



University Advising Center

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

FROM RISK TO RETENTION

ACADEMIC ADVISING'S IMPACT
ON SCHOLARSHIP MAINTENANCE
AT USC

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Academic Advising's Impact on Scholarship Maintenance at USC

Executive Summary

The University Advising Center (UAC) implemented a strategic initiative through its collaboration with the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships (OFAS) to help students retain their scholarships and enhance their academic success. This initiative, known as the Scholarship Risk Intervention (SRI), identifies students at risk of losing their scholarships due to low GPAs or insufficient credit hours and provides them with targeted support and guidance. The program's impact from May 2021 to August 2024 has been significant, demonstrating the critical role of academic advising in boosting scholarship retention and overall student success.

Key Findings

- Financial aid and scholarships are crucial for student retention and graduation. Students who retained their scholarships showed a higher likelihood of returning and graduating compared to those who lost their scholarships.
- From May 2021 to August 2024, academic advisors responded to 6,634 SRI cases for 5,650 unique students.
- Advisor contact significantly influenced student engagement and outcomes. Students who engaged with their advisors were more likely to enroll in summer courses, retain their financial aid, and return in the fall.
- Independent samples t-tests indicated significant differences in summer enrollment, aid retention, and fall retention between students with and without advisor contact.

Background

Financial aid and scholarships positively impact retention and graduation rates. A study by Wohlgenuth et al. (2007) concluded that financial aid increased retention and graduation rates. Similarly, Millea et al. (2018) found that students who received a merit-based scholarship had a 12.5% higher probability of returning and an 18.4% higher probability of graduating. Internal data from the University of South Carolina (USC) aligns with national findings. Of the 2015 first-year cohort, 73% of students who lost scholarships in their first year returned for their second year, while 96% of students who retained scholarships persisted to a second year at USC. Furthermore, 53% of students who lost scholarships in their first year graduated within six years, compared to 89% of students who retained their scholarships (M. Mamrick, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

Many USC students rely on state and institutional scholarships to afford their education, and losing this financial aid can significantly jeopardize their academic progress. Recognizing this issue, USC's University Advising Center (UAC) partnered with the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships (OFAS) to create a proactive support system aimed at helping students retain their scholarships. The idea was to leverage the established relationships between academic advisors and students to provide personalized support and guidance. This initiative targets students at risk of losing their state lottery or general university scholarships due to low GPAs and/or not meeting minimum credit hour requirements. The primary goal is to help these students meet the necessary requirements through summer enrollment.

The Approach

The Scholarship Risk Intervention (SRI) begins in early May when the UAC receives a list of at-risk students from OFAS. These students are identified based on their GPA, credit hours, or both. The UAC then opens cases for these students in the campus advising software, including information about the specific scholarship the student is at risk of losing. Cases are automatically assigned to the students' assigned academic advisors. When advisors are alerted that a student is in danger of losing a scholarship, they review the student's academic record, concentrating on total completed credit hours and GPA, depending on the specific scholarship requirements. By examining the student's academic performance, advisors assess whether it is feasible for the student to meet eligibility criteria by completing additional coursework over the summer before the official scholarship review by OFAS. If advisors believe the student can realistically retain their scholarship with summer coursework, they initiate various outreach efforts to offer assistance. This outreach often includes emails, texts, and phone calls. When students engage, advisors help them identify the risk areas and develop plans to meet the retention requirements. Advisors may suggest degree-applicable summer courses, discuss GPA projections, course formats, and the student's academic strengths. They encourage enrollment in courses that align with the student's strengths and could positively influence their GPA. Conversely, advisors might advise against taking multiple intensive three-week courses concurrently to avoid overburdening the student, which could negatively impact their GPA.

