

# Efficacy of Intrusively Advising First-Year Students via Frequent Reminders for Advising Appointments

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*Intrusive advising has been frequently used to encourage or require at-risk or probationary students to attend advising sessions. The efficacy of intrusive advising targeted to all students has received little attention. We implemented a case-control experiment with 501 first-year students at a large, urban, state university to test the efficacy of nonmandated intrusive advising designed to encourage advising session attendance. Students in three academic units were randomly assigned to outreach or no outreach conditions. Those in the outreach group received a series of reminders to schedule advising appointments. Results suggest intrusive advising was successful in increasing the probability students would schedule and keep an advising appointment during their first semester of college enrollment and in shortening the time until that appointment was held. Implications for broad implementation of intrusive advising are discussed.*

**KEY WORDS:** adjustment to college, advising approaches, freshmen, intrusive advising, retention

**Relative Emphasis:** research, practice, theory

Intrusive advising has emerged in the higher education literature as one of the most effective tools to help and ultimately retain challenged and at-risk students. Definitions and strategies vary somewhat (Earl, 1988; Glennen, 1975, 1983; Varney, 2007), but intrusive advising typically involves some combination of recommended or required advising sessions for students on a regular basis; a predetermined set of goals to be accomplished in advising sessions; and the dual objectives of a) increasing the motivation and academic success of students and b) reducing attrition from the college or university. Most intrusive advising strategies target at-risk or probationary students.

In this study, we focused on implementation of one aspect of intrusive advising: the use of frequent recommendations and reminders for students

to make and keep academic advising appointments. Scholars agree that advising sessions, even those to which students are mandated or urged to attend, are helpful (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Vander Schee, 2007). Students subsequently report being pleased with intrusive advising sessions (Johnson & Morgan, 2005; Vowell & Karst, 1987). This set of findings raises a critical question: Why not use intrusive strategies to urge all students, even those in good standing and not at risk of attrition or failure, to attend advising sessions? Intrusive advising has been used primarily for at-risk students, but if advising helps all students, why not encourage advising broadly and intrusively?

To test the efficacy of intrusive advising strategies on a relatively large and diverse student body, we developed a case-control experiment targeting 501 first-year students at a large state university (note that previous tests of intrusive advising have typically used pre-post experimental designs and much smaller sample sizes). We implemented intrusive strategies (i.e., repeated E-mails and telephone calls) with a randomly selected half of the sample, encouraging but not requiring the students to make and attend advising appointments with their assigned professional advisor. We did not focus solely on probationary or at-risk students. With the rationale that student retention, success, and satisfaction in college are facilitated by advising for all students and not just at-risk populations, we targeted all first-year students in three academic units (pre-nursing, psychology, and undeclared).

Our study had two primary hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that students who were randomly assigned to the outreach group and therefore exposed to intrusive advising techniques would have a higher rate of advising appointments and would schedule appointments earlier in the term than the non-outreach group. Second, we hypothesized that intrusive advising would be effective across gender, race, age, major, and financial aid status.

## Methods

### Setting

The research was conducted at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a large state university in an urban setting. A large portion of first-year students at UAB are from North and Central Alabama, and approximately 35% have ethnic minority backgrounds, primarily African American. UAB uses a decentralized professional advising system, and professional advisors in pre-nursing, psychology, and undeclared majors participated in this research program.

### Participants

Five hundred one students who entered UAB in Fall 2007 and declared a major as pre-nursing ( $n = 180$ ), psychology ( $n = 60$ ), or undeclared ( $n = 261$ ) were included. This group included 174 (35%) men, 318 (64%) women, and 9 (2%) students who declined to report their gender. The sample was ethnically diverse, including 312 (62%) White non-Hispanic individuals, 138 (28%) African American non-Hispanic individuals, 19 (4%) Asian Pacific Island individuals, and 32 (6%) others who were Hispanic, multiracial, of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, or who chose not to report their race. In other respects, the sample was rather homogeneous. Most of the sample was of traditional college age (mean age = 19.06 years;  $SD = 1.22$ ; range = 16–32 years). Over 90% were from Alabama and almost 75% were receiving financial aid to attend college.

