



RE-IMAGINING ADVISEMI TO BOOST COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

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ABOUT ADVISEMI

AdviseMI is a college advising program that places recent college graduates into selected high schools around the state to serve as college advisers. AdviseMI high schools are predominantly located in communities with low college-going rates and low adult educational attainment rates. Serving alongside high school counselors and other school professionals, advisers support students as they make the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Advisers help students navigate the complex college exploration process, retake college admissions tests, apply to colleges that are a good match, complete the FAFSA, secure financial aid, and matriculate to college.

The Youth Policy Lab (YPL) partnered with the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) and the Michigan State University College Advising Corps (MSUCAC) to evaluate AdviseMI with the aim of improving the program. This policy brief reports on the findings and outcomes of that evaluation.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. AdviseMI is implemented with fidelity to its program model and **meets or exceeds all of its performance goals**. These include the number of students meeting with an adviser, registering for the SAT/ACT, submitting a FAFSA application, and applying for and being accepted by at least one college.
2. Advisers help students to overcome many barriers to college-going. School staff provide overwhelmingly positive feedback on the role played by advisers, especially their ability to provide one-on-one support, and their ability to assist students in matters related to financial aid.
3. In an effort to improve the program, MCAN commissioned YPL to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation of AdviseMI looking at the effect of the program on college **enrollment** rates, over and above its primary performance indicator of college **acceptance** rates. We do not find evidence that college advising increases the college **enrollment** rate of seniors compared to a control group of similar schools that did not participate in the program.
4. This analysis should be interpreted with caution as we did not have data on college application and acceptance rates for high schools in the comparison group. We are therefore unable to account for changing student preferences for college between AdviseMI and comparison group schools.
5. Focus groups with advisers and school supervisors suggest that advisers' ability to influence students is inhibited by:
 - the program's narrow focus on seniors, whose postsecondary pathways may already be set;
 - a program model where advisers meet with every senior; and,
 - the fact that students who use the program's resources most intensively are not necessarily those students who need the most assistance.

In response to the Youth Policy Lab's findings, the Michigan College Access Network implemented changes to the AdviseMI program, including:

- pivoting the advising model to a targeted approach in which each adviser has an intensive advising strategy for a cohort of approximately 50 students who are either low-income, first-generation, or seniors of color;
- implementing "nudges" for students and parents to remind them of key dates and upcoming events while maintaining "low-touch" school-wide events such as Michigan College Month and Decision Day and general college advising; and
- developing relationships with juniors, especially those in the following years' cohort, starting from the middle of the year.

ADVISEMI – MICHIGAN’S COLLEGE ADVISING PROGRAM

Michigan ranks 33rd nationally for education attainment and is below average in the Great Lakes region, with states such as Ohio and Wisconsin outperforming Michigan in postsecondary attainment (The Office of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, 2020). Increasing the educational attainment rate of low-income and minority students is necessary to propel Michigan towards achieving the state’s aggressive goal of reaching 60% college attainment by 2030. Greater college attainment also has the benefits of driving individual prosperity, addressing inequality, and boosting economic growth.

Since 2015, AdviseMI and the Michigan State University College Advising Corps (collectively referred to in this policy brief as AdviseMI) has placed well-trained, near-peer AmeriCorps service members into disadvantaged high schools around the state. AdviseMI advisers help students to apply for college by providing assistance with college searches, applications and essay writing, and applying for financial aid. They work most closely with seniors, aiming to meet with each senior at least once during the year to complete a postsecondary plan. Advisers also hold whole-school activities such as College Decision Day, a celebration of high school seniors who have made the decision to go to college. These activities aim to strengthen the school’s college-going culture.

This policy brief describes the results of an evaluation conducted by Youth Policy Lab on AdviseMI, alongside changes to the program implemented by MCAN in response to the evaluation. First, we describe the results of an adherence check conducted to determine if the program was being implemented with fidelity to its program model. We also report the findings from in-depth focus groups with advisers, program staff and AdviseMI leadership that were held in order to understand the programs successes, as well as barriers that may have inhibited the program from making further gains. Last, we report the findings of a quantitative analysis that uses a quasi-experimental methodology to examine the effect of AdviseMI on college enrollment outcomes.

“ AdviseMI advisers help students to apply for college by providing assistance with college searches, applications and essay writing, and applying for financial aid. ”

A STRONG PROGRAM: ADVISEMI MEETS OR EXCEEDS PERFORMANCE GOALS

In the qualitative component of the evaluation, we sought to answer: Is AdviseMI implemented with fidelity to its intended program model? What are the program’s successes? What are the programs challenges? To answer these questions, YPL asked AdviseMI program staff to complete an adherence checklist for each AdviseMI adviser and host school. AdviseMI also shared data they collect on their AmeriCorps performance goals that tracks students’ achievement of key college-going milestones. To supplement these data, we held focus groups with advisers and program staff where we discussed how the program was being implemented, alongside the successes and challenges of the program.

