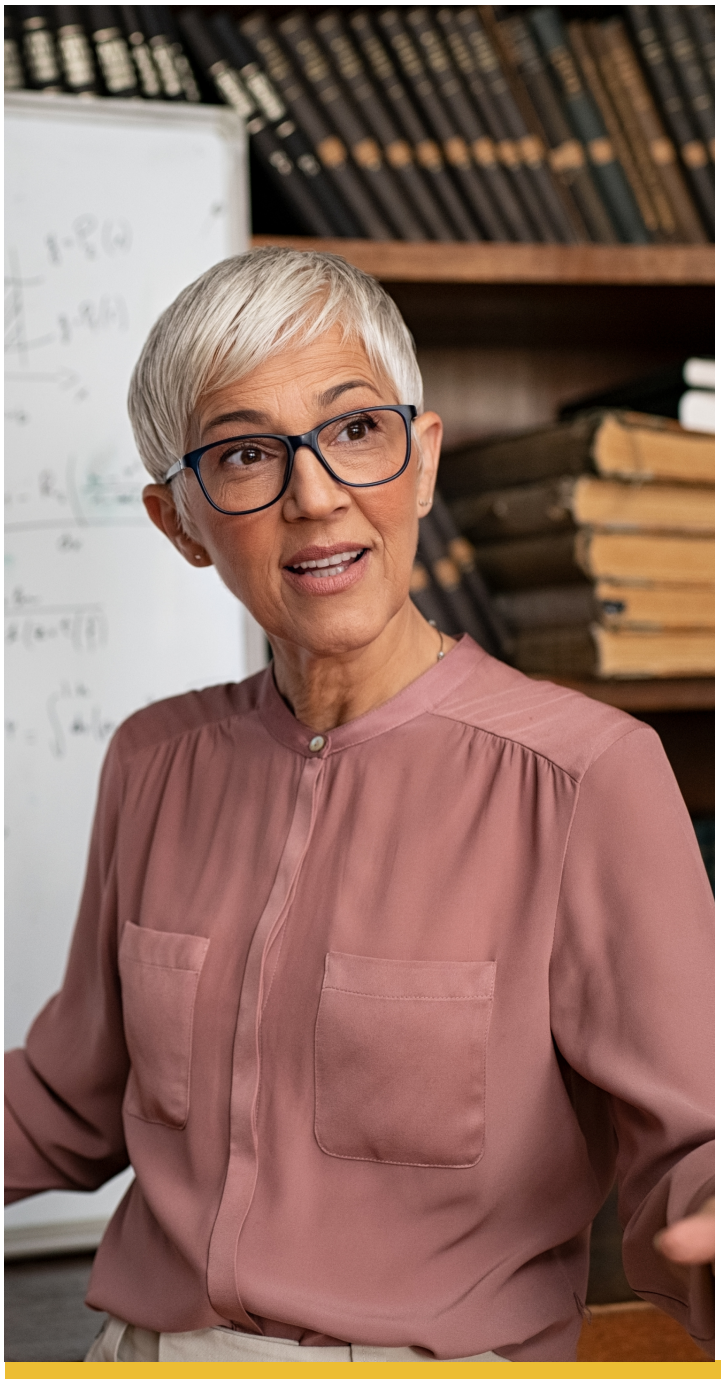


Open-ended responses on the student survey also discussed developmental education, with varying perspectives. Some students said they enjoyed their developmental courses, but others had strong negative reactions to being required to take them. One survey respondent replied:

> "I THOUGHT THE MATH I WAS TAKING WAS THE ONE THAT WAS REQUIRED. I WAS NOT TOLD IT WAS ONLY A PRE-REQ. NOW I HAVE 2 MORE MATH CLASSES TO TAKE WHICH ARE NOT RELEVANT TO MY DEGREE, VERY WASTE(FUL) OF MY TIME WHEN I COULD BE DOING ANOTHER CAD OR DRAWING CLASS."

A substantial body of research also challenges the premise that developmental education courses are supporting students’ successful completion of college-level math and English. As students must persist through a series of developmental courses before reaching the gateway course, there are many opportunities for stop-out, resulting in a low gateway course completion rate for those who begin in developmental courses, compared to those who start at the college level. Only 28 percent of students who start in developmental courses go on to pass the gateway course in English, and in math, only 11 percent do (Ganga, Mazzariello, and Edgecombe, 2018).

All public institutions in West Virginia were required to eliminate developmental education courses and instead place students into the gateway course with aligned support, a strategy known as corequisite support. The systemwide pass rate for gateway math increased by 39 percentage points and the gateway English pass rate increased by 16.4 percentage points since 2014 (Dennison, n.d.).



