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# Alternative Uses for Course Management Systems: They Aren't Just for Classes Any More

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## Abstract

Universities are quickly moving from brick and mortar toward online classroom settings. The online setting provides students with increased accessibility and flexibility to attend classes they would normally be unable to attend. Unfortunately, for those students who never attend classes on campus, many campus resources are not accessible. Students who attend online are often challenged by a lack of access to on-campus resources such as the ability to contact an academic advisor, retrieve forms, obtain timely information, use the writing lab, and technology assistance. Additionally, many adult learners are returning to school to further their education after a long period of time. These students are surprised at their lack of technical skills needed to complete course work. Virtually all courses in the Purdue University Calumet School of Nursing were either hybrids or totally online. Thus the School needed to reach all students equally with student supportive services whether they were attending class on campus or through distant learning. In response to the aforementioned issues, the School created series of "support courses" within the University's course management system. These were not credit courses. Each student was provided access to them in his or her course list and interacted with them as if they were real distance learning courses. The alternative course development began with the "Undergraduate Academic Advisor" site where students accessed a myriad of advising resources. A "Graduate Advisor" support course was then developed to provide graduate students with resources needed for both their classroom and clinical experiences. In the "Carol's Corner" support course, all students found general school information, including information about student organizations. A "Faculty Intranet" site disseminated information rapidly among faculty and allowed them to interact with each other online. Lastly, the School developed a "Computer Tutor" support course to enhance technical skills of students to ensure program success. Changes and upgrades to each site were done based on user evaluations and needs by all participants. In general, faculty, staff and students evaluated these on-line course management additions positively.

## Introduction

The Purdue University School of Nursing (the School) offered many online and hybrid courses to both undergraduate and graduate students. As the department moved further and further away from the traditional brick and mortar classroom scenario, it became obvious that many support resources would have to be adapted as well. The University offered online applications, payment and other resources, but specifics such as advising, technical assistance and departmental information were not addressed.

As a result, nursing distance and on-campus students as well as faculty and staff were asked to complete a Needs Analysis. Based on the results, a common thread was noted. Distance education students repeatedly complained that they did not have the same access to staff resources as on-campus students. The students specifically addressed areas such as advising, timely announcements and the ability to receive forms and documents quickly. Classroom delivery was done very effectively but student support was found to be lacking. As a result, in an effort to reach the entire nursing student population more effectively, the School developed a series of "support courses" within the University's course management system to assist both on-campus and distance students. These were not credit courses, but functioned like what business calls intranet sites: and they appear on each student's course list, accessible 24/7 with forms, information, links, and often e-mail features.

The existing course management system was chosen as the vehicle for five support courses. First, the system offered a Web-based medium that was private. The course management system required logins and passwords issued to students, faculty, and staff by the university. Additionally, for those support courses that used e-mail, there was no risk of spam or other outside influences as e-mail within the course management system was totally internal to the system. Finally, the system provided a one-stop shop for all the services being provided to students, faculty, and staff. All appropriate support courses appeared automatically on a registered user's course list.

The initial need was developed for the Academic Advisor, who had to reach over 400 undergraduate students. Once that first support course was created, other needs arose and sites were created to address them:

For students, the School created an Undergraduate Academic Advisor, a Graduate Advisor, a Computer Tutor, and a support course to provide nursing students with needed information not covered in other sites. The goal of these support courses was to provide all students with 1) easy access to forms, plans of study, and other pertinent information; 2) enhanced student success; 3) quick information to our students; 4) easy e-mail access from staff to students and among classmates, and 5) reduced departmental costs. Most recently, a fifth site was created as a department intranet for faculty and staff to share information.

## Review of the Literature

There is little in the literature on using a Course Management System to replace the numerous traditional support structures for online college students as has been done at the Purdue University Calumet's School of Nursing. The literature available focused

on student needs with a variety of approaches towards filling those needs.

