



Education
Advisory
Board

Community College Executive Forum

Advising for General Studies or Undecided Students



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Community College Executive Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

To flag and track undecided or exploratory applicants but not preclude them from federal financial aid, institutions should allow applicants to indicate an “undecided” status while still enrolling in a specific academic program. Contacts at all profiled institutions emphasize the challenges associated with undecided students who are “hidden in data.” Because undecided students often select a major in which they harbor little interest, or are unaware of general studies or liberal arts majors, advisors cannot track and consult these undecided students. To better catalogue undecided students, applications should include an additional undecided or exploratory status.

Establish advising milestones for undecided and general studies students prior to registration and throughout the semester. At all profiled institutions, advisors establish the first point of contact with undecided and general studies advisees before registration to establish students on an appropriate academic pathway. Students in the undecided and general studies categories often accumulate credits in their first or second semester that will not count toward an eventual major. To counter this trend, advisors explain the implications of certain credits before students register for classes; in these conversations, advisors also inform students of viable career pathways that correspond with majors and general college success skills (e.g., communication, time management).

Specialized professional advisors and tenured faculty advisors alike counsel undecided and general studies students at profiled institutions. Specialized professional advisors typically possess five to ten years of advising experience before accepting undecided students as advisees. Likewise, only tenured faculty members, having built up expertise pertaining to the unique challenges posed by this student population, tend to advise undecided students.

Advisors leverage faculty connections to flag students at risk for academic probation and the automation of early alert software systems to “flag” similar students. Because faculty members interact with students more often than advisors, they can more easily identify students who may require additional academic advising services. Software systems can quantitatively and automatically identify students who may require additional academic advising services by “flagging” them based on risk indicators such as low attendance, missing or incomplete assignments, and low grades.

2) Programs of Study

Undecided Applicants

Provide an Undecided or Exploratory Status Option on Applications

Because federal regulations require students to qualify as a “regular student” (i.e., a student enrolled in a specific program of study) to receive federal financial aid (e.g., Pell Grants), many admissions officers have dissuaded applicants from choosing “undecided” when applying or removed the option altogether. To mitigate the problems associated with this practice, contacts suggest adding a field on online applications to indicate an undecided or exploratory status, in addition to selection a program of study.



Undecided Students Remain Difficult to Track

Contacts at **Institution D** report that the most difficult challenge associated with undecided students is that undecided students become hidden in data in the absence of a real “undecided” option on applications. The inability to track these students hinders advisors abilities to contact these students and provide them with specialized services.

General Studies and Meta-Majors

Develop Meta-Majors to Better Define Academic and Career Pathways for General Studies or Undecided Students

In the absence of a real undecided option for students, institutions typically offer general studies or liberal arts programs. To address challenges with this system, some institutions have adopted “meta-majors” which bundle multiple majors with common courses and career paths (e.g., health, business, and engineering) while students decide on a major.¹

Examples of Meta-Major Solutions to General Studies Challenges

	Challenges	Solutions
Institution B offers over 30 tracks within the Liberal Arts major, including tracks as varied and specific as computer science, dance, food science, and renewable energy.	 General studies requirements are too broad for students who seek to explore various majors. Students often take courses that will not count toward their eventual major.	Meta-majors strike a balance between broad general studies courses and specific tracks within majors. While students decide, all courses in a meta-major will count.
	 Contacts report that online applicants often do not know that undecided students should enroll in general studies or liberal arts programs.	If admissions offices cannot inform online applicants of programs, meta-majors will better orient applicants with clearly indicated content areas and career-minded titles.
	 General studies students often lack a strong affiliation to a defined cohort or peer mentor group.	Students within meta-majors can build stronger and smaller cohorts. A more defined major will also aid in the identification of peer or faculty mentors.

1) “Rethinking Retention,” Stephen Mintz, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-beta/rethinking-retention>.

Design Meta-Majors Based on Career Pathways

Community colleges in Florida widely adopted several meta-major academic pathways presented in the state legislature in 2012 to aid undecided students. These eight meta-majors correspond to similar career pathways. At **Institution F**, each of the eight meta-majors includes English and mathematics “gateway courses” in addition to courses unique to the meta-major.

