An Alternative Approach for Advising Online Students

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Abstract

Academic advising provides an avenue to increase college student retention and graduation rates across all higher education institutions. This is accomplished by providing supportive, strategic communication engagement and by developing student strengths and decision-making abilities through counseling and advisement sessions. This article provides an overview of traditional advising approaches and discusses the utilization of an alternative approach of academic advising to support online students. The article suggests that through the incorporation of appreciative advising into online advising sessions, and through utilizing emerging technologies to increase efficiency in advisor-student communication, online program completion and retention rates will increase.

An Alternative Approach for Advising Online Students

Academic advising has been one of the most researched topics within higher education over the last 40 years. “Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions” that support student development, improve student success outcomes, increase retention and timely graduation rates, and decrease student attrition (National Academic Advising Association, 2006). Advisors “help students become more self-aware of their distinctive interests, talents, values and priorities” (Cuseo, 2003, p. 15). Through effective communication and relationship building, academic advisors guide students “to see the ‘connection’ between their present academic experience and their future life plans” (Cuseo, 2003, p. 15). As Dr. Richard Light (2001), a Harvard professor and author of *Making the Most of College* writes, “good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p. 81).

While it is agreed that academic advisors play an integral role in student success, there seems to be a lack of research on specific, effective strategies to advise distance learners. The terms, “distance learner” and “online student,” are used interchangeably within this article, and refer to students who enroll in virtual classes within higher education institutions and do not engage in face-to-face learning throughout their enrolled semester. These students generally enroll in online courses due to their geographic location in respect to the institution, or due to personal circumstances like family and work responsibilities (Cross, Mandernach, & Huslig, 2013).

Online students make up approximately 28 percent of the total postsecondary enrollment population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Of a total of 20.2 million students enrolled in higher education, approximately 2.8 million students enrolled exclusively in online classes, and 5.7 million students enrolled in at least one online class during the Fall 2014 academic semester (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Despite these overwhelming statistics, many institutions are lacking in the quality and structure of academic advising for their online students. This article suggests two strategies to increase distance learner success through advisement: (1) incorporate the appreciative advising approach into virtual communications and advisement sessions with online students, and (2) utilize emerging technologies to meet students *where* they are located: through the virtual platform.

**Traditional Approaches to Academic Advising**

Advising students is one of the strongest means to consistently increase retention and student persistence to graduation (Drake, 2011; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Jeschke, Johnson & Williams, 2001). Research on academic advising processes used by higher education institutions generally include the following approaches: prescriptive, developmental, and intrusive advising (Bloom, Hutson & He 2008; Jeschke, et al., 2001; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). These approaches can be further categorized by their intent or focus: information-based, holistic, and intervention-based advising (He & Hutson, 2016).

Prescriptive advisors tend to engage in one-way information reporting where engagement in student and professional development is limited (He & Hutson, 2016; Jeschke, et al., 2001). Prescriptive advising limits the ability of students to demonstrate critical thinking or decision-making as the student takes on a passive role within the advisement process (Bloom, et al, 2008; He & Hutson, 2016; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Rather, the advisor focuses solely on answering student questions when enquired, verifying academic requirements are met, and limiting student-advisor interactions to “declarative and procedural knowledge” (He & Hutson, 2016, p. 215).

Developmental advising is based in student development theory, meaning that the process of advising supports the facilitation of the entire individual throughout their cognitive development and engagement in both environmental and interpersonal experiences (Crookston, 1994). Formal training is required for advisors and so, in return, students receive a higher quality, holistic progression of advising and personal development (He & Hutson, 2016; Jeschke, et al., 2001). Weaknesses of this approach, however, is that it requires increased time and devotion on the behalf of advisors, may lack in evaluation strategies, and may assume that students do not already have original goals and effective decision-making strategies (Bloom, et al., 2008; Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Intrusive, or intervention-based advising, utilizes multiple communication channels and early-warning alert systems to identify at-risk students so that the advisor may intervene and prevent failure from occurring (He & Hutson, 2016; Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Jeschke, et al., 2001). This approach to advising is pro-active in nature, meaning that the student does not need to be the one to initiate contact first (Jeschke, et al., 2001). Research on intrusive advising has found that this approach leads to increased retention, increased satisfaction, and decreased attrition, especially among traditional freshmen and at-risk students (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Jeschke, et al., 2001; King & Alperstein, 2015). Students advised through this approach are more inclined to be successful in their classes, as they know their advisor is there to track them and reach out if they stumble or procrastinate (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Thus, intrusive advising increases the supportive and developmental relationship between student and advisor, and leads to the increased feeling of connectedness between the student and institution (He & Hutson, 2016).

**Appreciative Advising as a Newer, Alternative Approach**

While prescriptive, developmental, and intrusive advising have traditionally been used by higher education institutions, there exists an alternative approach called appreciative advising. Appreciative advising is defined as “a social-constructivist advising philosophy that provides a framework for optimizing advisor interactions…. [where] advisors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students” (Bloom, et al., 2008, p. 11). Appreciative advising uses the practice of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry to develop and promote a strength-based advising process (Bloom, et al., 2008; He & Hutson, 2016).

