

 SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Exploring the Impact of Advising Frequency and Free College Scholarships on Community College Student Persistence Rates: A Racial Group Analysis

By Michael Goemans, Brian Kapinos, and Steve McDowell

This quantitative study investigates the relationship between academic advising frequency, free college scholarships (FCS), and student persistence in a statewide community college system. Using data from more than 34,000 students, the study examines how frequent advising and FCS participation influence persistence, with particular attention to race and enrollment status.

Results show that students who attended multiple advising sessions were 3.68 times more likely to persist than those without advising. Additionally, FCS recipients were 2.59 times more likely to persist than non-recipients. The combined effect of frequent advising and FCS acceptance resulted in the highest persistence rates.

Race-based analysis revealed disparities, with Black and Hispanic/Latino students starting with lower persistence rates but showing significant gains from increased advising. The study highlights the importance of proactive advising and financial aid programs in supporting student success, particularly for underrecognized populations, and provides evidence-based recommendations for improving equity in community colleges.

Financial aid is available to qualifying students through the annual completion of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) and based on demonstrated financial need. Federal financial aid is provided under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, including the Federal Pell Grant and Federal Direct Loan programs. During the 2020–21 school year, 43.7 percent of all undergraduate students attended a community college, where about 32 percent of community college students received Pell Grants, and 13 percent received federal student loans (U.S. Department of Education 2025).

States often use the demonstration of financial need through the FAFSA® to determine eligibility for localized financial aid programs. According to the Annual Survey from the National Association of State Student Grant & Aid Programs, states were awarded \$7.9 billion in primary need-based grant programs for undergraduate students in 2023 (National Association of State Student Grant & Aid Programs 2025). Alongside this, research has shown that financial aid can also have a profound impact on community college student success, including increased persistence, credit completion, and graduation rates (Chen and Hossler 2017; Mendoza, Mendez, and Malcom 2009).

Alongside financial aid impacting community college student success metrics, the frequency of advising appointments also plays a significant role in ensuring that community college students receive the support they need to be successful (Goemans and Kapinos 2024). Regular interactions with academic advisors can help students stay informed about deadlines, maintain their eligibility, and troubleshoot any issues that arise, ultimately enhancing their opportunities for success (Hawthorne, Zhang, and Cooper 2022; Karp, *et al.* 2021). This, in turn, can positively impact their persistence, credit completion, and overall academic success (Goemans and Kapinos 2024; Klepfer and Hull 2012).

Therefore, this quantitative study aims to investigate the association between the frequency of advising appointments and various student success outcomes, including the impact of students' acceptance of a free college scholarship (FCS) as part of their overall financial aid package within a community college setting. By pro-

viding evidence-based insights, this research can guide community college practitioners in optimizing their advising practices to better support students' educational and financial needs, ultimately improving their success and increasing equitable access to higher education.

Literature Review

Academic Advising

Academic advising has long been recognized as a critical component of the student experience in higher education, particularly in relation to its impact on persistence and student success (Chiteng Kot 2014; Troxel, *et al.* 2021). The role of academic advising has evolved beyond merely assisting students in course selection. It has evolved into a holistic support system that fosters academic, personal, and career development, especially for community college students, many of whom face unique challenges such as being first-generation students or coming from underrepresented backgrounds (Bahr 2008; Donaldson, *et al.* 2016; Fosnacht, *et al.* 2017).

Several studies have demonstrated that regular interaction with academic advisors positively correlates with increased persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Bettinger and Baker 2014; Goemans and Kapinos 2024; Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby 2013). Studies by Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013) and Goemans and Kapinos (2024), for example, found that students who had at least one meeting with an academic advisor were significantly more likely to persist to the next semester. Similarly, Klepfer and Hull (2012) emphasized that frequent advising contacts, particularly in two-year institutions, increase the likelihood of persistence by 53 percent, highlighting the critical role advising plays in student retention.

Despite these promising practices, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific effects of advising frequency on various student success outcomes in community colleges. Additionally, there is an increasing focus on free college tuition programs, particularly for community college students, which has prompted significant research into their role in enhancing access to education and improving student persistence.