Institutions across the country have seen positive results after implementing a robust corequisite support model, increasing the completion rates of gateway math and English courses in the first semester, as well as increasing student momentum to graduation (Strong Start to Finish, 2020). Many state systems are providing resources and technical assistance to support institutions as they implement this fundamental shift in how students are served.

The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) adopted a policy in 2019 that required elimination of developmental education and full-scale adoption of corequisite support by Fall 2021. NSHE then created a task force to support the two-year implementation process, which provided in-depth technical assistance for math and English faculty charged with designing and teaching the corequisite courses, as well as advisors who are placing students into them.

What was clear from the focus groups and survey responses is that faculty and staff at the FCS institutions want to do what is in students' best interest. The only potential path forward that honors this commitment, is rooted in evidence, and is compliant with state law is the systemwide replacement of developmental courses with a corequisite support model.

RECOMMENDATION: THE FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM AND STUDENT SUCCESS CENTER SHOULD SUPPORT THE COLLEGES WITH SUBSTANTIAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO HELP WITH A MODIFIED APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTING SB 1720. THE FCS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD REPLACE PREREQUISITE, NONCREDIT DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION COURSES WITH A COREQUISITE SUPPORT MODEL TO ENROLL STUDENTS DIRECTLY INTO COLLEGE-LEVEL MATH AND ENGLISH AND PROVIDE SUPPLEMENTAL SUPPORT IN THE SAME TERM.

BELONGING

FINDING: STUDENTS REPORT A STRONG SENSE OF BELONGING AND AFFINITY FOR FACULTY ON CAMPUS, BUT ONE IN FOUR STILL DO NOT HAVE SOMEONE ON CAMPUS WHO THEY TRUST.

Trust lays the foundation for a student's sense of belonging at an institution, thus it is critical for students to have a relationship of trust with at least one member of the college staff or faculty.

Research from NSSE shows an equity gap in first-year students' trust of five categories of campus actors (Leadership, Student Services, Other staff, Faculty, Advisors), as Black students trust campus personnel ten percentage points less across all actor categories than other students. Students in this study, regardless of race, trusted advisors and faculty the most. Students who did not trust campus actors at all had a low sense of belonging, with the inverse being true for those who had high levels of trust.

Connection with a person on campus also influences life after graduation. According to the inaugural results from the Gallup-Purdue Index (now called the Gallup Alumni Survey), published in 2014, graduates who had at least one professor who made them excited about learning, cared about them as a person, and was a mentor, have more than double the odds of being engaged at work and thriving in well-being.

87%

OF STUDENTS AGREED THEY BELONG AT THEIR COLLEGE

81%

OF STUDENTS AGREED THAT THEIR COLLEGE CARES ABOUT THEM

Students in the FCS institutions are, in general, very connected to their campuses. Of those who responded to the survey, 87 percent agreed they belong at their college. Eighty-one percent agreed that their college cares about them. (Students ages 25-34 and those identifying as multi-racial/multi-ethnic were less likely to agree with these statements, and those involved in campus activities were more likely to do so.)

In open-ended survey responses, students were also highly complimentary of their professors, citing them as one thing the college does really well. One student said, "The teachers so far are amazing! They are very understanding, and they hope to see us do well." Another responded, "The teachers really care about the students."

Students also reported high levels of agency in terms of knowing where to find support when they needed it. Of the survey respondents, 86 percent knew where to find academic support and 72 percent knew where to find non-academic support. A smaller percentage, 60 percent, knew where to find basic needs support, though Black and Asian students were much more likely to report having this knowledge.

Despite these impressive results, there are still 10-20 percent of students who are lacking feelings of connection with their campus, and one in four students on the survey did not agree with the statement: There is someone who works at the college that I trust to help me.

FORTUNATELY, MANY OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN OTHER SECTIONS OF THIS REPORT WILL HELP TO CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE THE STRONG BELONGING RESULTS SEEN IN THIS STUDY. A CASELOAD ADVISING MODEL, ROBUST PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ADVISORS, AND HAVING A DEDICATED ONBOARDING COACH ARE ALL STRATEGIES THAT WILL GIVE STUDENTS ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS WITH CAMPUS PERSONNEL AND MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS BUILT ON TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING.

CONCLUSION



The FCS institutions have a clear desire and opportunity to revamp their approach to onboarding students, as a fundamental component of guided pathways. The new model should be holistic, student-centered, and equity-focused, as well as address specific issues related to communications, technology, advising, and policy. A more streamlined and intentional process, supported by well-trained and committed professionals on campus, has the potential to improve student outcomes and increase the already-strong sense of belonging at the institutions.

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Student-Ready
STRATEGIES