We found extremely high compliance by advisers and host schools in adhering to the requirements of the program across three domains. First, we found that 99% of advisers completed their in-school activity requirements across 99 host schools. These in-school activity requirements include whole-school activities such as leading College Bound Michigan activities (Michigan College Month, College Cash Campaign, and Decision Day), and fostering a visual college-going culture at the school. Second, schools overwhelmingly adhered to their requirements of the program, with virtually

all schools complying with requirements such as providing a dedicated space for the adviser and designating a full-time staff member as the adviser’s supervisor. Finally, advisers exhibited high rates of compliance with requirements such as completing training and professional development sessions, completing their required AmeriCorps service hours, and completing required reporting.

AdviseMI also collects metrics on AmeriCorps performance measures: advisers’ meetings with students, FAFSA applications, and college applications and acceptances (Table 1). For these measures, AdviseMI meets or exceeds its performance goals. Most students at AdviseMI schools submit a college application and are accepted into college. In 2018, 81% of students applied to a college, while 71% were accepted into at least one college. In 2019, the number of college acceptances rose by 3 percentage points (to 74% of students) even though the share of college applications fell by 2 percentage points. Advisers are also performing well on intermediate measures, such as the number of students meeting with an adviser at least once, and registering for the SAT or ACT. In both cases, over 9 in 10 students participated in these milestones in 2018 and 2019.

Table 1 – Percent of Students Achieving Key College-Going Milestones

	2018	Year 2019	2020 [^]
Met with Adviser 1+ Times	92%	94%	91%
Registered for SAT/ACT	93%	93%	89%
Submitted College Application	81%	79%	74%
Accepted by 1+ College	71%	74%	68%
Submitted FAFSA Application	64%	62%	N/A
Milestone Completions*	59%	58%	N/A
Average Number of Seniors	131	128	120

Source: MCAN and MSUCAC.

* Milestone Completions: seniors that registered for the ACT or SAT, submitted 1+ college applications, and submitted the FAFSA application.

[^] Data for the 2019-2020 school year are affected by a move to remote learning in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools did not resume in-person instruction during that school year.

Our focus groups with advisers and their supervisors highlight many program successes. First, feedback from advisers and their supervisors indicate that advisers are very effective at understanding student needs and working to provide personalized support and resources to help students overcome barriers to college. In particular, advisers felt they were skilled at navigating financial aid applications such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Supervisors were unequivocal in highlighting the positive impact of advisers, with one supervisor stating that having

AdviseMI means that “the students and parents feel as though they’re more supported in depth with the college adviser and university process” and that the adviser is “not rushed [or] skimming” as they can devote more time to advising individual students. A critical component supporting advisers’ success is the training provided by AdviseMI, which advisers and their supervisors reported to be highly comprehensive, especially the training for FAFSA applications.

A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION OF ADVISEMI

MCAN also commissioned YPL to conduct an evaluation of the program to examine its effect on college enrollment rates. These evaluation efforts are in addition to the program’s formal performance outcomes, and MCAN commissioned the evaluation to improve the AdviseMI program.

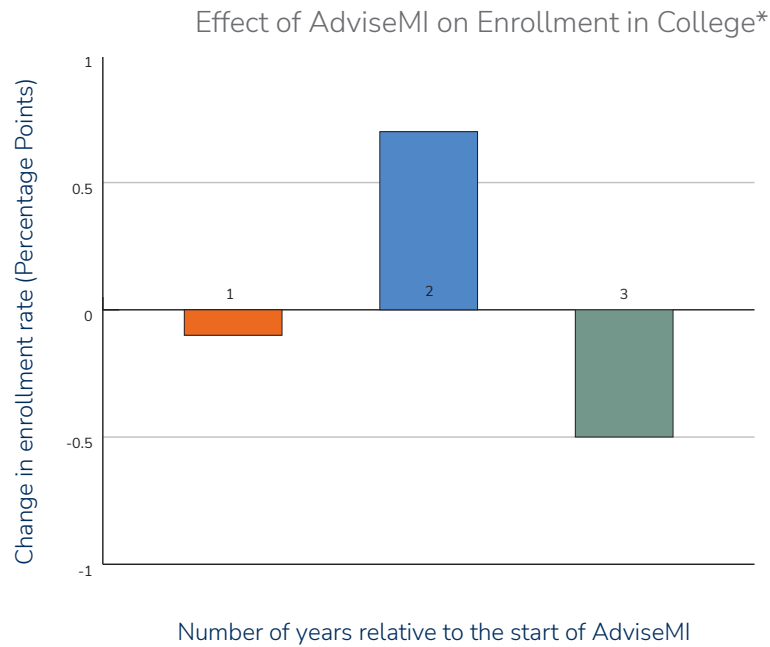
Using administrative data from the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan’s Center for Education Performance (CEPI), the Youth Policy Lab conducted a quasi-experimental study examining the impact of AdviseMI on four outcomes: enrollment in college within 1 year of high school graduation; enrollment in a four-year college within 1 year of graduation; enrollment in a reach college; and enrollment in a reach college (see Appendix).