Meta-Major Profiles at *Institution J*

	Meta-Majors	Sample Required Courses	Suggested Occupations
	Arts, Humanities, Communications and Design	- Public Speaking - Argument and Communication - Humanities I & II	- Archivist/Curator - Editor/Writer - Graphic Artist - Copyrighter
	Business	- Introduction to Customer Service - Financial Accounting - Income Tax Accounting	- Accountant - Financial Advisor - Risk Manager - Actuary
	Education	- Intro to Technology for Educators - Educational Field Experience - Intro to the Teaching Profession	- Early Childhood Teacher - Guidance Counselor - Special Education Teacher
	Health Sciences	- Contemporary Social Problems - General Psychology - Physiology	- Health Information Technician - Paramedic - Registered Nurse (RN) - Pharmacist
	Industry, Manufacturing and Construction	- Physical Geology - General Chemistry - Environmental Geology	- Foreman - Industrial Machinery Mechanic - Building Inspector
	Public Safety	- College Composition - Argument and Persuasion - College Algebra	- Correctional Officer - Paralegal - Police Dispatcher - Intelligence Analyst
	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math	- Calculus for Management - General Chemistry - Energy and its Environmental Effects	- Nutritionist - Database Administrator - Web Master - User Support Technician

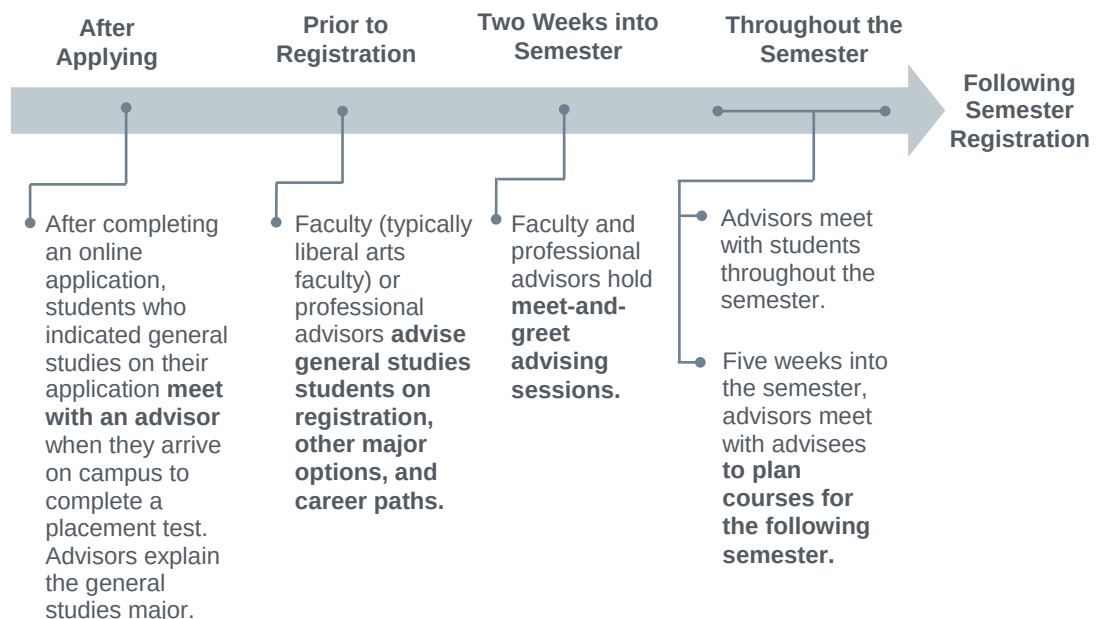
3) Advising Services

Advising Timeline

Advise Undecided Students Prior to Registration; Establish Advising Milestones throughout the Semester

At **Institution G**, advisors establish the first point of contact after general studies students apply to the institution online but before students complete placement tests on campus. General studies students must meet advising milestones throughout the semester (i.e., after applying, prior to registration, two weeks after registration, and before the next semester) to remain eligible for registration for the following semester.

Advising Timeline for General Studies Students at *Institution G*



Assigning Advisors

Assign Undecided or General Studies Students to Specialized Professional Advisors or Liberal Arts Faculty

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) surveyed 239 two-year institutions and asked respondents to indicate which advising model they employ.² The majority of participating institutions indicated the use of a shared split or self-contained academic advising model, which requires a combination of professional advisors and trained faculty to help students establish academic goals, choose courses and degree plans, and overcome barriers to success.