Financial Aid and Free Tuition Programs

Free tuition programs are typically categorized as either “last-dollar” programs, which cover remaining tuition costs after other forms of aid are applied, or “first-dollar” programs, which pay tuition costs upfront (Buchanan and Wilson 2017). Davidson, Ashby-King, and Sciulli (2018) underscored the success of initiatives, like the Tennessee Promise, which have been shown to boost college enrollment and completion rates of the FAFSA®. By addressing the initial cost of college tuition, these programs make higher education more affordable, especially for low-income students. However, last-dollar programs may overlook additional expenses, such as textbooks, transportation, and living costs, which continue to be significant barriers to persistence and graduation.

Denning (2017) further supports the idea that lowering tuition fees can drive up community college enrollment, demonstrating that even a modest \$1,000 reduction in tuition costs can lead to a 5 percent increase in enrollment. The research underscores the sensitivity of community college students to price changes, demonstrating that reducing financial barriers can lead to improved access. Despite their success in boosting enrollment, the impact of free tuition programs on student persistence and degree completion is less definitive.

According to Davidson, Ashby-King, and Sciulli (2018), programs like the Tennessee Promise have shown some promising short-term improvements in persistence, but their long-term effect on graduation rates remains uncertain. McKinney and Burrridge’s (2015) research adds complexity to the conversation by investigating the role of student loans in persistence. Their findings revealed that while loans can positively influence first-year persistence, they often have a detrimental effect long term. Students who take out loans during their first year are more likely to drop out within six years, largely due to the financial burden of accumulating debt. This suggests that while financial aid programs, such as free tuition or loans may increase access, they do not fully address the broader financial and non-academic challenges that impede student persistence, including rising living costs and unforeseen financial burdens. Further literature is also suggestive

of detrimental consequences for academically underprepared, low-income students when borrowing occurs without proper caution (Luna-Torres, *et al.* 2019).

Study Purpose

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between the frequency of advising appointments and student persistence for students who accepted a free college scholarship (FCS) as part of their overall financial aid package within a community college setting. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What differences can be observed when compounding the variables of advising appointment frequency and the acceptance of a free college scholarship (FCS) while evaluating persistence rates for students in a community college setting?
- **RQ2:** If RQ1 demonstrates strong statistical associations between the aforementioned variables, are there observable differences when incorporating reported race for students in a community college setting?

Setting

This study was conducted at a multicampus, statewide community college institution from the Fall 2023 semester through the start of the Spring 2024 semester. The institution has more than twelve primary locations that enroll, on average, 30,000–40,000 credit-seeking students in total per academic term. Each of the primary campus locations staffs an advising office comprised of full-time, professional, primary role academic advisors. Staffing in each office was primarily dependent on the full-time student enrollment at that campus, with staffing numbers varying between four and 26 professional primary role advisors per location at the start of the Fall 2023 semester.

Each semester, all newly registered, credit-seeking students are assigned to an academic advisor based on their program of study. Primary role advisors average an actively registered caseload of between 250 and 350 students. After advising assignments are established,

advisors are responsible for introducing themselves to their advisees and welcoming them to the institution. Conducted primarily by email, their outreach aims to provide relevant information, including their physical office location, email and phone contact information, and the primary services offered by the academic advising office. Throughout the semester, academic advisors routinely communicate with their advisees by email, phone, and through in-person conversations about a variety of subject matters. Discussion topics may include access to on- and off-campus holistic resources, academic progress, academic and career goal planning, and course registration.

For this study, the researchers defined an advising appointment as a meaningful contact between an academic advisor and a student that occurs in-person, over the phone, or through a virtual video conferencing platform (*e.g.* WebEx, Microsoft Teams). Throughout the semester, advisors regularly broadcast their office hours in an effort to increase awareness amongst the student population about their services and operational hours. Office hours are dedicated times throughout a given week when advisors are available for scheduled or drop-in advising appointments. While advisors may have also conducted brief check-ins with students throughout the semester, formal advising appointments offered longer, devoted periods of time where advisors and students could discuss numerous topics that may have required significant dialogue, attention, and action steps. Although appointment lengths varied depending on the topic(s) discussed, appointments typically averaged 30–45 minutes.

