

## PROMISING PRACTICE

# Paving the Vertical Transfer Pathway: Components of a Student-Ready Advisement Program

Lauren B. Merenda

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lauren Merenda** is an academic advisor at CUNY College of Staten Island. She has supported students in advising and coaching roles since 2011. She holds a Master's Degree in Student Development in Higher Education from Central Connecticut State University and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Instructional Leadership at CUNY Hunter College. Her research focuses on vertical transfer students and the institutional factors that promote their academic success.

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**V**ertical transfer students, those who transition from community colleges to 4-year institutions, embark on a challenging path that often presents academic, logistical, and financial obstacles. For many, this journey is marked by disruptions in financial aid, unfamiliar campus environments, and credit transfer complications, leading to frustration and detachment. While community college enrollment can be an entry point to higher education, research shows that only a small fraction of these students complete a bachelor's degree, despite many entering with that intention. According to the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE, 2023), a comprehensive survey used by community and technical colleges to assess the behaviors of new students, 75% of respondents aspire to transfer and earn a 4-year degree, yet only 15% achieve this goal within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017).

In response to these challenges, institutions can benefit from adopting a *student-ready* approach, which is a shift in thinking from the traditional *college-ready* perspective that focuses solely

on students' preparedness for college. Yes, it is important for students to be aware of the expectations of enrolling in college; however, a student-ready approach also emphasizes how the institution can meet students where they are by offering tailored support to ensure a smooth transition. Through proactive advisement, community building, and assistance with costs and logistics, colleges can remove barriers to success for transfer students and create an environment in which they can thrive.

This article will first examine existing literature on proactive advisement, offering context and highlighting student outcomes associated with this approach. It then shifts to an advisor's perspective, sharing real-world experiences with vertical transfer students who initially struggled to find support before participating in a comprehensive support initiative. The initiative, Project Finish, is a program designed to help transfer and returning students complete their baccalaureate degrees. Through a proactive, high-touch model that provides academic and career advisement, transportation, and financial assistance, Project Finish addresses many of the common challenges faced by vertical transfer students. By showcasing student journeys and the core elements of Project Finish through the lens of an advisor, this article aims to provide actionable strategies that other institutions may be interested in adopting to better serve vertical transfer students and increase their chances of degree completion.

### Proactive (Intrusive) Advisement Literature Review

Coined by Robert Glennen (1976), *intrusive advisement* describes a proactive approach in which academic advisors reach out to students early on and throughout the semester. This strategy aims to proactively address potential challenges, providing students with the necessary tools and resources to tackle obstacles they may encounter throughout their college journeys. This approach typically involves consistent advisement meetings throughout the semester and not only provides opportunities for students to ask any questions that might have come up for them, but also for advisors to share any updates and important information tailored to their students' specific needs.

Because the term *intrusive* can carry negative connotations, this article will use the term *proactive advisement* to emphasize the supportive, intentional, and student-centered nature of this approach.

### Corresponding Author

Lauren Merenda  
CUNY College of Staten Island  
2800 Victory Blvd | Academic Advising | Staten Island, NY 10314  
Email: [Lauren.Merenda@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:Lauren.Merenda@csi.cuny.edu)

Proactive advising is usually initiated by the advisor (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Rust & Willey, 2024; Shaaban & Reda, 2022) and has the most impact on students who are at risk of departure (Rust & Willey, 2024), those enrolled in remedial courses (Thomas, 2020), and those just beginning their college journey as first semester freshman or having just transferred (Van Jura & Prieto, 2021). To maximize the benefits of this approach, advisors should maintain manageable caseloads (Fay et al., 2022; Kolenovic et al., 2013), as this enables them to invest more time and energy into each student's unique needs and build a strong rapport (Evans et al., 2020; Rust & Willey, 2024), which in turn results in stronger retention rates (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Preuss et al., 2023; Swecker et al., 2013).

As there are often many touchpoints throughout the semester, communication is an important aspect of proactive advisement (Evans et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Thomas, 2018; Van Jura & Prieto, 2021). Tailored communication can reduce confusion and aid in keeping students on track (Thomas, 2020), as it is customized to address their individual needs or circumstances. At times, students' needs extend beyond course selection and academics, and advisors are encouraged to engage in discussions that focus on college success skills and foster behaviors that will enhance academic performance (Thomas, 2020). After participating in a proactive advising program, students have reported greater self-advocacy, time management, organization, and communication skills (Rothwell & Shields, 2021) as well as greater levels of confidence (Sandha et al., 2022). Although not directly related to academics, these skills can indirectly impact degree progress and overall academic success. This focus on holistic advising not only supports students' immediate academic needs but also lays the groundwork for a smoother transition, particularly for vertical transfer students as they navigate the complexities of their educational journey.

