

# Charting a Course with MAAPS

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In 2016, the 11 University Innovation Alliance (UIA) campuses implemented a proactive advising model known as Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Student Success (MAAPS) to support engagement and success of limited-income and first-generation students.

Compared to more passive approaches, proactive advising is positively associated with various academic outcomes, especially among students who enter college underprepared (Abelman & Molina, 2002; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Swecker et al., 2013). A prior randomized control trial (RCT) study compared academic achievement measures of students offered the MAAPS intervention (in addition to the university’s primary academic advising services) with students who worked solely with their primary advisors. Results from this study showed significant differences between groups at only one institution (Alamuddin et al., 2018, 2019). However, findings from student surveys and focus groups did suggest that some students might be gaining beneficial skills and experiences from the intervention (Alamuddin et al., 2019).

At Ohio State, we further explored students’ perceptions of MAAPS advising to determine if there were recommendations for improving the design and implementation of this proactive advising approach. This brief examines students’ experiences

with MAAPS advisors, including how the program impacted their academic engagement, well-being, and overall satisfaction with the University. Namely, we asked: 1) What were students’ perceptions of the MAAPS advising intervention, and 2) In what ways, if any, did students believe MAAPS advising contributed to their academic success?

**Methods**

The study employed a qualitative methodological design. Participants must have been offered the MAAPS intervention in Fall 2016, earned over 90 credit hours<sup>1</sup>, and had not invoked FERPA. Recruitment messages were sent via email, explained the purpose of the study, and offered students a \$25 gift card as an incentive to participate. Ten students, listed in Table 1, agreed to participate in an hour-long, one-on-one, semi-structured interview with a member of the research team. Audio recordings of the interviews were professionally transcribed and analyzed using a two-stage, thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Campus Change*	First-Gen Status	Met In-Person with MAAPS Specialist
Adrianne	Black / African American	Female	Yes	First-Gen	Never
Anshu	Asian	Male	No	Continuing-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Jake	White	Male	Yes	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Jessica	White	Female	No	First-Gen	Limited
Katie	Asian	Female	No	First-Gen	Limited
Leah	Multiracial	Female	Yes**	Continuing-Gen	Never
Marissa	White	Female	Yes	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Nishant	Asian	Male	No	First-Gen	Never
Scott	Asian	Male	No	First-Gen	Multiple / Ongoing
Vicki	White	Female	No	Continuing-Gen	Limited

\*Campus change typically refers to students who started their degree programs at one of Ohio State’s regional campuses and moved to the flagship Columbus campus to complete their degree.

\*\*Changed from one regional campus to another.

<sup>1</sup>Students are considered fourth-year students if they have completed over 90 credit hours. Some, however, were in their fifth year at the university, and others had started graduate programs.

## Findings

Students reported mixed impressions of MAAPS advising. When they took the time to develop a relationship with their specialist, students believed these staff members played a crucial role in supporting their academic and personal success during college. Yet most participants reported limited interactions with the MAAPS team or never met with their advisor in-person. Based on these accounts, we focused on how students perceived strengths and limitations of the MAAPS initiative, looking specifically at how proactive communication provided a foundation for support, how MAAPS advisors helped students navigate hardship, and why some students decided to forgo the invitation to meet with MAAPS advisors.

### Proactive Communication Provides Foundation for Support

Students appreciated how MAAPS specialists initiated contact at key points in the semester to check-in, share important reminders, and invite students to visit their office for a consultation. Marissa, a campus change student, compared her communications with the MAAPS team to the confusing and frustrating advising structure at her prior campus. She said that soon after arriving on the Columbus campus, "I remember [my MAAPS specialist] emailing me to say, 'Hey, welcome to Columbus. I'm doing walk-ins. You can come say hi.'" This invitation prompted Marissa to schedule a visit and develop an ongoing relationship with her specialist. Indeed, for several students with whom we spoke, these targeted and frequent outreach messages led to a more personable and accessible advising experience.

Conversely, participants felt that the general advising structure at Ohio State required students to initiate communication if they needed guidance. As Vicki described it, "if you needed help with advising or anything like that, you definitely had to reach out and get it yourself. Because you only really see them when you need them. Which was fine for me, but I can imagine other people would've been more shy about it." Thus, the fact that specialists initiated contact with students who may have been unwilling to ask for help was consistently cited as a strength of the initiative.