The collaboration between the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships and academic advisors is key to the success of the Scholarship Risk Intervention. Each office brings its unique expertise and resources to the table, creating a comprehensive support system for students. While financial aid staff handle verification of scholarships, review renewal eligibility, and notify students of their at-risk status,

advisors focus on providing personalized academic guidance. Table 1 delineates the specific roles and responsibilities of financial aid staff and advisors, highlighting their complementary functions:

Table 1

Roles and functions of Financial Aid Staff and Academic Advisors

What Financial Aid can do	What advisors can do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verify scholarship a student is receiving • Review scholarship renewal eligibility after spring grades post • Contact students to inform them that they are at risk of losing their scholarship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculate GPA and/or credit hours • Advise towards summer courses that are degree-applicable and contribute to scholarship renewal requirements (if successfully completed) • Assist students with transient enrollment if necessary
What Financial cannot do	What advisors cannot do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete GPA calculations • Advise towards degree-applicable courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide financial aid counseling • View and verify which scholarships a student is receiving

Results/Data

Demographics

Since May 2021, academic advisors have responded to 6,634 SRI cases for 5,650 unique students. The demographic breakdown of supported students (Figure 1) in the SRI from May 2021 to August 2024 shows a majority of White (3,905) and Black or African American (913) students, with a balanced gender distribution slightly favoring males (51%). Significant numbers of first-generation and transfer students are supported as well (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown of Student Supported by the SRI (May 2021 – August 2024)

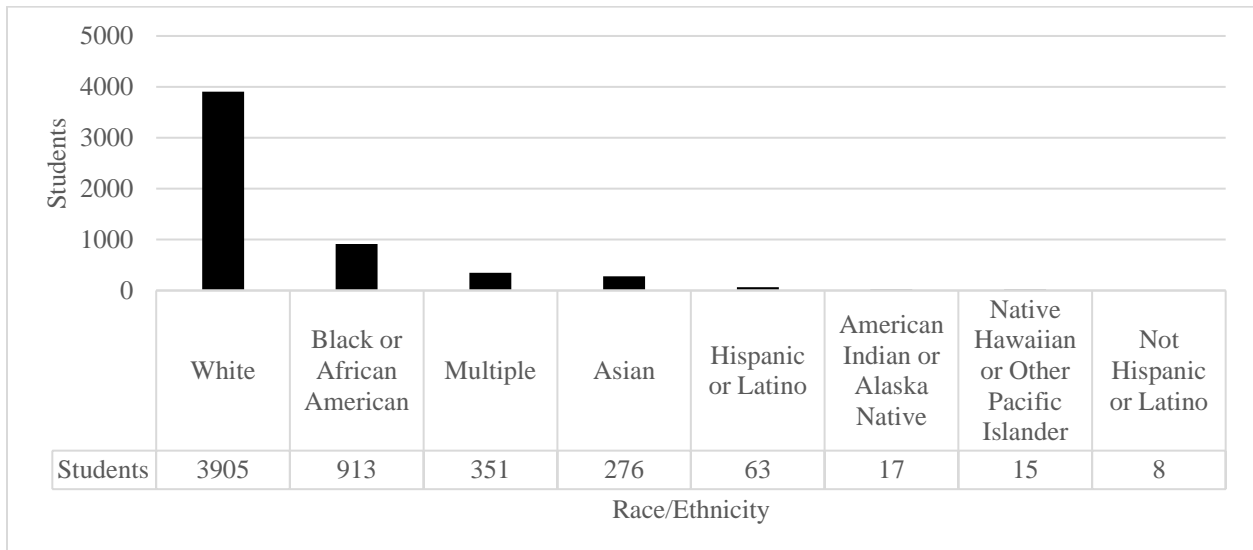
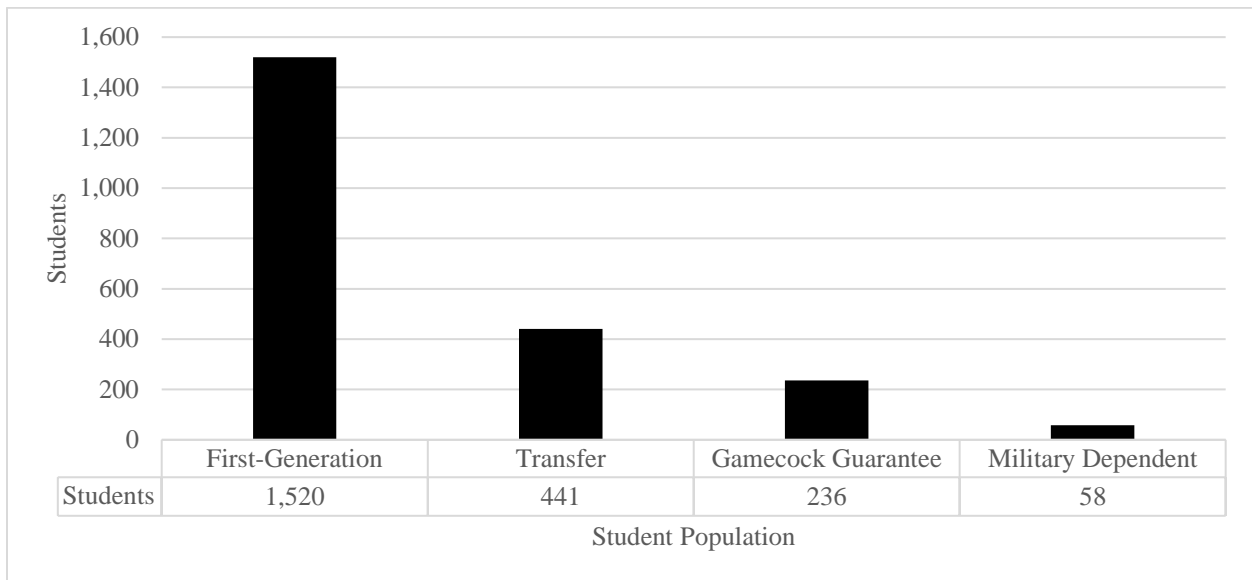