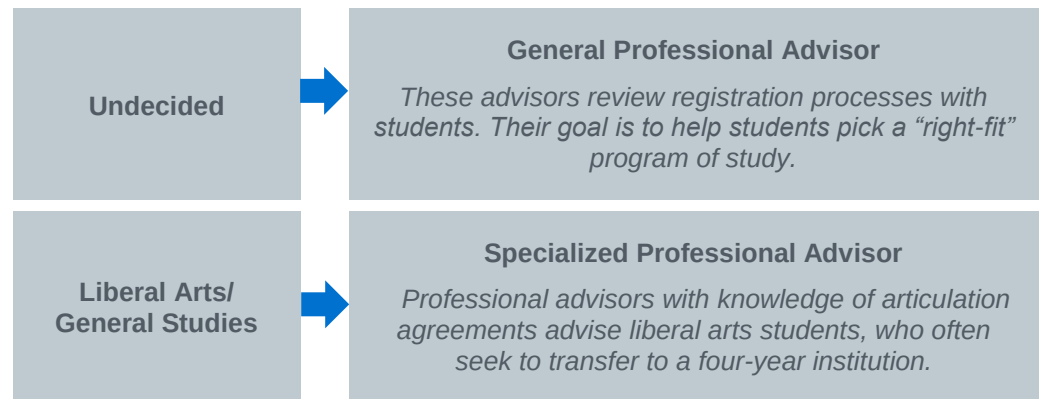
At **Institution B**, advising staff assign liberal arts students to a faculty advisor who will have that student in their class in the first semester. Contacts report that this relationship creates proximity and familiarity between the new advisor and student.

2) National Academic Advising Association (2011). "National Survey of Academic Advising," <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/2011-NACADA-National-Survey.aspx>.

Advising conversations help advisors (whether professional staff or faculty) understand students' interests; they possess sufficient expertise in the field to guide course selection and goal-setting. The shared split advising model (i.e., faculty members provide advising in academic discipline, and staff members take responsibility for a subset of students (e.g., undecided, pre-majors)) efficiently matches a student with his best-fit advisor based on the student's intended program of study and the advisor's area of expertise. The director of advising assigns students to advisors based on information from their initial college application.³

Channeling Students to Advisors Based on Intended Program of Study

Process Adapted from a Shared Split Advising Model



Advising Practices

Emphasize Career Pathways in Advising Sessions

In advising sessions with undecided or general studies students, advisors help students determine what they want to achieve in college and what they hope accomplish with their degree. Advisors at **Institution B** attempt to make these sessions feel informal to students to illicit candid conversations.

Advisors at **Institution G** first educate general studies students on the purpose of the degree they selected and the different paths associated with that degree. Then advisors can direct students to job shadowing opportunities in line with their major. For undecided students, advisors administer the “Focus 2” career planning test.⁴



Sample Questions for Advisees

- Why are you pursuing a degree?
- What do you hope to accomplish at this institution?
- What do you want to do with your career?

3) “Optimizing Academic Advising at Community Colleges,” Education Advisory Board, <http://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/community-college-executive-forum/white-papers/optimizing-academic-advising-at-community-colleges>

4) “Focus 2: A Career and Education Planning System for College Students,” www.focuscareer2.com

Employ Motivational Tactics to Encourage Persistence

Contacts at **Institution B** report that students primarily underperform in classes because they are unsure about their college goals and desired outcomes, in addition to concerns about major selection. To mitigate these feelings, advisors emphasize tangible examples of the risks of failing and evidence of other students' successes to illustrate the importance of finishing their degree.

Motivational Tactics Applied at Profiled Institutions

Explain Financial Consequences of Course Failure or Withdrawal

Advisors at **Institution H** reference that students' credit accumulation is relevant to financial aid and satisfactory academic progress; advisors can warn students when course withdrawal or failure will cause them to lose financial aid. Students reportedly pay more attention when they realize the connection between lack of financial aid and other aspects of their lives, such as their families.

Reference Students' Goals

Institution H advisors reference students' medium- and long-term academic and professional goals to remind them why academic success is important. For example, if a student mentioned a desired job or summer internship in a previous advising session, the advisor notes that the student will be more likely to achieve that goal if they reach an attainable short-term academic goal, such as a B grade in a course.

Relate Other Students' Successes

Institution C advisors leverage success stories of other students with personal and academic challenges that inspire advisees to overcome obstacles, graduate from college, and achieve professional success. Advisors secure permission to use such stories from advisees. One advisor employs a personal college transcript to show students that a low first-year GPA does not prevent them from graduation.