We use an event study model as our methodological approach. First, we select a control group of schools with the following criteria: schools with an above-average free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rate and below-average college-going rate, and with at least 50 seniors. Next, we compare the trends in college enrollment between AdviseMI schools and the control group. Finally, we average results across schools with the same length of exposure to AdviseMI, allowing us to detect differences in outcomes for schools depending on how long they have had an adviser.

Overall, we find no evidence that AdviseMI raises overall or 4-year college enrollment rates. While the impact of AdviseMI is found to be slightly negative in the first and third years of the program and slightly positive in the second year of the program, the estimated effect sizes are small and not statistically significant (Figure 2). Nor do we find evidence that AdviseMI improves the match between students and colleges for those enrolling in four-year schools. We therefore cannot rule out that the program has no effect on college enrollment rates at AdviseMI schools.

A weakness of the study is that data on college application and acceptance rates for control group schools are not available. While we select demographically similar schools for the control group, we are unable to control for differences in student college acceptances between schools. In other words, we cannot rule out that the AdviseMI program is increasing college **application** and **acceptance** rates but not college **enrollment** rates compared to control group schools. This could arise, for example, due to students’ changing preferences for college between AdviseMI schools and comparison schools over time.

Figure 2



* Event study estimates of the effect of AdviseMI on average enrollment in college within 1 year of high school graduation. Control group is target schools that never participated in AdviseMI or in any other college advising program prior to 2019. This model controls for student and school characteristics.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

While overall feedback from advisers and schools paints a picture of a well-run program that offers strong benefits to schools, there is a disconnect between the benefit identified by school staff and the program’s outcomes in raising college enrollment rates. Our focus groups point to some of the factors that may have inhibited the program’s ability to raise aggregate college enrollment rates. These challenges are common in working with first-generation students and in relatively under-resourced schools.

Two barriers stand out as key. First, college advisers and **supervisors highlight the difficulty of interacting meaningfully with students who do not actively seek support.** A key adviser activity is meeting with each senior in the school to work on a postsecondary plan. Based on program data provided by MCAN and MSUCAC, 91% of seniors met with advisers at least once in 2018-19.

Yet, it is unclear how deep and sustained these interactions are, especially with students who are unsure about, or resistant to, college. One school counselor, for example, notes that “our biggest challenge is getting the people who actually should be using the services to use the services”. Many advisers note that seniors often engage with them late in the year or come to them with preconceived expectations regarding college. Other students have already decided they are not attending college and are resistant to meeting with the adviser altogether.

Second, advisers report a lack of community and parental engagement, and at times outright resistance, as one of the main barriers to college. Some parents are hesitant to encourage their students to pursue a postsecondary path, seeing college as sending their kids “away from their homes, their communities”, instead of as a chance to “expose them to other careers and opportunities”.

One adviser describes the complexities of talking about college in a community that is skeptical about college:

“College is kind of looked down on in the community that I am in, because, if you go to college in a rural community, typically you don’t come back.... that’s very true in this community.”

Even when parents are not resistant to college, their lack of engagement can be a barrier – for example not understanding the importance of meeting deadlines and providing financial information for FAFSA.

Relatedly, students from low-income backgrounds and those who live in more rural communities face challenges in physically accessing their campus due to a lack of transportation and the tyranny of distance. In some rural areas, the closest community college is 30 to 40 miles away. Even when they are in close proximity, the lack of access to a personal vehicle and no public transportation means that colleges are “just far enough away that it could be a barrier”.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROGRAM CHANGES

Despite the considerable resources put towards AdviseMI and similar college advising programs in the state, we know relatively little the efficacy of college advising programs. An experimental evaluation of a program following the College Advising Corps (CAC) model in Texas, AdviseTX, found similar results to this study. Overall, they found no significant overall effects of the program on college enrollment when results are pooled; and positive, statistically significant effects (2.4 percentage points) on two-year colleges in the first year of the program (Bettinger & Evans, 2019). However, these effects attenuate over time: the authors find no positive effects in the second and third years of the program.