Figure 2

Special Populations Supported by the NRI (December 2021 – May 2024)

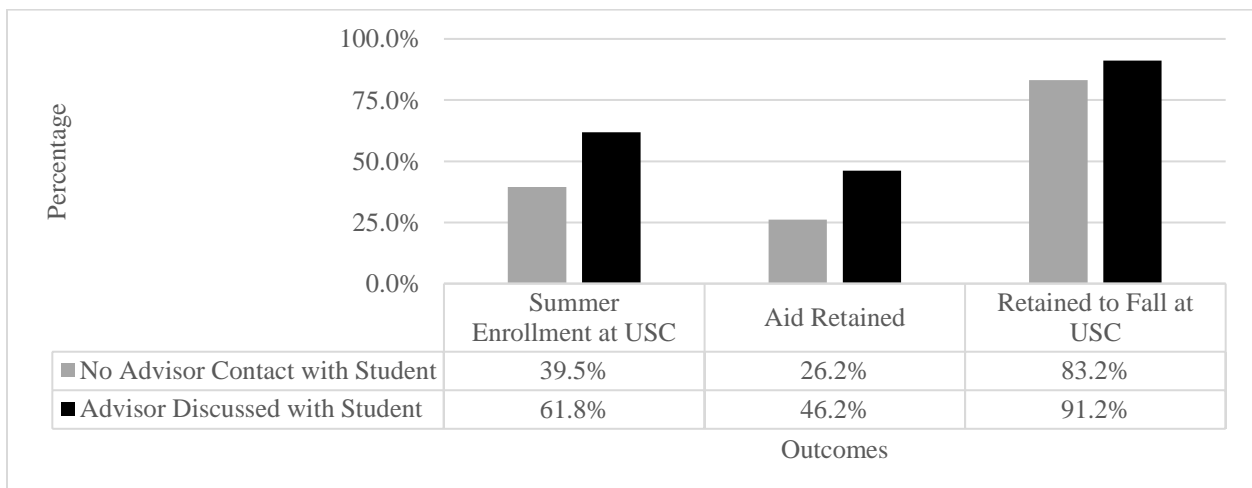


Impact of the SRI

Advisor contact with students significantly impacts summer enrollment, aid retention, and fall retention at USC. Data analysis reveals that students who engage in discussions with their advisors exhibit a higher likelihood of enrolling in summer sessions, with 61.8% of these students enrolling compared to only 38.2% of students who had no advisor contact. Furthermore, the retention of financial aid is positively correlated with advisor interaction; 46.2% of students who discussed plans with advisors retained their aid, in stark contrast to the 26.2% retention rate among those without advisor contact. Fall retention also shows a similar trend, with 91.2% of students who had discussions with advisors returning in the fall, significantly higher than the 83.2% retention rate of those with no advisor contact.