Coach Students in College Success Skills

Contacts at **Institution I** emphasize that at-risk and general studies students often do not understand how to navigate the administrative processes of college (e.g., deadlines for withdrawal from classes, when the bookstore buys back books).

Advisors should impart college success skills (e.g., course registration, communication) during advising sessions. Advisors at **Institution C** prepare students to navigate institutional materials such as course catalogs and registration systems and select classes for each semester on their own. Advisors do so through a demonstration of institution reference materials and through the creation of a specific, multi-semester plan for the student's selected major.

Administer Group or Skype Advising Sessions to Reach More Students with Less Resources

Contacts at all profiled institutions leverage group and Skype advising sessions during peak registration times and other high volume times during the semester to reach greater numbers of students.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Group and Skype Advising Sessions

	Benefits	Drawbacks
 Group Advising Sessions	✓ Advisors reach more students with less resources ✓ Students foster connections with a group cohort	✗ Students may feel uncomfortable talking about private matters in a group ✗ Group sessions may be harder to coordinate
 Skype Advising Sessions	✓ Commuter students can receive advising remotely ✓ Advisors and advisees can schedule advising sessions more easily without the need for in-person sessions	✗ Students may lack access to a computer or internet ✗ Students may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar with certain types of technology

Non-Academic Learning Communities

Group General Studies Advisees in Learning Communities Based on Affinities Other than Academic Interests

Advisors at **Institution B** often group advisees in learning communities based on affinities and characteristics other than academic major. These learning communities provide support groups, peer advising, and peer tutoring. Contacts attribute the success of these learning communities to the fact that often students connect with and support each other based on commonalities often unrelated to degree.

Non-Academic Learning Communities at *Institution B*



“Women in Transition”

This learning community supports women transitioning to an academic life. Community members collaborate with **Institution B’s** Women’s Resource Center to develop special skills.



GED Students

The GED community consists of students who received their GED before enrolling at the institution. This community may focus more on academic support.



Dual Enrollment Students

Dual enrollment students encounter unique challenges while still enrolled in high school. This learning community helps students connect with other students of the same age and situation.

Early Alert Systems

Automate Early Alert Systems for At-Risk Undecided and General Studies Students

Because faculty interact with students more often than advisors throughout the academic year, faculty can more easily identify students that show signs of academic struggle and may require additional support to prevent failure. Colleges use early alert software packages to facilitate communication between faculty who observe at-risk student behavior and advisors who can offer additional support and guidance.

Institution A uses both Starfish EARLY ALERT™ and SARS•ALRT™ software, which sync with the college's PeopleSoft student information system to automatically "flag" students with data indicating they may require extra attention, and also encourages faculty to create alert "flags" for students who display any of the following risk indicators:

Contacts at **Institution G** report that general studies students receive academic probation at a higher rate than other majors.

- Low attendance or excessive tardiness
- Inappropriate classroom behavior
- Lack of participation in or preparation for class
- Missing or incomplete assignments
- Low grades on quizzes or exams
- Academic dishonesty violation

Automated components are particularly useful for institutions without adequate staff to dedicate to student tracking and outreach.

Automated Early Alert Flags at Institution A



Last login for an online class: The system raises a flag for a student if they have not signed into an online class for five days. This flag disappears once the student logs in.



High alert flag: If three or more flags have been raised for one student, the system flags that student as "high alert." Advisors prioritize that student in outreach processes.

Alert 'Flags' Descriptions Early Alert System at Institution E

Severity of Alert Flag ↓	Flag Name	Description
	Assignment Concerns	Faculty concerns about a student's low scores on assignments
	Attendance Concerns	Faculty concerns about a student's poor attendance habits
	Low Participation	Faculty concerns about student engagement in the course
	Low Quiz/Test Scores	Faculty concerns about a student that received low scores on quizzes and tests
	Never Attended	Student never (or has not yet) attended the course section
	In Danger of Failure	Student requires immediate intervention to avoid failing the course

