

Advising Remodel at Mississippi State University

DESIGN DOCUMENT

Introduction

A vitally important element of MSU's vision statement is, "We provide an innovative, hands-on learning experience, meeting all students where they are and equipping them for a world that needs their talent."

As noted in the [Student Success Task Force Report \(2020\)](#), effective advising is essential to fulfilling this vision. Since that report, the university has explored how best to strengthen advising by evaluating best practices from peer institutions, holding listening sessions and focus groups, and considering how these practices fit MSU's culture.

A pilot program, funded by a private gift, investigated the impact of a cadre of professional advisors who adopted a proactive approach to student support. From the lessons learned through this pilot, the university is now prepared to take the next steps toward a stronger, more coordinated advising model.

Why It Matters: Advancing Student Outcomes and Economic Impact

Mississippi State currently ranks last among SEC institutions in both retention and graduation rates. Peer institutions such as the University of South Carolina (90% retention) and the University of Mississippi (94% retention) are significantly outpacing us.

Closing this gap is about more than reputation. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds who complete a college degree experience outsized long-term benefits: higher wages, lower poverty, and greater life stability. These benefits ripple outward, reducing dependence on social safety nets and strengthening communities.

At the state level, even modest improvements in graduation yield major returns. An NSPARC report estimated a \$4 billion economic impact tied to MSU graduates. A scalable advising model that improves retention and completion will ensure more students persist, graduate, and contribute to Mississippi's workforce.

We recognize that a more proactive approach to advising best serves our students. However, we also acknowledge that faculty already have full workloads and cannot shoulder this responsibility alone. A well-trained, well-equipped professional advising cadre is essential. Expanding existing efforts with professional staff advisors will be critical if we are to improve retention, graduation rates, and overall academic achievement.

Pilot Program Achievements

The pilot program, launched through the Center for Advising (CFA), tested a comprehensive professional advising model designed to provide earlier and more consistent support during the first year. The program focused on several core elements:

- **A Developmental Approach:** Advisors met regularly with first-year students to develop academic plans, set goals, and address personal or financial barriers to success. Early meetings focused on adjustment to college life; later sessions centered on course sequencing and progress toward major core courses or major selection.
- **Centralized Oversight:** Advising operations were managed through the CFA, providing shared data tracking, technology, and supervision. Advisors served specific majors while maintaining access to centralized tools and training.
- **Standardized Training and Caseloads:** All advisors completed a structured onboarding process emphasizing holistic advising and use of technology for outreach. Caseloads were assigned according to National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) recommendations to allow meaningful engagement.
- **Leveraging Technology for Proactive Engagement:** Advisors used a best-in-class tool in conjunction with existing campus systems to identify students at risk of withdrawal or failure.
- **Coordinated Care Across Divisions:** Regular communication among CFA advisors, Division of Student Affairs staff, and academic success programs ensured coordinated interventions for students facing academic, financial, or personal challenges.
- **Accessible Advising Resources:** The CFA created advising checklists and registration toolkits to help students navigate key academic policies and procedures.

The pilot has yielded measurable success—most notably a 3% increase in retention among students with ACT scores of 18–27, outpacing MSU’s eight-year retention gain (2015–2023) of just 1%. These results demonstrate the potential for university-wide improvement with full institutional support.

Understanding the Results: Why 1–2% Matters

In academic advising, measurable outcomes often take time to emerge, especially for metrics like graduation rates. However, even a 1–2% increase in first-year retention represents meaningful progress. From 2015 to 2023, MSU’s first-year retention rose just one percentage point—from 82% to 83%. Students in the advising pilot were retained at 85%, a two-point improvement over the baseline.

This mirrors national trends. The University of South Carolina, a national model for advising transformation, saw only a 0.4% retention gain in its first year even with a fully scaled effort.

Additionally, pilot participants reported 87%+ student satisfaction, 10% higher than non-pilot peers—further confirming that the model works, particularly during the crucial first 30 credit hours.