An article published in *Online Classroom* ("Advances in Online Student Advising", 2004) targeted the specific need for advising online, noting that this change was due to technological advances and the way instruction is now being delivered. The article discusses how many institutions provide general student services, but still lack online advising capability.

Student success was discussed in two articles. Dearnley (2003) studied nursing students who required support in technical, social, and academic areas. Dearnley was concerned with the ability of adult learners to use new technology as well as have the confidence necessary to be successful. Dearnley concluded that student support was essential to becoming successful regardless of the method of delivery. Distance learners in Brazil received support via the Internet (de Moraes, Matuzawa and Fiuza, 2003) but without the use of a course management system. The conclusion was reached that support was fundamental to achieve student success.

Computer literacy was also an issue for support. Michalick (2004) addressed the need for computer literacy for distance students and discussed her university's approach to accommodate its students. This article suggested that students take a class in course management software usage prior to beginning actual course work. Gaide (2005) addressed the issue of how to overcome the lack of computer and library skills among distance learners, using an orientation approach to assess and upgrade student skills to improve both satisfaction and retention. The author concluded that for online students to be successful, a good online support system must be in place.

While the specifics of using a course management system for student support was not addressed, the need for support was clearly an issue for many.

To address both advising and support issues, Purdue University Calumet's School of Nursing has maximized its course management system as a student support resource. The course management system offered a wealth of tools and resources that could be used to provide student support in a variety of ways. The biggest hurdle in using a course management system for advising was from the advisor who was not used to using the software.

## **Method**

The School moved its entire R.N. completion program online, resulting in a number of students who never attended classes on campus. The School needed to advise almost 500 undergraduate students and provide distance learners with the same information as their traditional classmates in a timely manner. As a result, the first support course created was the Nursing Advisor site.

Initially, staff resistance was encountered. With training and determining what tools worked best for the Advisor, resistance was overcome. For the most part, students were used to using the course management system for their classes, so resistance from students was minimal.

Within the Nursing Advisor site, pages created contained information about the undergraduate advisor including name, e-mail address, phone number, location, office hours, how and with whom to make an appointment, and the advisor's photo. Additionally, the Nursing Advisor site hosted a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). The FAQ page is updated as needed.

Also included in the Undergraduate Academic Advisor was a module containing links to all department plans of study for undergraduate nursing students. These links sent students to the department's public website, where the plans of study were hosted. Because the plans of study resided on the public website, the plans only needed to be updated on the website, which ensured timely, accurate information.

Additionally, the designers included a module containing links to other resources, such as the School of Nursing Undergraduate Handbook, Undergraduate Faculty Page, School of Nursing Home Page, the University's Transfer Equivalency page, Financial Aid Page, and Scholarship Page.

A Program Updates module showed any changes or class information that needed to be quickly disseminated to students. For example, the School recently used Program Updates to inform students of a change in their clinical assignments and locations.

A Scholarship Information module was included to advise students of any scholarship opportunities that might be available to them. The designers could include application forms, criteria for awarding the scholarship, and forms for recommendations.

The Academic Advisor also included modules for School of Nursing programs, complete with forms pertinent to a student's particular program. Modules were included for Bachelor's Completion, Bachelor's Generic, Accelerated Second Degree, and LPN to Bachelors Degree. Within each module, students were able to download forms that corresponded to their specific Plans of Study. At this time, there is no plan for forms that can be completed and submitted online. Most recently, the designers created a module for posting departmental newsletters.

The School's academic advisor posted announcements and contacted students via the course management system's internal e-mail. Additionally, using the internal e-mail system, the Advisor sent targeted group e-mails to students within a specific program. E-mail within the support course is advantageous to the advisor because all advising e-mails will appear in one location. The Nursing Advisor has succeeded in its prime mission. The site was not designed to give students individual advising information, but to provide more generic information to students quickly and efficiently. Academic Advisor has recorded over 2,500 hits per semester for approximately 475 students.