### Protocol

Students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: outreach or no outreach. Students in both conditions received all normal university messages, announcements, and programs concerning advising. These messages include frequent reminders, through various channels, about the importance of regular advising sessions. The outreach group received extra intrusive advising in a series of three steps. First, during the 3rd week of the 15-week class term, students in the outreach group who had not yet arranged an appointment with their professional advisor were sent an E-mail inviting them to do so. Second, during the 4th week of classes, students who had not yet arranged an appointment were telephoned by administrative support staff, who reminded the student to schedule an advising appointment and who would set an appointment upon the student's request. Third and finally, during the 5th week of classes, the advisors themselves called all students who had not yet set an

appointment. Again, appointments were scheduled immediately upon request. Students in the no outreach group did not receive any supplemental intrusive advising strategies but were exposed to various university-wide programs designed to encourage advising appointments (as were those in the outreach condition). Statistical comparisons between the outreach and no outreach conditions yielded no differences on gender, age, race, major, or financial aid status between the two groups, suggesting randomization to groups was effective.

### Advising

Advising sessions with students in both groups were conducted by one of the professional advisors assigned to first-year students in the majors of interest. Sessions covered logistical issues of course selection and registration as well as discussion on topics such as major selection, short- and long-term goals, career options, college success strategies, adjustment and transitional issues, and how to gain the most from the college experience.

## Results

The study was designed to test two primary hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that intrusive advising, directed toward all first-year students, would increase the rate of advising appointments and also shorten the time within which the appointments were scheduled within the term. Second, we expected intrusive advising to yield similar success for students across gender, major, age, race, and financial aid status.

With regard to our first objective, 90% of students in the outreach group made and kept an advising appointment, but only 78% of students in the no outreach group did so. The difference was statistically significant:  $F(1, 499) = 13.06, p < .01$ . In addition, students in the outreach group scheduled an appointment 43.69 days into the term, on average, while students in the no outreach group did not schedule an appointment until 52.57 days into the term on average. The difference was statistically significant:  $F(1, 420) = 14.74, p < .01$ . Students who did not make an appointment were omitted from this analysis.

Following these findings, we investigated our second question, which addressed whether covariates might influence the results, using logistic (have appointment or not) and linear (time to appointment) regression equations (see Table 1). The first row of Table 1 shows univariate analyses with regard to predicting advising appointments. Replicating analysis of variance results, we found that the randomized

condition was a strong predictor of both appointment ( $t = 16.46, p < .01, R^2 = .03$ ) and time to appointment (Wald  $\chi^2 = 12.24, p < .01$ ).

The second through fifth rows of Table 1 show results of multivariate analyses that included both condition and single covariates in the model. As shown, including gender, age, race, major, and financial aid status in the models did not impact the strength of prediction by condition (multilevel categorical variables were dummy coded for these analyses, with race divided into African American, White, and other). In other words, even after controlling for variance from individual covariates, we found that random assignment to the outreach versus no outreach group remained a strong and statistically significant predictor of scheduling and keeping advising appointments as well as the time into the semester when those appointments were made.

As shown on the last line of Table 1, when all covariates were included together in multivariate models, the randomized condition of outreach versus no outreach remained the strongest predictor in both models. Financial aid status (Wald  $\chi^2 = 9.69, p < .01$ ) also emerged as a significant predictor of whether a student made an appointment: Seventy-four percent of those who did not receive financial aid and 88% who received financial aid held appointments. Dummy coded major emerged as a predictor of days until an appointment ( $t = 3.14; p < .01; t = -3.47; p < .01$ ). The average days until appointments made for pre-nursing, psychology, and undeclared students were 50.00, 37.52, and 48.86, respectively.