### The Vertical Transfer Student Experience

Since 2011, I have worked in academic advising and coaching capacities at various institutions, both 2-year and 4-year, public and private, assisting students as they navigate their unique challenges and transitions. In my experience, vertical transfer students often encounter barriers that complicate their academic progress. One challenge I have observed is the difficulty some transfer students face

in declaring their intended major due to institutional policies requiring them to accumulate a certain number of credits before gaining entry into specialized programs (i.e., education, social work, pre-med, etc.). As a result, they are limited to general education coursework while waiting to take major-specific classes, leading to frustration and potentially extending their time to degree completion, which could result in issues with their financial aid. Many of my transfer students have shared that they struggled to find a dedicated advisor who understands their unique needs, which left them with an unclear path navigating institutional policies and academic planning. Without clear guidance, some students become discouraged and even consider leaving college before earning their degrees.

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Programs designed to support returning and transfer students, such as Project Finish, can play an important role in addressing these challenges by providing structured advisement, targeted resources, and a sense of community. Through proactive, student-centered advising practices, institutions can better support vertical transfer students and help them persist in achieving their academic goals.

### Project Finish: A Model Advisement Program

Project Finish incorporates the following research-based high-impact practices to assist students with the transition to college. Although this article focuses on vertical transfer students, it should be noted that these practices are impactful whether they are used to support first-year students, transfer students from other institutions, or those returning to college after an extended break.

### Providing Proactive Advisement

All students in Project Finish have a dedicated academic advisor with whom they connect throughout the semester to discuss academic progress, make appropriate campus referrals, develop an academic plan for future semesters, and discuss potential post-undergraduate pursuits. This facet of the program stems from the concept of *proactive advisement*, introduced by Robert Glennen (1976). As explained earlier, this type of advisement involves frequent meetings between advisors and advisees, allowing students to bring up questions or concerns while advisors ensure that students meet certain college deadlines and update their current course-

work appropriately (applying for the FAFSA, applying for graduation, reminders about enrollment, etc.). Maintaining academic momentum is often discussed during advisement meetings, which is reviewed in the next bullet point.

### **Maintaining Academic Momentum**

Advisors in Project Finish encourage students to enroll in 15 credits per semester to maintain academic momentum and complete their degree on time, which is supported by the literature (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Attewell et al., 2012). Students who enter Project Finish have at least 60 credits, as they all have an earned associate degree. With most baccalaureate degrees comprising 120 credits, maintaining this momentum allows students to finish their degrees within two years of program entry, supporting vertical transfer students' goals of earning a baccalaureate degree. Of course, students may enroll in 15 credits, but there is a chance they will withdraw from a course or two, or perhaps they will not pass. Advisors talk to their students about summer and winter enrollment and encourage opportunities to repeat any courses or use these sessions to catch up or get ahead.

### **Fostering Community and Belonging**

Project Finish also fosters a sense of belonging and community among its students, which contributes to academic success (Deil-Amen, 2011; Munoz & Rendon, 2011; Rendon, 1994). Events are organized throughout the semester, and students network with their peers as well as other faculty and staff members on campus. Community building is especially important for vertical transfer students as they familiarize themselves with their new academic environment. Project Finish also employs peer leaders who are current or former program participants. They play an important role in supporting students, as their firsthand experiences provide a unique and complementary layer of support alongside academic advising. While advisors offer guidance on college policies, curriculum, and success strategies, peer leaders share personal insights into the challenges they navigated and the paths they have taken, helping new students feel understood, motivated, and hopefully better prepared for their college journeys.

### **Financial Support**

With funding from the city and private donors, Project Finish provides students with tuition assistance and an additional stipend for textbooks, and other course materials. Students also have the choice of a semesterly voucher for public transportation or a campus parking permit, whichever suits their needs.

When combined, these practices aim to remove some of the common barriers to success so

students can devote more focus to completing their degree (Kolenovic et al., 2013). Moreover, these practices are important not only for vertical transfer students, but also for first-year students or those returning to college after a break to assist in their respective transitions.

### **Student Experiences with Project Finish**

Through my experience as an academic advisor, I have observed that vertical transfer students often face a range of challenges that impact their ability to persist and complete their degrees, as noted by the research (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Dietrich & Lichtenberger, 2015; Hayes et al., 2020). Many navigate long commutes, juggle multiple responsibilities such as work and family obligations, and struggle to find the personalized support they need to successfully transition to a 4-year institution. Without structured guidance, these challenges can create barriers to academic success and delay degree completion.

Programs like Project Finish aim to address these obstacles by providing dedicated advising and targeted resources. One of the most valuable aspects of this support model is the reduced advisor caseload, allowing for more meaningful interactions and tailored guidance. In contrast to traditional advising structures, where advisors may be responsible for upwards of 400 students, Project Finish advisors work with smaller caseloads, typically around 150 students, enabling more proactive and individualized support. Additionally, recognizing that transportation can be a significant barrier for students commuting across a large city, the program offers transportation assistance to help alleviate this burden.