The wider literature on college advising programs is mixed. College advising programs take many different forms, and the programs that have been found to have the largest positive impacts have generally been those with more intensive advising models where subgroups of students are targeted for intensive advising, compared to a whole-school and less targeted approaches. Examples of relatively intensive programs found to have positive effects in rigorous evaluations include the Dartmouth College Advising Program (Carell and Sacerdote, 2017), the Student Outreach for College Enrollment (SOURCE) program in the Los Angeles Unified School District (Bos et al, 2012), and the “Keep Your Options Open” program in Toronto, Canada (Oreopoulous and Ford, 2019).

Drawing lessons from the literature and findings from the adviser and site supervisor focus groups, the Youth Policy Lab made a series of recommendations for changes to AdviseMI’s program structure. These included to more tightly target advising to a subgroup of students for whom advising has the highest impact, and engaging students earlier in high school. The Youth Policy Lab also recommended that the program be embedded in a broader community-level strategy to build the college-going culture in the community.

In response to the Youth Policy Lab’s findings, the MCAN implemented changes to the AdviseMI program, including:

- pivoting the advising model to a targeted approach in which each adviser has an intensive advising strategy for a cohort of approximately 50 students who are low-income, first-generation, or seniors of color;
- implementing “nudges” for students and parents to remind them of key dates and upcoming events while maintaining ‘low-touch’ school-wide events such as Michigan College Month and Decision Day and general college advising; and
- developing relationships with juniors, especially those in the following years’ cohort, starting from the middle of the year.

CONCLUSION

First-generation students and students of color face many barriers to college enrollment. Improving outcomes is complex, requiring sustained long-term efforts. Improving college enrollment and attainment is made even more challenging by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the long-term suspension of in-person instruction in many schools across Michigan, and has had a disproportionately negative effect on students who are the least likely to attend college.

MCAN's changes to the AdviseMI college advising program has the potential to provide students with sustained help to achieve their postsecondary goals in lieu of help from parents, school counselors and/or teachers. This intensive support is even more important in this era of remote learning.

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APPENDIX

Enrollment in any college and in a four-year college are indicator variables constructed from college enrollment data provided by MDE/CEPI that take the value of 1 if a student was enrolled within 1 year of graduating high school, and 0 otherwise. We construct indicators for enrollment in reach, match and safety schools using ACT and SAT national college percentiles from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Enrollment in reach, match and safety schools is only defined for students enrolled in a 4-year college. A college is a reach college if the student's ACT/SAT score is less than the college's 25th percentile score, a match college if the student's score is between the 25th and 75th percentile score, and a safety college if the student's score is above the college's 75th percentile score.

Using an event study model, we estimate the effect of advising on outcome Y (for example, enrollment in any college) for student i attending school s, and graduating in cohort t as:

$$Y_{ist} = \lambda_t + \delta_s + \sum_{k=-7}^3 \gamma_k \mathbf{1}\{K_{st} = k\} + \beta_1 \mathbf{X}_{it} + \beta_2 \mathbf{Z}_{st} + \varepsilon_{ist}$$

where λ_t and δ_s are cohort and school fixed effects. K_{st} denotes the event year such that $K=1$ when a student experienced one year of advising, $K=2$ when a student experienced two years of advising, and so on. K_{st} ranges from -7 to 3, where a school is unaffected by advising for $K < 1$, where $K=1$ is the first academic year in which an MCAN adviser began working in the school. We omit the event time dummy at $K=0$, implying that the event time coefficients measure the impact of advising relative to the year just before the advising program was introduced in the school.

This model controls for student- and time-varying school-level characteristics. \mathbf{X}_{it} is a vector of student level variables including gender, race and ethnicity, Grade 8 test scores, and indicators for if a student is economically disadvantaged, qualifies for special education, or receives limited English proficiency services. \mathbf{Z}_{st} is a vector of cohort-varying school-level characteristics: number of students; number of students squared; the share of students who are Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and who qualify for special education services; and standardized average Grade 8 math scores.

We evaluate the impact of advising on four outcomes: enrollment in any college within 1 year of high school graduation, enrollment in a four-year college within one year of graduation, enrollment in a reach college, and enrollment in a reach or match college.

DATA DISCLAIMER

This analysis utilizes data obtained through a confidential data application process submitted to the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC)/Michigan Education Research Institute (MERI). Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan requested data access and completed the analysis included in this report. The data are structured and maintained by the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data is modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information and opinions solely represent the analysis, information and opinions of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, or reflect the views or positions of, grantors, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.

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Support the Youth Policy Lab's efforts to use data for good.

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Youth Policy Lab

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.