Additionally, the researchers defined a free college scholarship (FCS) as a state-funded, last-dollar-in, tuition assistance program. The institution offers a free college scholarship (FCS) as a means of additional funding that covers the gap between accepted students' federal and state grants and the tuition and mandatory fees they incur each fall and spring semester. To qualify for a free college scholarship (FCS), students must meet the following criteria:

- Be a resident of the state in which the institution is located

- Be a high school graduate
- Have completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®)
- Satisfied all financial aid requirements set forth by the institution
- Be enrolled in a degree or credit-bearing certificate program
- Have registered for a minimum of six-plus credits per semester
- Remain in good academic standing according to the institution's academic standing policies

Further, this program offers a refundable award of \$500 (full-time) or \$300 (part-time) per semester if an eligible student already has their tuition and mandatory fees covered by existing grant aid, such as a Federal Pell Grant. This refundable award is intended to provide additional financial assistance toward a student's indirect costs of attendance not billed by the institution, such as food, housing, transportation, and other miscellaneous expenses.

Participants

The researchers used the data collected during the fall 2023 semester through the CRM platform and the institution's enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. Data from the CRM platform included all credit-earning students who completed one or more advising appointments during the Fall 2023 semester, including the metrics associated with those appointments. Associated appointment metrics included the date and times of the appointment, location, modality, and topics discussed. Data from the ERP system included all enrolled, credit-earning students during the Fall 2023 semester and pertinent demographic and financial data, including their legal sex, race, and their free college scholarship (FCS) status. Combined, these lists provided the researchers with a comprehensive data set that resulted in the formation of three student groups: students with no completed advising appointments, students with one completed advising appointment, and students with multiple completed advising appointments. Upon reviewing the results of Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby

(2013), which demonstrated an effect on student retention based on increased frequency of student contact with advisors, the researchers decided groupings of zero, one, two or more advising appointments would be appropriate for this study. Table 1 illustrates the total population of students analyzed by the researchers for this study ($n=34,882$), along with the breakdown of the identified student groups.

Procedure

Academic advisors utilized the CRM platform to document advising appointments with students. A tailored advising appointment form was made available in the CRM platform to allow advisors to capture the germane details of each student-advisor interaction, including the student's name and institutional identification number, the appointment date and times, meeting location and modality of the appointment, pertinent notes from the appointment regarding topics discussed, and any relevant action steps for either the student or advisor.

After the fall semester concluded, the data collected on the CRM platform was exported and merged with the secondary data set that was exported from the institution's ERP system. These merged data sets allowed the researchers to determine what, if any, patterns existed among the three identified student groups.

Measures

For this study, the researchers evaluated the persistence rates for each student group as a dichotomous factor; students either persisted or they did not. The researchers considered a student "persisted" if they registered for any number of credits for the Spring 2024 semester at the institution or, if they graduated at the end of the Fall 2023 semester. In both circumstances, a student progressed with their academic goals, either moving closer to, or achieving, program completion. In the absence of accomplishing either of those milestones, a student was categorized as "did not persist." The researchers were not able to verify whether students persisted at another postsecondary institution for this

specific study. Students who may have transitioned to another institution were labeled as "did not persist."

Race was categorized into one of five options: white, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or various/multiple. The various/multiple category in-

TABLE 1 ► Advising Appointment Count by Semester

Groups: Students with...	Totals
No Advising Appointments	16,125
One Advising Appointment	10,730
Multiple Advising Appointments	8,027
Total	34,882

cluded the race values of American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, two or more races, and race and ethnicity unknown. The various/multiple category was established as a result of the significantly smaller n values present for each of the aforementioned reported race values.

The acceptance of a free college scholarship as part of a student's overall financial aid package was also categorized as a dichotomous value: yes or no. Students either accepted the scholarship, were not offered the scholarship, or did not accept the scholarship.