Figure 3

SRI Outcomes by Advisor Contact with Student (2021 – 2023)



Independent samples t-tests were conducted on the data and reveal significant differences across these metrics. In the first set of t-tests, examining the impact of advisor contact on Summer Enrollment, Aid Retained, and Fall Retention, results indicate that advisor contact positively influences all three metrics. Students with advisor contact had a higher mean Summer Enrollment (1.62) compared to those without advisor contact (1.40), with a significant mean difference of -0.223 ($p < .001$) and a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.457$). Similarly, Aid Retained was higher for students with advisor contact (Mean = 1.46) compared to those without (Mean = 1.26), showing a significant mean difference of -0.200 ($p < .001$) and a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.432$). Fall Retention was also higher among students with advisor contact (Mean = 1.91) compared to those without (Mean = 1.83), with a smaller but significant mean difference of -0.080 ($p < .001$) and a small effect size (Cohen's $d = -0.233$). Given this small effect size, a second t-test, examined the overall impact of Aid Retention on Fall Retention, results indicate that students who retained aid had a higher Fall Retention (Mean = 1.96) compared to those who did not retain aid (Mean = 1.81), with a significant mean difference of -0.149 ($p < .001$). The effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = -0.442$), further emphasizing the positive impact of retaining aid on fall retention rates.

2024 Outcomes

Advisor Contact and Student Engagement

In 2024, advisor contact played a crucial role in student enrollment in summer courses at USC

- **Advisor Contact vs. No Advisor Contact:** Of the students involved in the SRI, 54.7% had discussions with their advisors, while 45.3% did not. This engagement is pivotal, as it directly influences the subsequent actions taken by students.

Summer Enrollment

- **Enrollment Statistics:** Among students who discussed their situation with an advisor, 65.8% enrolled in summer courses at USC. In stark contrast, only 30.3% of students without advisor contact chose to enroll. This highlights the effectiveness of advisor intervention in encouraging students to take necessary steps to retain their scholarships.

Table 2

Advisor Contact Engagement Breakdown

Advisor Contact	N	%
No Advisor Contact with Student	837	45.3%
Advisor Discussed with Student	1010	54.7%

Table 3*Summer Enrollment by Advisor Contact*

Advisor Contact		N	%
No Advisor Contact with Student	Not Enrolled at USC During Summer	583	69.7%
	Enrolled at USC During Summer	254	30.3%
Advisor Discussed with Student	Not Enrolled at USC During Summer	345	34.2%
	Enrolled at USC During Summer	665	65.8%

Conclusion

The success of this initiative underscores the importance of collaboration between financial aid offices and academic advising centers. By leveraging the trusted relationships between advisors and students, USC has been able to provide more effective support to those at risk of losing their scholarships. This proactive approach not only improves retention rates but also enhances the overall educational experience for students. The SRI at USC serves as a model for how targeted outreach and support can significantly impact student success and retention. The substantial improvements in summer course enrollment, scholarship retention, and persistence to the following fall semester highlight the critical role advisors play in supporting student success. This initiative exemplifies how strategic partnerships and dedicated interventions can create meaningful change in higher education, ensuring that students have the resources and support they need to thrive academically.

References

- Millea, M., Wills, R., Elder, A., & Molina, D. (2018). What matters in college student success? Determinants of college retention and graduation rates. *Education, 138*(4), 309-322. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/prin/ed/2018/00000138/00000004/art00003>
- Wohlgemuth, D., Whalen, D., Sullivan, J., Nading, C., & Shelley, M. (2007). Financial, Academic, and Environmental Influences on the Retention and Graduation of Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.2190/86X6-5VH8-3007-6918>