## Discussion

Results of this experiment suggest that intrusive advising strategies designed to encourage but not require first-year students to attend advising sessions are successful. A simple series of E-mails and telephone calls significantly increased the probability

that students would schedule an advising appointment during their first semester in college, and the approach was efficacious across gender, race, major, age, and financial aid status. In developing this intrusive advising strategy, our goal was to create a system that was easy and cost-efficient to implement. Like most universities, UAB has limited financial and temporal resources, but stakeholders believe in connecting to students and encouraging them to attend advising sessions (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). Today's computer technology makes sending bulk E-mails to groups of students, who are identified through simple database searches, a relatively easy task; this was the first step of our intrusion. For students who did not respond to typical university reminders about advising or the E-mail intrusion, administrative support staff made follow-up telephone calls. If the first telephone call proved unsuccessful, advisors themselves called the students. By the start of the following term, just over 90% of the students in the outreach group had held an advising appointment.

Advisors face a difficult task, especially with first-year students (Dudek, Marriner, & Herreid, 2005). A common but unfortunate pattern is that students rush to see their advisors during registration windows, leading to brief and nonproductive advising sessions focused on registration logistics but not broader topics. There are a few solutions to this problem. One option is to require advising appointments, preventing registration or release of grades until the appointments are kept. This option, which is used at some universities, especially with at-risk or probationary students, sometimes leads to an unhealthy relationship between advisor and student. Students perceive advising as a mandatory requirement rather than as an opportunity to maximize their potential for success in college.

**Table 1** Descriptive data and regression models predicting advising appointments by condition (1 = no outreach, 2 = outreach;  $N = 501$ )

	Appointment (1 = no, 2 = yes)		Time to Appointment (days)		
	Odds Ratio	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	$t$
No Covariates	0.40	0.24, 0.67**	-8.88	2.31	-3.84**
Controlling for gender	0.37	0.22, 0.62**	-8.97	2.32	-3.86**
Controlling for major	0.40	0.24, 0.66**	-9.04	2.28	-3.96**
Controlling for age	0.41	0.24, 0.68**	-8.93	2.31	-3.86**
Controlling for race	0.41	0.24, 0.68**	-8.78	2.32	-3.79**
Controlling for financial aid	0.41	0.24, 0.68**	-8.88	2.32	-3.83**
All covariates included	0.40	0.24, 0.68**	-9.00	2.30	-3.91**

Note. \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

Another option, and the one we chose with our intrusive advising system, is to encourage but not require advising appointments. This encouragement occurred through frequent reminders during the early part of the term. It resulted in a higher rate of advising appointments. It also spread advising appointments throughout the term, allowing advisors to spend more time with students. Extra time during advising sessions permitted advisors to cover important registration logistics but also to discuss critical topics such as career development, major selection, goal development, college success strategies, and most important for this population of first-year students, adjustment and transitional issues. It allowed professional advisors to be genuine advisors with educational planning rather than routine course planners and schedulers.

We did not alter the curriculum or topics discussed during advising sessions (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). We allowed the professional advisors to use their judgment in choosing curricula tailored to the needs of the students. We did, however, address aspects of the pedagogy of advising (National Academic Advising Association, 2006), primarily by encouraging the development of a healthy student-advisor relationship that might yield trust between student and advisor, valuable mentorship of the student, and ultimately a student who is happier, more successful, and less likely to withdraw from college. In other words, the intrusive strategies used to encourage advising appointments ultimately were designed to improve the pedagogical opportunity for professional advisors to interact with students.

In closing, we mention strengths and limitations of our work. The most prominent strength, we believe, is the methodology of our experiment. We used a randomized case-control design with a large sample across academic units. We emphasize that this study targeted all first-year students rather than focusing solely on probationary or at-risk students, that all advising was done by professional advisors rather than faculty members, and that the study was conducted at a large urban state university serving a diverse student body.

Like all research, however, the study had limitations. Although we included students in three majors, we neglected large swaths of the student body. It is unclear if our findings would be replicated in smaller colleges, in settings with faculty advisors instead of professional advisors, or when different means of intrusion (e.g., more E-mail and less telephone calling) were implemented. The long-term effects of broadly targeted intrusive

advising on student retention, success, and satisfaction are also unknown. We encourage future researchers to investigate some of these issues.

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## Authors' Notes

*Thanks to Doug O'Neil for computer database assistance.*

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