

## Summary

### More Robust Student Outreach Could Reduce Drop-out Rates

First-year students who received repeated emails encouraging them to participate in advising services — particularly in group advising sessions — were less likely to drop out, finds a new report published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

The study was conducted by researchers at Mohawk College and the Education Policy Research Initiative (EPRI) and funded through HEQCO's [Access and Retention Consortium](#), a partnership between HEQCO, education institutions and community groups that is evaluating the effectiveness of interventions intended to improve access to and persistence in higher education.

The report, *Academic Advising: Measuring the Effects of “Proactive” Interventions on Student Outcomes*, presents the findings of the second of two studies conducted by Mohawk and EPRI. The second phase of the study focused on evaluating new approaches to student outreach and academic advising.

#### Project Description

The study evaluates the use of so-called “proactive” advising services offered by Mohawk College to first-year students who entered the college in the fall of 2015. Proactive advising refers to more deliberate advising interventions that aim to enhance student motivation. It typically includes more frequent outreach, offering support before a student needs it, and fostering strong relationships between an adviser and a student.

The students were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment groups or a control group. All students were contacted before the start of the fall semester by email and informed about the student advising services that the college offered. The students in the treatment groups were also offered an opportunity to participate in advising sessions; one group was invited to participate in group advising sessions and the other treatment group was invited to participate in one-on-one sessions. Students in the treatment groups who didn't book an appointment received further email reminders and then a followup phone call from a student leader. The control group received only one email informing students about advising resources available to them and encouraging them to meet with a student success adviser.

#### Findings

Among the main findings of the study were:

- The offer of proactive group advising improved overall retention over one term by 2.5 percentage points, while one-on-one advising had no significant effect on retention rates.

- The offer of proactive advising improved retention rates for male students but had no significant effects on the retention rates of female students.
- Males who were offered either of the advising interventions were 4 percentage points less likely to leave early than those in the control group.
- Women who were offered group advising saw their adviser more frequently in the first semester compared to those in the control group.

In the [previous phase of the study](#), researchers developed and tested a predictive model to forecast student retention at Mohawk and assign students to three risk categories: high, medium and low. One of the purposes of the broader project was to estimate the effects of the advising initiatives overall and also across the different risk categories. The final study found no clear or consistent pattern for the effects of proactive advising on students when they were grouped by risk categories.

“Proactive communications and advising, particularly before school starts, is an important strategy to embed into regular operations because it makes a significant difference to student success,” the authors conclude. Proactive service delivery makes an especially important difference to male students, who are at greater risk of leaving college early. “Pairing this lesson with the ability to identify those most at risk through a predictive model developed in the previous stage of the research project offers a powerful opportunity to start making a meaningful difference to student success well before students arrive at the college,” the authors write.

Another important lesson that emerged from the study was that group advising sessions had a more significant impact on student success than one-on-one sessions. “Group advising represent a more efficient approach to service delivery, which allows administrators to support more students earlier in their time at the college,” the report says. This has positive implications for institutional budgets.

### **Further Research**

There is strong evidence that a comprehensive approach to student advising, including mandatory participation in advising programs and financial incentives such as bus passes, make the greatest impact on student success, the report says. The authors suggest that Mohawk could bundle some of these programs and services, or others it has already tested such as [Future Authoring](#), into a comprehensive suite and evaluate the effects.

The authors of *Academic Advising: Measuring the Effects of “Proactive” Interventions on Student Outcomes* are Ross Finnie, Tim Fricker, Eda Bozkurt, Wayne Poirier, Dejan Pavlic and Megan Pratt.