These findings make clear that advising reform is not a theoretical exercise; it is an investment with measurable returns in academic achievement. The pilot's outcomes demonstrate that when students receive consistent, proactive, and informed guidance, they stay enrolled and make better academic decisions.

Building on this success, Mississippi State will now expand the model campus-wide, ensuring that every student benefits from the same level of coordinated, high-quality advising, and expand the model to encompass the first 60 hours of a student's journey at MSU.

The Vision for Campus-Wide Advising

The proposed model includes a **central administrative unit** in the Center for Advising which provides supervision, oversight, coordination, and support, while students continue to receive advising within their respective academic units during their first 60 hours.

The “standardized” components—training, accountability, and technology—ensure quality and consistency, not uniformity of student experience. A **central hub paired with localized advising** allows for intentional, consistent support tailored to each college's culture.

This model does not remove faculty from advising. Instead, it enables faculty to focus on mentoring and discipline-specific development while professional advisors handle proactive, early-stage support.

Foundational Pillars of the Model

1. Centralized Oversight with Localized Implementation
 - Advisors remain physically embedded within their colleges, maintaining close proximity to students and faculty.
 - All professional advisors report through the CFA, which sets training standards, monitors outcomes, and ensures consistency.
 - Department heads and college leaders provide feedback incorporated into advisors' annual reviews.
2. Integrated Advising for the First 60 Hours with Coordinated Transition
 - Incoming students are assigned to professional advisors offering proactive, interventionist advising.
 - Around 60 credit hours toward their degrees, students transition to a faculty or upper-division advisor for advanced academic and career guidance. This assignment may vary by college or department and is documented in the MOU.

- Faculty have emphasized that they want to mentor—not manage forms and policies. This model allows professionals to guide students early, freeing faculty to focus on high impact mentoring once students are ready.
3. **Standardized Training, Career Development, and Accountability**
 - Advisors participate in structured training aligned with national best practices.
 - A clear career ladder promotes advisor excellence and retention.
 - Centralized data collection supports continuous improvement and accountability.
 4. **Institutional Alignment and Scalability**
 - A unified advising technology platform will standardize processes and communication.
 - A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the CFA and each college will define shared roles and expectations.
 - Standardized forms, curriculum sheets, and advising materials will be implemented campuswide.
 5. **Proactive Engagement and Completion Support**
 - Early intervention strategies will identify and address academic or personal barriers.
 - Professional advisors housed in the CFA will provide targeted support for undeclared students.
 - Advising efforts will align with other academic achievement initiatives (e.g., major maps, experiential learning).

Center for Advising Structure

Leading the advising structure is the **Executive Director of Advising**, a role focused on ensuring consistency across the student experience and aligning advising efforts with institutional goals and student outcomes. This role supports, rather than replaces, college authority.

College Leads serve as direct liaisons between the CFA and each college, adapting practices to local needs while maintaining connection to the broader model.

Professional Advisors are embedded within colleges, trained and resourced to build meaningful student relationships and focus on what matters most: the student. Professional advisors focus on proactive, hands-on support during the early college experience.

In keeping with the dedication to robust training and development for the entire advising community, the CFA's **Director of Advisor Training** will design and deliver a comprehensive

professional development curriculum that includes onboarding, certification, ongoing training, and mentoring aligned with NACADA standards. Regular workshops and performance assessments will ensure advisors remain informed, supported, and equipped to guide students effectively through academic and personal challenges.

Finally, The new structure clarifies reporting lines, improves professional development opportunities, and enhances coordination while remaining nimble and responsive to local needs a newly formed **Advisory Board** of faculty, staff, and administrators will guide ongoing refinement of the advising model.

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“Centralized but Embedded” Model

The phrase “embedded in colleges” is intentional: the CFA serves as a **resource center and advising headquarters** partnering with departments and colleges.

