

Scaling High-Touch College Advising: Causal Evidence and Program Design Insights from Tennessee

Taylor Odle and Isabel McMullen

Across the country, states and districts have invested heavily in college advising programs to increase postsecondary enrollment, particularly for students who face the greatest barriers to navigating the college-going process. Yet evidence on what actually works at scale remains mixed. Many advising initiatives show promise in small pilots but struggle to deliver consistent results when expanded statewide, raising important questions for policymakers: *Can large advising programs meaningfully increase college enrollment? And if so, what design features make the difference?*

This study helps answer those questions by examining Advise TN, a statewide counseling program that was implemented across nearly 50 high schools and served tens of thousands of students over multiple graduating cohorts. Each participating high school was assigned a full-time college advisor who supported students through the college application, financial aid, and enrollment process. Because the program was rolled out across a large and diverse set of schools, including urban, suburban, and rural communities, it provides rare evidence on how college advising performs at scale, rather than in a small pilot or single district.

By moving beyond the question of whether advising works to examine how it works at scale, this study provides practical insights for state and district leaders designing or refining college advising initiatives.

STUDY AND METHODS

The study estimates the impact of Advise TN by comparing changes over time in student outcomes at 33 high schools that received an Advise TN advisor to changes over the same period at 31 similar schools that applied for the program but were not selected. In other words, it asks: *Did outcomes improve more after Advise TN began in participating schools than they did in comparable non-participating*

schools? By focusing on differences in trends before versus after implementation, the design accounts for pre-existing differences between schools and isolates the effect of the advising program itself.

In addition to estimating the overall impact of Advise TN, the study uses descriptive analyses to understand which program design features were most strongly linked to better student outcomes. Rather than treating advising as a single, uniform intervention, the authors take advantage of variation in how the program was implemented across schools, including how often students met with advisors, whether advising was delivered in person or virtually, and how many students each advisor served. The researchers link detailed program records (such as advisor caseloads, number of student–advisor interactions, and mode of contact) to student-level outcomes like FAFSA completion and college enrollment. They then compare outcomes for students who experienced different levels or types of advising exposure. For example, they examine whether students who met with advisors multiple times had higher enrollment rates than those with fewer interactions, and whether schools with lower student-to-advisor ratios saw stronger results than schools with higher caseloads. While these analyses are not causal (e.g., students were not randomly assigned to different advising intensities), they help identify patterns that point to which features of advising delivery mattered most in practice. Together, these descriptive findings complement the causal estimates by offering concrete guidance on how advising programs can be structured to maximize their impact.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Advise TN raised immediate college enrollment by 3 percentage points across 33 communities.

- The strongest effects were observed for Hispanic students (+6.3 pp), female students (+4.5 pp), and students in rural communities (+6.4 pp), suggesting that advising can help reduce inequities in access to college.

2 Large increases in FAFSA and state aid completion suggest that helping students complete these steps was a key pathway through which advising increased college enrollment.

- FAFSA completion increased by 7–8 percentage points, and applications for state financial aid increased by 3–4 percentage points. This indicates that Advise TN’s impact was not driven by changing students’ aspirations or attitudes alone, but by reducing procedural and administrative barriers that often prevent students from following through on college plans.

3 Students experienced better outcomes when advising involved multiple meetings, in-person or hybrid delivery, and lower student-to-advisor caseloads.

- Intensity: Students who had multiple advising meetings were substantially more likely to enroll in college than those with only one or no meetings. Students who met with an advisor 2–3 times during their senior year were 5.2 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than peers without Advise TN services. Students who participated in 4 or more meetings were, likewise, 13.9 points more likely to enroll.

- **Modality:** Outcomes were strongest for students who received hybrid advising, which combined in-person support with virtual meetings, calls, and texts; these students were 14.1 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than similar students without Advise TN. Students who received only in-person advising enrolled at rates 7.5 percentage points higher than their peers. In contrast, students who received only virtual advising or calls/texts showed no improvement in college enrollment.
- **Case Load:** Schools with fewer than 300 students per advisor, and especially fewer than 100, saw the largest impacts on college enrollment.

4 Advising improved college enrollment, but did not consistently improve college persistence or completion.

- This suggests that pre-college advising removes entry barriers, but additional supports are needed after enrollment to sustain long-term success. One way of extending these impacts could be to have advisors maintain contact with graduates throughout the summer and into their college freshman year—or to design structured student hand-offs between high school advisors and new college counselors.

5 Several program design features likely explain why Advise TN succeeded where other large-scale advising initiatives (such as Advise TX) showed more limited impacts.

- **Professional, full-time advisors with a clear role.** Advise TN employs full-time professional advisors rather than recent, “near-peer” college graduates, who serve short-term placements. Advise TN advisors often hold graduate degrees, have substantial relevant professional experience, and are embedded members of the local communities in which they work.
- **Clear roles:** Advisors’ primary responsibility was college advising, rather than adding advising duties onto existing school staff. They also had dedicated school-based offices.
- **High-touch, sustained engagement with students.** Students often met with advisors multiple times over the year, allowing advisors to build relationships and support students through each step of the college-going process rather than offering one-off guidance.
- **Strong focus on completing concrete tasks.** Advisors prioritized helping students finish FAFSA, state aid applications, and enrollment paperwork, reducing procedural barriers that commonly derail college plans.
- **Centralized training, oversight, and data use.** Advise TN invested in consistent advisor training, ongoing coaching, and data systems to monitor implementation and student progress, helping maintain quality across schools.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- 1 States considering advising expansion should plan for multiple student meetings, manageable advisor caseloads, and in-person or hybrid delivery models to maximize the effectiveness of advising.**

- Statewide advising initiatives can increase college enrollment, but effectiveness depends on sustained, high-touch delivery. Light-touch or informational advising alone is unlikely to move outcomes.

2 States should prioritize advising models that provide explicit support for application, financial aid, and enrollment steps, rather than awareness campaigns alone.

- The largest gains occurred in FAFSA completion and state aid applications, which directly preceded increases in college enrollment. This implies that advising models should focus less on general college encouragement and more on hands-on support with paperwork, deadlines, and enrollment logistics, especially for students who already intend to go to college but struggle to follow through.

3 Pre-college advising should be paired with postsecondary supports if states want to improve persistence and completion.

- While Advise TN increased college entry, it did not consistently improve persistence, degree completion, or workforce outcomes. States seeking longer-term returns should consider linking high school advising to college-based advising, academic supports, or skill-building interventions that help students navigate challenges after enrollment.

4 Centralized oversight and data systems are likely critical for sustaining quality at scale.

- Advise TN’s centralized training, monitoring, and use of detailed student-advisor interaction data helped ensure consistency across schools and enabled continuous improvement.
- Other states looking to replicate this model should invest not only in advisors but also in state-level infrastructure for training, supervision, and data-driven management.

FULL WORKING PAPER

This report is based on the EdWorkingPaper “*Scaling High-Touch College Advising: Causal Evidence and Program Design Insights from Tennessee*” published in May 2026. The full research paper can be found here: <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai25-1371>.

The [**EdWorkingPapers Policy & Practice Series**](#) is designed to bridge the gap between academic research and real-world decision-making. Each installment summarizes a newly released EdWorkingPaper and highlights the most actionable insights for policymakers and education leaders. *This summary was written by Christina Claiborne.*