The most commonly used portion of the Nursing Advisor is the Program Updates module, followed by the Advisor Information page, then e-mail. As a result of the Nursing Advisor site, distance students have access to all of the same resources as on campus students. An unexpected benefit of putting advising resources online was that the Nursing Advisor site reduced departmental printing costs. Students now print their own plans of study, clinical assignments, and forms.

The success of the Academic Advisor led to several other support courses, the next was called "Graduate Student Resources and Advising Information" (Graduate Advisor). Its purpose was to disseminate information, forms, and other materials pertinent to nursing graduate students who took classes both on and off campus. Like the undergraduate Academic Advisor, it was not designed to provide personal advising for students.

Within the Graduate Advisor is a module entitled "Clinical Packets". This module was broken down further by class (e.g. NUR 613, NUR 623). Within each class were documents such as the syllabus, objectives for the course, practicum information, preceptor forms, and examples of letters that the School sends to preceptors. Additionally, students were able to download general preceptor information, a preceptor credential form and a practicum time sheet.

A Miscellaneous Forms module contained documents that all graduate nursing students needed to complete, such as the Communicable Disease Policy and a Statement of Refusal of Hepatitis B Vaccine. All forms were easily downloadable.

The Important Links module contained links for sites both external and internal to the University. External links included professional licensing, state regulatory agencies, and other professional organizations for advanced practice nurses. Internal university links include Purdue Calumet Bookstore, Purdue Calumet Graduate Program, and the Purdue Calumet Nursing Home Page.

The University posted Plans of Study sheets on the public website for prospective and current students. These sheets listed all required and elective courses, that students checked off as their courses were completed. Included in the Graduate Advisor is a folder that contains a Plan of Study for each program offered by the nursing graduate school.

Like the Nursing Advisor, the Graduate Advisor included scholarship information. Links and/or downloadable information on scholarships were posted for student edification.

Because these are nursing programs, the designers included a module dedicated to certification. This module contains links to credentialing bodies as well as downloadable certification-exam applications. To correspond with this module, another module provided students with resources for certification-review courses. The module housed information on the various review courses available.

A much smaller but a very necessary support course, was created for general school information. This support course, named Carol's Corner for its owner, contained information and resources for both undergraduate and graduate nursing students. There was a module for student organizations, broken down into graduate and undergraduate folders. The various student organizations were able to post information pertinent to their groups.

Additionally, there was a module for information about the Nursing Resource Center, a computer lab for nursing students only. This module contained information regarding the lab hours, contact information, staffing details and available hours.

Contained in the Must-Have Information folder were documents such as locations of CPR classes and any other documents that all students required including a Tip for Nursing Research Page that was posted by the library staff.

After a second needs analysis was completed, it was determined that many students required a "support course" that helped them use computers and the software that nursing programs required. As a result, the School designed a Computer Tutor course.

Within Computer Tutor, a was module created to house short, downloadable instructions on using software programs such as Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word and Windows. Additionally, tutorials were added for topics such as File Management and Podcasting. Finally, the library included a tutorial on library resources.

Additionally, Computer Tutor has a module for both internal and external links. This folder links students to the School's Writing Center and the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL).

Computer Tutor links students to videos that train them in techniques for assessing patients. These training videos were loaded on a campus media server and links to the videos were provided so students can stream them to personal home computers. Both graduate and undergraduate students used the assessment videos.

Finally, Computer Tutor contains a discussion forum for questions that students might have about topics not covered in the existing tutorials. Students can post questions and either the site owner or their classmates responded. Quite often their classmates respond first.

The last of these five support courses created was a School intranet for faculty and staff. All nursing school personnel with course management accounts were included. Like the previous support courses, this one contained several modules pertinent to the staff and faculty in the School of Nursing.

The most popular module was Documents. Contained within it were the School of Nursing Faculty Handbook, a home address and phone number list for all personnel, and a list of all committees and members.

A second module housed the minutes from all Faculty Meetings. Additionally, there was a module folder for Shared Learning. Contents of the Shared Learning folder include Rubrics, Podcasting, Conferences, Videos, and General Tips.