Each student will be supported by:

- A **professional advisor** trained in holistic support, early interventions, and technology tools during their early years.
- A **faculty mentor or upper-division advisor** aligned with their discipline, focusing on long-term goals such as research, graduate study, or career development.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU’s) between the Center for Advising and each college serves as the foundation for shared governance in the advising model. Each MOU will:

- Clearly delineate which advising functions are managed centrally through the Center for Advising and which are handled locally within the college to ensure both consistency and flexibility.
- Establish regular communication and check-in protocols between college advising leads and CFA leadership to maintain alignment on priorities, expectations, and student needs.
- Specify advisor-to-student ratios and staffing levels based on college size, program complexity, and student demographics to promote equity and manageable workloads.
- Ensure colleges participate directly in the selection, supervision, and performance evaluation of embedded advisors to foster shared ownership and accountability.
- Document how professional advisor-to-faculty advising transitions will occur, including shared advising notes, co-signed plans, and coordinated meetings to provide a seamless student experience.

These agreements reinforce that advising remains collaborative, transparent, and aligned with each college’s academic mission.

Moving Forward Together

Mississippi State is taking the next step toward a more consistent, coordinated, and student-centered advising model. The foundation has been tested, the results are clear, and the path ahead is focused on scaling what works.

The planned implementation timeline is as follows:

- November 2025: Finalization of MOUs with each college in Phase 1 (Bagley College of Engineering; College of Architecture, Art, and Design; College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; College of Arts and Sciences; and College of Forest Resources)
- January 2025: Finalization of MOUs with each college in Phase 2 (College of Business; College of Education; and College of Integrative Studies)
- February 2026: Advisor training, technology integration, and onboarding of additional professional advisors.
- March 2026: Existing CFA advisors will adjust duties to prepare for full integration of the Fall 2026 cohort into the new advising model.
- July 1, 2026: Official launch of the expanded advising model with embedded advisors across all colleges, including campus-wide adoption of standardized advising materials, assessment dashboards, and refined handoff procedures.

This effort strengthens the support network for every student, ensures accountability and consistency across the university, and aligns advising with MSU's broader goals for retention, completion, and academic achievement. Together, we are building a model that honors our values, strengthens our outcomes, and transforms the advising experience for every Bulldog.

Frequent Questions or Concerns

Loss of College/Departmental Autonomy

Concerns have been expressed that centralizing supervision, even if co-located, will take away local control over advising practices, hiring, and daily management. A "one size fits all" approach could ignore college's unique culture or academic mission.

This is not about taking away faculty, departmental, or college voice; it's about supporting our students more effectively. While supervision is centralized, day-to-day advising remains embedded and deeply aligned with departmental culture and needs. Colleges will still influence hiring decisions, assignment of caseloads, and the academic direction advisors follow through the MOUs. While being embedded, this allows advisors to promote departmental relationships for students to get plugged in with events, student organizations, departmental-specific research and other academic opportunities.

Impact on Faculty Roles

Faculty may see this as a threat to their traditional role as mentors and advisors, or faculty may worry

that students will be pushed away from them toward professional advisors, reducing faculty-student connections.

This model doesn't replace faculty involvement; rather, the model will enhance faculty advising. Faculty remains central to upper-division mentoring and will gain access to tools that make advising easier. Professional advisors take the early load off faculty, helping students build a foundation so that faculty can focus on deeper, discipline-specific mentorship.

Advisor Morale and Transition Stress

If advisors currently report directly to departments, a move to centralized supervision could make them feel displaced or worried about changes in reporting lines, workloads, or job security.

Departments/colleges could be concerned about how these transitions affect staff retention and morale.

We understand that change brings uncertainty. Advisors will gain stronger professional communities, clear advancement pathways, and manageable caseloads—fostering greater job satisfaction and retention.

Student Relationships

Restructuring could potentially disrupt long-standing relationships between advisors and their student populations, especially if caseload assignments or staffing changes break continuity.

Transitions will be seamless and coordinated. With lower caseloads and proactive outreach, students will experience deeper, more meaningful relationships at every stage.

Resource Allocation

Questions have been raised on how resources (funding, staffing, office space) will be equitably distributed across colleges under the new model.