4) Advising Center Resources

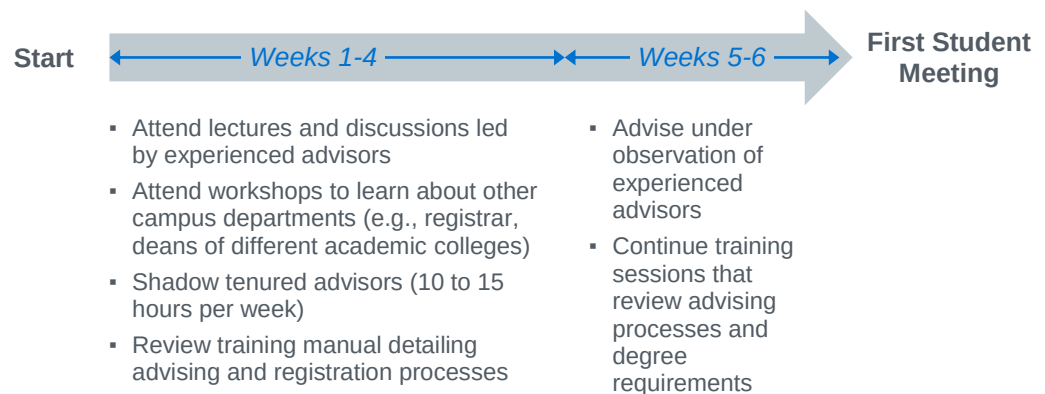
Training Professional Advisors

Recruit Tenured Professional Advisors to Assume Specialized Advisor Roles for General Studies or Undecided Students

Under a shared split model of advising, students who declare a general studies major may be assigned to a specialized professional advisor. Contacts report that these specialized professional advisors do not undergo additional training outside of the standard six-to-eight weeks of incoming training for these roles. Instead, the director of advising assigns experienced advisors to these roles; advisors with five-to-ten years of experience at the college typically possess sufficient knowledge of program pre-requisites and degree plans to assist interested students. In many cases, advisors who request this specialized designation possess previous professional experience in the industry.

All new professional advisors undergo formal training for six to eight weeks to understand the college's policies and procedures (e.g., course registration, degree audit). During this training period, the director of advising outlines the responsibilities and expectations of the advisor's role, including performance evaluation metrics. At most institutions, advisors must complete training prior to their first independent contact with a student.

New Professional Advisor Training Timeline



Training Faculty Advisors

Train New Faculty Advisors through Seminars, One-on-One Sessions, and Department Mentors

At **Institution B**, new faculty advisors receive training through different modalities during their onboarding process. Typically, faculty in the liberal arts subjects receive additional training for liberal arts or undecided students.

Training for New Faculty Advisors at *Institution B*

Generalist Training



Academic Advising Seminar

All new faculty receive a full year of monthly seminars, one of which includes academic advising strategies and responsibilities.



Faculty Mentor within Department

Each faculty advisor pairs with a tenured faculty member in the same department. These faculty mentors serve as an informal sounding board to assist new faculty member with their advisees.



Specialized Training



One-on-One Sessions with Professional Advisor

Faculty who serve as advisors to liberal arts or undecided students receive specialized, one-on-one training from professional advisors to understand the unique challenges their advisees face.

5) Assessment

Outcome Development

Define Measurable Student Learning Outcomes

Although contacts report difficulty in tracking outcomes from undecided students due to financial aid considerations, many assess general studies students to also gauge success among undecided students. To do so, committees of advisors, administrators, and faculty develop institution-wide student learning outcomes (SLOs) for academic advising. Examples of SLOs from advising include:

- Students understand their degree requirements
- Students can generate and interpret a degree audit
- Students can develop an appropriate schedule and register for classes
- Students understand and follow the academic rules of the university, college, and department
- Students know of and can access programs and experiences that enhance degree programs (e.g., internships, study abroad, student and professional organizations)

Informal assessment of SLOs can occur during advising appointments. Advisors compare students' schedules to degree plans, inquire about academic and campus resources the student uses, and assess students' understanding of academic policies and requirements.

Academic Advising Surveys

Leverage Surveys to Gather Data on Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

From the time advisors begin unsupervised one-on-one sessions, administrators randomly select students and solicit feedback on their sessions. Surveys based on SLOs can reveal more about the content of the advising session than surveys that seek a student's general opinion of an advisor. For example, a survey may ask fact-based questions regarding institutional policies to assess students' understanding of university operations.