Results

The researchers evaluated whether there were strong statistical associations between the compounding variables of advising appointment frequency and the acceptance of a free college scholarship (FCS) in relation to student persistence rates. Table 2 (on page 66) displays the descriptive statistics crosstabulation results comparing the student groups to the persistence data categories while controlling for the presence of a free college scholarship (FCS) as part of a student's overall financial aid package. Expected count values for the student groups were again included in the testing, as well as the count values within each student group expressed as a percentage of the total n value for the group.

Table 3 illustrates that the Pearson chi-square asymptotic significance (two-sided) value, or p -value, was <0.001 for both student scholarship groups. To-

TABLE 2 ► Descriptive Statistics Crosstabulation Results Comparing Student Groupings and Persistence with Free College Scholarship (FCS) as a Controllable Variable

FCS Status	Appointment Frequency	Did Not Persist			Persisted			Total
		n		% (Actual)	n		% (Actual)	
		Actual	Expected		Actual	Expected		
No FCS	Never	4,809	3,736.5	39.8	7,288	8,360.5	60.2	12,097
	One	1,647	2,049.7	24.8	4,989	4,586.3	75.2	6,636
	Multiple	726	1,395.8	16.1	3,793	3,123.2	83.9	4,519
	Total	7,182	7,182.0	30.9	16,070	16,070.0	69.1	23,252
Yes FCS	Never	921	593.3	22.9	3,107	3,434.7	77.1	4,028
	One	473	603.0	11.6	3,621	3,491.0	88.4	4,094
	Multiple	319	516.7	9.1	3,189	2,991.3	90.9	3,508
	Total	1,713	1,713.0	14.7	9,917	9,917.0	85.3	11,630
Total	Never	5,730	4,111.9	35.5	10,395	12,013.1	64.5	16,125
	One	2,120	2,736.2	19.8	8,610	7,993.8	80.2	10,730
	Multiple	1,045	2,046.9	13.0	6,982	5,980.1	87.0	8,027
	Total	8,895	8,895.0	25.5	25,987	25,987.0	74.5	34,882

TABLE 3 ► Chi-Square Test Results for Descriptive Statistics Crosstabulation Results Comparing Student Groupings and Persistence with Free College Scholarship (FCS) as a Controllable Variable

FCS Status		Valid Cases (n)	Value	df	p-value ^a
No FCS	Pearson chi-square	23,252	1,024.999 ^{b,c}	2	< 0.001
	Likelihood ratio		1,069.981	2	< 0.001
Yes FCS	Pearson chi-square	11,630	333.863 ^{b,d}	2	< 0.001
	Likelihood ratio		322.536	2	< 0.001
Total	Pearson chi-square	34,882	1,699.201 ^{b,e}	2	0.000
	Likelihood ratio		1,749.746	2	0.000

^a Asymptotic significance (two-sided)^c Minimum expected count = 1,395.81^e Minimum expected count = 2,046.91^b 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5^d Minimum expected count = 516.70

gether, these test results allowed the researchers to conclude that a strong statistical association was observed between the frequency of advising appointments and persistence rates for students who accepted a free college scholarship, thereby rejecting the null hypothesis associated with RQ1.

The researchers were also interested in assessing whether the compounding effects of attending advising appointments more frequently and accepting a free college scholarship (FCS) disproportionately impacted student persistence rates when evaluating students by race.

Table 4 (on page 67) displays the results from a crosstabulation analysis of advising frequency, race, and persistence, which revealed notable differences in persistence rates across racial groups as the frequency of advising appointments increased.

Table 5 (on page 68) illustrates the results of the chi-square test conducted to examine the relationship between race, advising frequency, and persistence for students with a free college scholarship (FCS). The results show statistically significant differences across all advising frequency categories, highlighting the impact

TABLE 4 ► Descriptive Statistics Crosstabulation Results Comparing Race and Persistence for Students with a Free College Scholarship (FCS) with Student Groups as a Control Variable