There are six phases of appreciative advising: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don’t Settle (Bloom, et al., 2008). These phases assist in developing rapport between student and advisor, open up lines of communication to discover student strengths and goals, and assist in developing the student in terms of academic, personal and professional goals (Bloom, et al., 2008; Leek, 2016). The Disarm phase creates a positive, warm, inviting environment for the student through pre-determined, positive actions on the behalf of the advisor. The Discover phase is where the advisor learns about the student’s goals, abilities, and preferences, in order to reveal the Dream phase. The Design phase is unique in that both student and advisor collaborate on a plan to bring the Dream to the Delivery phase. Finally, the Don’t Settle phase reminds both student and advisor that many goals can be achieved, and to always remember that they have remarkable, unlocked potential within (Bloom, et al., 2008).

Academic advisors who actively engage in student development, and who understand the motivations and underlying issues that threaten academic achievement, are fundamentally responsible for increased student success and retention (Drake, 2011; Gravel, 2012; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Both appreciative and intrusive advising place the academic advisor at the forefront of all student and professional staff interaction. With a continuously expanding online education platform, the question remains: are academic advising processes for online students evolving at the same rate as distance education enrollment? The answer appears to be: no. Thus, the need for further research and innovative practices is clear.

Research on effective advising approaches for online students has led to the following suggestions: (1) By incorporating key elements from intrusive advising, such as early-alert advising software and pro-active advisor communication, overall student success in online courses will increase; (2) Through implementing the appreciative advising approach into communications across virtual technologies, overall student satisfaction, student development and the feeling of connectedness with the institution will increase; and (3) The combination of intrusive advising processes with the personable, positive, and creative approach from appreciative advising will lead to increased retention and decreased attrition among online students.

**Technology and the Need for a Combined Approach**

Utilizing virtual technologies to reach students across the online platform is not a new concept. A variety of institutional and technological programs have already been implemented across colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. However, the rate at which online course enrollment grows is not equal to the effectiveness of these institutional strategies. Institutional programs created to address online student success include: mandatory online orientations, video conferencing, online readiness assessments, 24-hour text-based chat assistance, early-alert student tracking software, redundant email outreach, and mandatory in-person registration prior to online enrollment (Britto & Rush, 2013; Clay, et al., 2008; Cross, et al., 2013; King & Alperstein, 2015). However, these institutional and technological initiatives do not address the individualized advising session that takes place across the online platform and thus, presents a gap within higher education research.

Jeschke, Johnson and Williams (2001) found a significant difference in satisfaction amongst students placed under an intrusive advising approach that encouraged frequent communication and support with advisors. The study found that approximately 37 percent of students advised under a prescriptive approach asked to be reassigned to the intrusive advising model (Jeschke, et al., 2001). When given the choice, students choose the method of advising that increases their connectedness to people, resources and the institution rather than being left in isolation. Cross, Mandernach & Huslig (2013) acknowledge the importance of communication between advisors and distance learners:

“The need for frequent communication is not unique to online students; all students need, desire and seek on-going support through social interaction. For campus students, this need is fulfilled not only by formal advising appointments, but also via informal opportunities for interaction facilitated in the physically-connected campus environment. Recognizing that online students do not have spontaneous communications as a result of the natural interactions that occur in a campus environment, it is imperative that advisors of online students proactively reach out to foster frequent and consistent interactions” (pp. 105-106).

While intrusive advising supports frequent communication and is highly successful, it does not produce the same positive relationship building and subsequent student development that appreciative advising does. Thus, it is recommended that a combination of both intrusive and appreciative advising approaches be utilized to truly affect retention rates and student success.

The rate at which students enroll in online programs is increasing at a faster rate than traditional campus-based enrollment (Britto & Rush, 2013; Clay, Rowland and Packard, 2008; Gravel, 2012). As such, students are often unprepared for the differences and challenges that exist in online learning. Students report difficulties in navigating the technological platforms and complain about inadequate communication from advisors and instructors (Clay, et al., 2008; Cross, et al., 2013). Students reveal that they are overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work in online courses and admit to believing that online courses would be easier than their face-to-face counterparts (Clay, et al., 2008). Due to its nature of existing in an virtual platform, students may also need guidance navigating personal challenges regarding feelings of isolation, as well as the expected technological and study-skill support (Cross, et al., 2013). In this context, the appreciative approach to asking positive, open-ended questions to discover student characteristics and build on existing strengths becomes an effective mechanism when paired with intrusive communication practices to support online student success.