### **The Shift to a Student-Ready Mindset**

Community colleges are often an entry point into higher education for many students, especially those lacking the financial resources or academic prerequisites to immediately gain access to 4-year institutions (Xu et al., 2018). Nonetheless, most community college students begin their post-secondary career aiming to earn a baccalaureate degree, but only about a third of them do so (Shapiro et al., 2017). This low completion rate is likely due to the *community college penalty*, which posits that vertical transfer students are less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree than those who begin college at a 4-year institution due to credit loss, unfamiliarity with campus resources, and the need to adjust to an unfamiliar academic environment (Dietrich & Lichtenberger, 2015). This discrepancy may also be due to a lack of *college readiness*, specifically for a 4-year institution, which Conley (2007) defines as the content knowledge to succeed academically and the social-emotional skills necessary to understand the culture of

postsecondary education. It is important to admit students who are college-ready and capable of higher-level work; however, at the same time, institutions must reflect on how they can be *student-ready*.

Project Finish is a student-ready program that provides wrap-around support for students facing obstacles to completing their degrees. This type of support is particularly important for vertical transfer students who often come close to giving up on college entirely due to barriers in the transfer process (Jabbar et al., 2019). While participation in Project Finish may not directly increase the number of credits transferred, its advisors empower students to advocate for themselves, suggesting, for example, that they submit course syllabi to the registrar for credit reevaluation, which can help transfer additional credits that might not have been accepted automatically. As an advisor in Project Finish, my students benefit from my smaller caseload, which allows me to build meaningful relationships with them and help them develop personalized academic plans.

When I meet a student for the first time, I start by asking about their current or intended major. If they are undecided, I help them explore their interests, favorite subjects, or prior courses they have enjoyed to identify or narrow down potential options. Over time, I encourage them to consider adding a minor, or multiple minors, if they have several academic interests, ensuring their plans align with both their passions and career goals. My goal is to empower students to take ownership of their academic journeys. By providing guidance and the necessary tools, I encourage them to make informed decisions and actively shape their educational paths.

In my advising work, I have encountered many vertical transfer students who are highly motivated but struggle to navigate the sometimes complex degree pathways and long-term academic planning. Many come in with a clear career goal but may not be fully aware of the different routes available to achieve it. I have encountered students who often assume that a specific undergraduate major is the only route to their desired career, unaware that alternative pathways may offer a more efficient route to their goals. For example, aspiring educators often believe they must earn a bachelor's degree in education to qualify for a master's in teaching, when in reality, a degree in a related field, such as English or psychology, may provide the same graduate school opportunities while shortening their overall time to completion.

Project Finish demonstrates a comprehensive support program that provides wraparound services to keep students on track toward their academic and professional goals.

### Recommendations for Practice

As outlined in this paper, proactive advisement is the key to the success of Project Finish. The high-touch model allows students to stay informed of their academic progress and gradually take ownership of their educational journey. A key factor in this model's effectiveness is the low advisor-to-student ratio, with each advisor supporting approximately 150 students, which enables more meaningful student-advisor interactions. To implement a similar approach, institutions should assess how many students their advisors are currently working with and ensure adequate staffing to serve their specific student populations effectively and, bring the ratio as close to 150 as possible. The implementation should start in phases, such as within a specialized program with assessment of the effectiveness before scaling up. Institutions should prioritize student engagement and support by establishing monthly advisement meetings, consistently monitoring student progress, and proactively addressing potential challenges. Support should be individualized and tailored to meet each student's unique needs and goals, considering their academic interests, career aspirations, and personal circumstances.

Professional development opportunities for advising teams are advantageous when implementing a proactive advising program in that they highlight the impact of this model and can provide strategies for effective implementation. Different types of advising to strengthen rapport building, such as motivational interviewing (Ogles et al., 2021) or appreciative advising (Bloom et al., 2013), can also be incorporated to emphasize advising as more than course selection and highlight the importance of the student-advisor relationship. Professional development should be ongoing, rather than a one-time meeting, allowing advisors to gradually implement the strategies into their practice and offering opportunities for collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These trainings can also foster institutional buy-in and deepen advisors' and administrators' understanding of the specific challenges certain student populations face.

Establishing an effective communication strategy to ensure students receive timely information and are encouraged to meet with their advisor is a strong first step in helping students, especially first-year and transfer students, become familiar with college policies and know where to turn for support. Email and text messages can be valuable tools for prompting students to complete important tasks

and encouraging the use of campus resources. However, it's important not to overwhelm them with too many messages, which can lead to disengagement or missed information.

If an institution has an early alert system where faculty can indicate concerns about specific students regarding recent grades, attendance, engagement, etc., advisors can follow up with those students on their caseload as early as possible. This allows advisors to introduce students to helpful resources and support their success while there is still time to improve before the end of the semester. The hope is that the early contact will make students more likely to independently seek help when challenges emerge, ultimately contributing to their long-term success.

Project Finish demonstrates a comprehensive support program that provides wraparound services to keep students on track toward their academic and professional goals. While financial support is undoubtedly an important factor in this program to support degree completion, not all institutions have access to such funding streams. What truly sets this program apart is its proactive advisement model, especially when supporting vertical transfer students. The program fosters trust and guidance by ensuring students have a dedicated advisor who is a reliable point of contact for academic, professional, and personal support. Building strong advisor-student relationships and ensuring students know their advisors are the first steps in creating a student-ready support system that drives success. The cases included throughout this paper are prime examples of how this holistic approach can empower vertical transfer students to overcome common challenges and achieve their goals.

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