Appointment Frequency	Race	Did Not Persist		Persisted		Total (n)
		n	%	n	%	
Never	White	334	18.5	1,473	81.5	1,807
	Black or African American	131	28.5	329	71.5	460
	Hispanic/Latino	373	27.6	979	72.4	1,352
	Asian	15	13.0	100	87.0	115
	Various/Multiple	68	23.1	226	76.9	294
	Total	921	22.9	3,107	77.1	4,028
Once	White	158	8.9	1,621	91.1	1,779
	Black or African American	86	17.4	407	82.6	493
	Hispanic/Latino	176	12.8	1,200	87.2	1,376
	Asian	14	10.1	125	89.9	139
	Various/Multiple	39	12.7	268	87.3	307
	Total	473	11.6	3,621	88.4	4,094
Multiple	White	101	7.5	1,241	92.50	1,342
	Black or African American	67	12.9	454	87.1	521
	Hispanic/Latino	106	8.6	1,128	91.4	1,234
	Asian	10	8.2	112	91.8	122
	Various/Multiple	35	12.1	254	87.9	289
	Total	319	9.1	3,189	90.9	3,508
Total	White	593	12.0	4,335	88.0	4,928
	Black or African American	284	19.3	1,190	80.7	1,474
	Hispanic/Latino	655	16.5	3,307	83.5	3,962
	Asian	39	10.4	337	89.6	376
	Various/Multiple	142	16.0	748	84.0	890
	Total	1,713	14.7	9,917	85.3	11,630

of advising on persistence. For students who never attended an advising appointment, the test yielded a p-value of <0.001 , indicating significant racial differences in persistence. Similarly, for those who attended advising once, the p-value was <0.001 , showing a notable effect of race on persistence. For students who attended advising multiple times, the p-value was 0.002 , suggesting a smaller but still significant relationship between race and persistence.

Collectively, these findings allowed the researchers to confidently reject the null hypothesis associated with RQ2 and conclude that advising frequency is signifi-

cantly associated to persistence across all racial groups, with stronger effects observed for those who attend advising more frequently from the Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino race groups.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm the association between the frequency of advising appointments, the acceptance of a free college scholarship (FCS), and student persistence at a community college. These findings echo previous research emphasizing the critical role of academic advising in supporting students through

TABLE 5 ► Chi-Square Test Results for Descriptive Statistics Crosstabulation Results Comparing Race and Persistence for Students with a Free College Scholarship (FCS) with Student Groups as a Control Variable

Appointment Frequency		Valid Cases (n)	Value	df	p-value ^a
Never	Pearson chi-square	4,028	51.292 ^{b,c}	4	< 0.001
	Likelihood ratio		51.966	4	< 0.001
Once	Pearson chi-square	4,094	31.929 ^{b,d}	4	< 0.001
	Likelihood ratio		30.839	4	< 0.001
Multiple	Pearson chi-square	3,508	16.609 ^{b,e}	4	0.002
	Likelihood ratio		15.649	4	0.004
Total	Pearson chi-square	11,630	69.687 ^{b,f}	4	< 0.001
	Likelihood ratio		69.705	4	< 0.001

^a Asymptotic significance (two-sided)

^b 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5

^c Minimum expected count = 26.29

^d Minimum expected count = 16.06

^e Minimum expected count = 11.09

^f Minimum expected count = 55.38

both academic and financial challenges (Bettinger and Baker 2014; Swecker, Fiftolt, and Searby 2013). Notably, students who attended multiple advising appointments showed higher persistence rates than those who attended fewer or no advising sessions. Similarly, the acceptance of an FCS also led to improved persistence, with students who combined both frequent advising and scholarship acceptance demonstrating the highest rates of persistence.

When analyzing persistence across racial groups, a notable trend emerged: although persistence rates improved across all racial categories as advising frequency increased, students from Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino backgrounds showed larger percentage increases than their white peers. This suggests that frequent advising interactions may be particularly beneficial in helping to address the challenges faced by students from historically underrecognized populations, contributing to higher persistence. These findings align with Museums' (2021) advocacy for culturally engaging, proactive advising models that can better support the needs of diverse student populations.