**Current Advising Practices Utilizing Emerging Technologies**

Distance learner programs have reported attrition rates as high as 50 percent, about a 15-20 percent difference when compared to traditional face-to-face courses (Britto & Rush, 2013; Clay, et al., 2008; Gravel, 2012). A study conducted at a large East-coast university discovered that when targeted, proactive advisement and mandatory online orientations are implemented, online retention rates increase between 10 to 15 percent (Clay, et al., 2008). Additionally, the implementation of early-warning alert software and additional communication avenues for students, such as email, instant-chat, and video conferencing, can increase retention by nearly 30 percent (King & Alperstein, 2015).

In their research, Waldner, McDaniel and Widener (2011) discuss utilizing virtual technologies to enhance online student advisement and reach a diverse student body, including international and study-abroad individuals. The use of webcams, or both visual and audio platforms, provides a “richer mode of personal communication” (Waldner, et al., 2011, p. 552) and acts as a psychological reminder that students have social ties to their institution, campus resources and professional staff. Cranium Café is a newly established, innovative program that provides instant or scheduled video conferencing, shared screens, collaborative document editing, and can be accessed without downloading any software (Brown, 2014). Emerging technologies like Cranium Café allow academic advisors to participate in instant data transfer, and encourages time efficient, flexible, high-quality and personal-based advising sessions over the online platform for all students enrolled in distance learning courses (Brown, 2014; Waldner, et al., 2011).

Danielle Leek (2016), an Associate Professor at Grand Valley State University, incorporated appreciative advising into her email communications with students in the 2014-2015 academic year. Being conscious, personable, and creative in her attempts to incorporate the six phases of appreciative advising into her emails, she found the results to be an effective “compliment to a faculty advisor’s practice” (Leek, 2016, p. 4). Leek designed each email correspondence to touch on a different phase of appreciative advising, focusing on the “symbolic interaction theory which explains that *how* messages are understood and interpreted is a *function of* the exchanges and relationship between people” (Leek, 2016, p. 4). In her initial email featuring the Disarm phase, she included her contact information, office hours, a personal invitation to reach out to her for questions, her photograph, a request for photographic replies, and a brief, personalized commentary about her accomplishments from the last year (Leek, 2016). This email correspondence aimed to create a personal, open, and inviting relationship and make the advisor more approachable.

As part of the Dream phase, third in the series of six, Leek (2016) asked her students to think about their future and envision their accomplishments and goals. She encouraged students to participate in study abroad programs, volunteer activities, internships, on-campus workshops and highlighted previous student accomplishment and personal experiences to facilitate relationship building between advisor and student (Leek, 2016). The subsequent emails also continued the appreciative advising approach and aimed to provide students with guided pathways to success. Since this data collection only began in 2014, true implications and conclusions have not yet been drawn. However, it remains an important avenue of research for potentially increasing appreciative advising across multiple technological channels.

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research**

Further research must be conducted to determine if a combination of intrusive and appreciative advising approaches through virtual technologies can truly influence online student retention, persistence and attrition. Going beyond the primary use of email correspondences, video conferencing can and *should* be used to provide instant communication between advisor and student without losing the quality of message or inducing ambiguity.

Advisors who participate in virtual advising sessions should be conscious of how they implement the Disarm aspect of appreciative advising and seek to create a personalized, relatable, and inviting environment for students. The use of personal belongings such as paintings, family photographs, souvenir artifacts, plants, school mascots, and color-theory can lend to creating a virtual space in which the student feels at ease, open to communication, and a personalized connection to their advisor (Bloom, et al., 2008; Cleary, 2015). Additionally, photographs of smiling, happy, and engaging advisors should be incorporated into all email correspondences and staff websites to increase advisor approachability.

Advisors who hold designated virtual office hours can be contacted for immediate, detailed assistance as a problem or crisis presents itself. This will provides a greater sense of belonging and student satisfaction with the institution in comparison to alternate methods, such as delayed email responses or student travel to their physical campus location. If online students were required to register and report their Skype or other video conferencing usernames prior to registration, advisors would have the ability to initiate contact when low academic performances first occur. Additionally, technology such as Cranium Café should be implemented to allow for advisors and students to share screens so that forms can be filled out together to eliminate error on the behalf of the student (Brown, 2014). This will also increase time efficiency and reduce the overwhelming reliance on email for plans of study, registration, informed consent, and other items of academic necessity.

Academic advising for online students should be implemented in a way that incorporates the intrusive aspect of proactive, frequent contact at the start of low academic performance and the appreciative advising approach which stresses rapport, development and building on student strengths. Both qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted to measure retention, attrition, student satisfaction, and student expectation of success after implementation of this model. Based upon research studies of a similar nature, it is estimated that by incorporating an alternative approach for academic advising into distance learning programs, retention and student persistence should increase between 15-35 percent from where it exists today.

Additional literature is required to examine and support the assumptions of this article. Key areas of future research within this topic are:

1. Do online students prefer traditional face-to-face advisement or virtual advisement when the appreciative advising approach is used across virtual technologies within the individual advising session?
2. How might the use of virtual advising technologies increase cost efficiency for higher education academic advising departments?
3. To what extent does appreciative advising increase student retention and decrease attrition across online courses and programs?

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