We're working carefully to ensure resources will be distributed equitably, based on caseloads and student needs. Advisor placement will be determined collaboratively with colleges.

Measurement and Accountability

How will we measure success? Who sets priorities? What happens if an advisor fails to meet expectations?

Success will be measured using metrics tied to retention, progression, and satisfaction. Advisors will receive coaching and support to meet these expectations.

Communication and Culture Change

Any change to advising is, at its heart, a cultural shift. Concerns have been expressed about how consistent and clear the messaging will be, and whether students and faculty will buy-in to the model.

Culture change takes time. We will continue to communicate clearly and consistently, building a shared language around advising while honoring each college's identity.

Advisor Career Path and Retention

Even if morale is managed during the transition, what's the long-term plan to recruit, retain, and promote advisors? Will there be advancement opportunities within the advising structure? How do we

keep high performers engaged if they feel stuck or undervalued after centralization? Are salary bands competitive and sustainable across all colleges?

A formal career progression framework will outline titles, competencies, and professional growth opportunities. Also included in the career path plan are leadership and training opportunities, development plans, and recognition programs. We will also ensure clear advancement opportunities, competitive salaries, and pathways for professional growth to retain high-performing advisors.

Departmental Buy-In

Colleges may comply, but individual departments or faculty may resist or passively disengage especially if they feel “cut out” of the advising loop. Will departments make space for advisors to be co-located and visible? Will faculty refer students appropriately, or continue old habits?

Advisors will collaborate daily with departments, fostering strong partnerships. Advisors will foster partnerships and regular engagement between advisors and departmental faculty and staff. The CFA will also establish a shared governance feedback loop, where departmental input is formally documented and incorporated into annual advising reviews and planning.

Technology and Data Gaps

The model depends heavily on identifying early indicators of students off-track, tracking caseloads, and proactive outreach. Does the current advising software and institutional data infrastructure fully support this?

The CFA is investing in robust technology and data systems. In partnership with ITS and OIRE, they will create an integrated advising dashboard that supports early intervention and informed decision-making by integrating retention metrics, caseload analytics, and early-alert trends. The tool will also support proactive outreach and manageable advisor workflows. This infrastructure will allow advisors and leadership to make data-informed decisions in real time and provide colleges with reports on advising outcomes and student progress.

Communication Across Units

With advisors reporting centrally but living locally, there’s a risk of fragmented communication. Who handles student escalations? Who approves of an advisor’s time off? Are messages from central advising aligned with college priorities?

Clear protocols, liaison roles, and feedback loops will ensure alignment between CFA, colleges, and departments. These are documented in the MOUs.

Advisor Role Clarity and Scope

Once advisors are embedded, there’s a risk of “scope creep”: Departments may treat them like admin assistants; Students may expect 24/7 access or personal counseling; Staff may be unsure whether to refer students to faculty, advisors, or student affairs.

Advisor roles will be clearly defined and communicated to avoid “scope creep.” CFA will train both advisors and faculty on expectations. Note that at the beginning, this will be a mutual work in progress. CFA plans to continually monitor challenges and define advisor

responsibilities clearly and train both advisors and faculty on expectations to avoid overextension or underutilization.

Equity Across Colleges

Some colleges will have strong internal champions; others will be less resourced or engaged. What is the plan to avoid a “have and have-not” advising experience across campus?

CFA will regularly review caseloads, outcomes, and satisfaction by college and adjust resources to ensure equity.

Advisor-Student Transition at 60 Hours

The handoff points from professional to faculty or upper-division advisor (around 60 hours) is logical, but will students experience it as seamless or disruptive? Who “owns” the student if a crisis occurs during the transition?

CFA, working with the individual advisors and departmental faculty and staff, will develop a structured handoff protocol and document it in the MOU with each college. The transition between professional and faculty advising will include shared meetings, co-signed advising notes, and a personalized introduction from one advisor to the next. Students will see this transition not as a change of ownership but as a broadening of their support network, with both advisors remaining available during the overlap period.