The results also highlight the compounding effect of financial support through the free college scholarship (FCS) and consistent advising. Students who received the free college scholarship (FCS) and attended multiple advising appointments exhibited the highest per-

sistence rates, suggesting that financial aid and advising together may create a powerful support structure. By addressing both the financial and academic challenges faced by students, community colleges can significantly enhance student success, particularly for students who might otherwise face financial barriers.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers important insights into the relationship between advising, financial aid, and persistence, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data collected was limited to a single academic term, which restricts the ability to draw long-term conclusions about persistence and graduation rates. A longitudinal study that tracks students over multiple semesters would offer a more comprehensive understanding of these variables and their long-term effects on student success.

Additionally, the study's definition of persistence, which includes students registering for the following semester or graduating, does not account for students who may have transferred to another institution. Future research should consider adding a subcategory for students who "persisted elsewhere" to better understand student movement between institutions.

Another limitation is the use of binary measures for financial aid and advising frequency. Students' financial and personal situations are often far more complex and

may require more nuanced methods of categorization. Further research could explore the impact of varying levels of financial need and a broader range of advising interactions (e.g., group sessions, virtual advising) on persistence. Moreover, qualitative data capturing students' personal experiences and motivations for seeking academic advising and financial aid support could provide deeper insights into the barriers they face and how these services help them overcome those obstacles.

Lastly, although this study included race as a control variable, additional research is needed to investigate the unique challenges faced by students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Incorporating a mixed-methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative data could provide a more holistic understanding of how advising and financial aid impact persistence among diverse student groups.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the importance of both frequent academic advising and financial support in promoting student persistence at community colleges. Students who attend advising sessions regularly and receive financial aid through a free college scholarship (FCS) may be

more likely to persist, particularly when these two supports are combined. The compounding effects of advising and financial aid are especially pronounced for students from historically underrepresented racial groups, suggesting that these interventions can play a critical role in narrowing persistence gaps across racial lines.

For community college administrators, these findings provide evidence for the need to promote frequent and meaningful advising interactions while ensuring that students have access to comprehensive financial support. By creating policies and programs that emphasize the importance of both academic and financial resources, community colleges can help students overcome the multiple barriers they face and increase their likelihood of success.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion of best practices in higher education by underscoring the significant impact that advising and financial aid can have on student outcomes. Institutions that prioritize these areas, particularly through targeted outreach and culturally responsive advising practices, are well-positioned to enhance student persistence, success, and equity in higher education.

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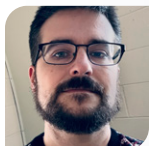
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Community College, leads initiatives to enhance student advising, enrollment management, and persistence through data-informed strategies. He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership for

Social Justice from the University of Hartford, where his dissertation examined the impact of academic advising frequency on student success in community colleges. His research interests include persistence, retention, holistic student support, and the role of technology in advancing equitable outcomes. Dr. Goemans has contributed to scholarship on

community college student success and serves as a reviewer for the *Journal of Applied Research in Community Colleges* and *NACADA's Academic Advising Today*. He brings over a decade of experience in higher education, including teaching, research, and administrative leadership.



Brian Kapinos

Brian Kapinos, Ed.D., Interim Executive Director of Advising Strategy and Outcomes at Connecticut State Community College, is a

higher education researcher and administrator specializing in student success

initiatives and institutional effectiveness. His work focuses on data-driven decision-making to improve student persistence, advising practices, and holistic support services. Dr. Kapinos has collaborated on research examining the impact of advising frequency on student

outcomes and advising systems, middle management, and the coordination of advising services within community colleges, contributing to the development of scalable student support models at Connecticut State Community College.

**Steven McDowell**

Steven McDowell, FAAC®, Associate Vice President for Financial Aid Services & Title IV

Compliance at Connecticut State Community College, is a higher education leader specializing in financial aid pol-

icy, strategic enrollment management, and student success. He has more than 20 years of experience in financial aid, working across enrollment management teams and serving on numerous state and local boards dedicated to college access and affordability. McDowell is the

author of multiple publications related to financial aid compliance and its role in enrollment strategy, including *Basic Guide to Financial Aid*. His research and strategic planning work focus on advancing enrollment, retention, and persistence goals across community colleges.