### Navigating Hardships

For participants who met with their specialists and developed a working relationship, MAAPS advisors helped students navigate hardships at pivotal moments in their college careers. Anshu noted that around the time he changed majors, he felt a great degree of uncertainty about his academic progress. His specialist encouraged him to "talk it out," which "helped me get some clarity on why I [changed majors] and why my grades dropped." Similarly, Jake turned to his specialist for help during a time when he felt "like I was drowning" because his STEM coursework seemed overwhelming:

*[The specialist] reassured me that it is my choice whether to stay or leave, but he encouraged me to continue to take classes and that a lot of people retake courses. Especially in STEM. And my case was not an anomaly; it's a very normal experience for people to have.*

These comments illustrated how at critical junctures, MAAPS specialists used a distinctly holistic and counseling-oriented approach to help students overcome challenges and persist.

### Deciding to Forgo MAAPS Advising

Most participants did not accept the invitation to meet with their specialist or had limited interactions with the MAAPS team. Three themes helped explain students' decisions to forgo MAAPS advising; (a) the perception that they already had access to resources they needed to be successful in college, (b) students' self-assessments that they were already successful, and (c) the fact that many students did not understand the distinction between the role of their primary advisors and the role of MAAPS specialists.

Several participants accepted the initial invitation to meet with their MAAPS specialist, but quickly concluded that the program was not as beneficial as other resources. Some students, like Jessica and Vicki, preferred working with primary advisors and did not perceive MAAPS specialists to be as knowledgeable when it came to the nuances of their academic program. Others, namely Students of Color like Katie and Adrienne, cited the importance of working with staff members with shared identities and backgrounds. Katie appreciated the MAAPS team, but "felt more comfortable with [advisors from her first-generation scholars program] because they could relate more to me in terms of life experiences."

In addition to participants' belief that they already had the resources to succeed, students chose not to utilize MAAPS advising because they already saw themselves as successful college students. Thus, they had no use for a success specialist. After receiving his invitation to MAAPS advising, Nishant's reaction was, "Clearly, I've got my [self] together. I'm doing well, getting A's...I don't need this." Adrienne voiced a similar opinion when she said, "I just had this idea that if you weren't successful, then leverage them." Some students were able to clearly articulate their degree plans, navigate university bureaucracy, and achieve their academic goals, making the decision to forgo MAAPS advising understandable. At times, however, students' self-assurance was a barrier that prevented them from seeking what may have been valuable help.

### Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study suggest that MAAPS advising was most beneficial to students who felt uneasy asking for help or were otherwise disengaged from the university. Proactively connecting with these students during moments of transition or academic hardship was consistently cited as a strength of the initiative. However, students' perceptions also revealed notable limitations concerning the structure and delivery of the MAAPS approach.

First, although the university offers an array of resources, it is not always clear which students feel overburdened by outreach efforts and which feel neglected. Many of the students invited to participate in the MAAPS initiative believed they already had the support systems necessary to be successful in college. Thus, when designing future proactive advising models, it may be helpful to assess how students perceive their current engagement with the university and direct resources to those

students whose support system is lacking. Second, a student's first impression of MAAPS was critical in determining whether or not they choose to participate. Yet too often, outreach messages were impersonal, unclear, or students did not understand how MAAPS was meant to be distinct from the services provided by primary advisors. This confusion may have stemmed from the decision to structure the MAAPS initiative as separate from primary advising within students' colleges. Future proactive advising efforts may be most effective if these practices are offered by primary advisors, giving students a more clear and consistent point-of-contact. Lastly, while students appreciated the holistic support, MAAPS advisors were seen as less knowledgeable about the intimate details of students' majors. In other words, MAAPS advising was designed to provide more transformational support, but students often came to these meetings expecting insight into the administrative details of their course of study. Again, this concern could be addressed if primary advisors are trained to leverage more proactive and counseling-oriented approaches to the advising relationship, instead of asking students to visit two separate offices for academic support.

## Conclusion

In closing, findings illustrate how MAAPS advising provided a key means of support for some students, but the overall reach of the initiative was limited by administrative barriers. Although scholars have documented the various benefits of proactive advising, one of the greatest challenges for translating research to practice is the fact that there are many variables associated with how to design and implement an effective proactive advising approach. Moving forward, higher education administrators can use insight from this report, which centers students' perceptions, to improve the use of proactive advising models.

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