This practice should continue throughout an advisor's career. Directors implement several strategies to combat student disinterest in post-session surveys:

- Administrative assistants prompt students to complete a survey in person immediately after their session
- Participants are entered in a raffle to incentivize survey completion
- Directors include five multiple choice questions at the top of the response sheet to collect basic feedback from students who do not complete the full form

Qualitative written responses that ask the student to assess intangible indicators such as helpfulness and likeability often provide the most information. Directors of counseling or advising should examine student surveys and report trends to staff. To ensure honesty, inform students that staff will not see their responses.

Sample Academic Advising Feedback Survey⁵

Questions in **bold** specifically pertain to undecided or general studies students who receive academic advising.

Survey of Academic Advising		Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
1.	General quality of academic advising that you have received	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.	Information about common career paths associated with majors and programs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.	Information about deadlines related to institutional policies and procedures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.	Availability of academic advising	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.	Amount of time in each advising session	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
6.	My advisor was prepared for my appointment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7.	My advisor listened to my concerns	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8.	My advisor seemed genuinely interested in me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.	My advisor referred me to appropriate campus resources as needed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10.	My advisor clearly communicates what is my responsibility and what she can do for me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11.	My advisor is helpful in discussing my career plans and goals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12.	My advisor helped me select the right major based on my goals and interests	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13.	I feel confident that my advisor will follow up on any unresolved issues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Use Metrics to Identify Areas for Improvement of Academic Advising

Although contacts do not recommend the evaluation of individual advisors through quantitative data, certain metrics can highlight areas for improvement across the academic advising program. Some metrics demonstrate trends in the advising process (e.g., length of advising visits). Other metrics, such as program retention or major declaration rates, reflect students' achievement of learning outcomes. Use of these metrics to enforce programmatic alterations ensures that academic advising services remain in a continuous cycle of review and improvement:

- Course grades or grade point averages in specific programs
- Rate of follow-through with action plans
- Rate of response to advisor meeting requests (applicable to proactive advising)
- Retention or persistence rates in specific programs
- Referrals to student services
- Number of students who fail to graduate on-time due to degree audit mistakes
- Major declaration and change rates at various academic checkpoints
- Frequency and length of advising visits

5) "Academic Advising for Exploratory Students," Education Advisory Board, <http://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/academic-affairs-forum/custom/2014/6/academic-advising-for-exploratory-students>.

6) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- How do advising centers or faculty advisors orient undeclared students to advising services?
- What advising services do centers or faculty advisors provide to undeclared students?
- How do advisors help undeclared students feel connected to the institution without a defined academic pathway or community?
- How do advising strategies differ for students who overlap with other high-risk sub-populations (e.g., developmental education, academic probation, financial aid)?
- Do institutions rely on professional advisors, faculty advisors, or both? Why do these constituencies participate in advising?
- If institutions use both professional and faculty advisors, how are their responsibilities divided?
- How do advising centers track usage of services among undeclared students?
- How do advising centers define and evaluate success in advising undeclared students?
- What challenges have advisors faced when advising undeclared students, and how have they overcome these challenges?

Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Education Advisory Board Forum Library: www.eab.com
“Academic Advising for Exploratory Students,” <http://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/academic-affairs-forum/custom/2014/6/academic-advising-for-exploratory-students>
- “Optimizing Academic Advising at Community College: Guiding Students through College to Completion,” <http://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/community-college-executive-forum/white-papers/optimizing-academic-advising-at-community-colleges>
- “Focus 2: A Career and Education Planning System for College Students” <https://www.focuscareer2.com/>
- National Academic Advising Association (2011). “National Survey of Academic Advising.”
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): <http://nces.ed.gov>

The Forum interviewed academic advisors at community colleges.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
Institution A*	Midwest	16,600 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Urban-serving Single Campus
Institution B	Northeast	2,200 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Suburban-serving Single Campus
Institution C*	Midwest	7,200 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Rural-serving Single Campus
Institution D*	Northeast	4,700 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Rural-serving Medium
Institution E*	Mid-Atlantic	51,800 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Suburban-serving Multicampus
Institution F**	Southeast	29,800 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Suburban-serving Multicampus
Institution G	Northeast	2,500 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Rural-serving Medium
Institution H*	Midwest	19,200 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Urban-serving Single Campus
Institution I*	Northwest	6,700 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Rural-serving Large
Institution J**	Southeast	13,500 (all undergraduate)	Associates—Public Rural-serving Large

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

* Institutions profiled through prior EAB research

**Institutions profiled through secondary research