A module was also created to host links to Human Resource forms and the forms for Professional Development. Finally, a Training Module folder offered tutorials on the use of software, specifically written for faculty and staff.

Table 1 consolidates the features of each alternative course.

Table 1

*Course Features*

Name of Online Course	Features
Nursing Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advisor contact information</li> <li>How to make an appointment</li> <li>Frequently Asked Question page (FAQ's)</li> <li>Plans of study for all available programs</li> <li>Internal and external links</li> <li>Email access to the advisor</li> <li>Program updates</li> <li>Undergraduate scholarship information</li> <li>Downloadable required forms</li> <li>Announcements</li> </ul>
Graduate Student Resources and Advising Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific course documentation</li> <li>Plans of study for all available programs</li> <li>Internal and external links</li> <li>Discussion forums</li> <li>Graduate scholarship information</li> <li>Certification information</li> <li>Downloadable required forms</li> <li>Announcements</li> </ul>
Carol's Corner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact information</li> <li>Hours of operation</li> <li>Tips and other student resource materials</li> <li>Email access to the site owner and other students</li> <li>Library resources</li> <li>Nursing club information</li> </ul>
Jills Computer Tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short tutorials on a variety of software used by the School</li> <li>Internal and external links</li> <li>Training videos</li> <li>Discussion forums</li> </ul>
School of Nursing Intranet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School documentation (i.e. faculty handbook)</li> <li>Faculty meeting minutes</li> <li>Internal and external links</li> <li>Discussion forums</li> <li>Short tutorials on a variety of software</li> </ul>

**Outcomes**

Response to these courses has been very positive from both on-campus and off-campus students. Within the first week of opening the Undergraduate Advisor support course, the advisor posted an announcement about hospital orientations, with a date, place, and time. She expected approximately 90 students to attend this orientation. Over 125 students actually did attend. The advisor attributes the attendance to the announcement she posted.

Additionally, the advisor posts announcements about making pre-advising appointments prior to registration. She has reported that the number of students who actually now come in for pre-advising has tripled.

Since the launch of Academic Advisor, the advisor has reported that students feel more “in touch” with the campus, its operations and expectations. Students are now fully aware of when they need to do pre-advising as well as the curriculum they are to follow. Students are able to e-mail short questions through the site to the advisor and get a response within 24 hours. This ease of communication has been a positive outcome for both the advisor and students.

Today the School enrolls approximately 475 undergraduate nursing students, 100 graduate students and a staff of approximately 50. Usage on the various sites are listed in Table 2, below.

Table 2

*Course Usage*

	Nursing Advisor	Graduate Student Resources and Advising Information	Carol's Corner	Computer Tutor	School of Nursing Intranet
Number of visits between January 1 to April 10, 2008	1,491	527	1,519	959	71
Average number of user sessions per day	16	6	17	11	2
Average number of user sessions on weekdays	19	7	18	12	1
Average number of user sessions on weekends	10	4	13	8	10
Viewed announcements	576	97	597	30	Not applicable
Used E-Mail	403	227	757	Not applicable	6
Visited web links	334	81	17	156	7
Used discussion forums	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	751	48
Total usage	3,542	3,042	3,218	1,785	161
Time spent	44 hours, 3 minutes	7 hours, 46 minutes	3 hours, 26 minutes	10 hours, 21 minutes	4 hours, 46 minutes

**Conclusion**

Using the course management system to facilitate a number of student support problems has been very beneficial to the School. The School has been able to address advising for both graduate and undergraduate students in an efficient manner. All participants, both on and off campus, have benefited from using the course management system for purposes other than its original intention. The advisor is able to handle a large number of students efficiently. Off-campus students have benefited by having the same information available to on-campus participants. Information is distributed in an effective and timely manner and has been well received by students. Students used the provided tutorials to upgrade their computer skills. Departmental costs were reduced. Students enjoy obtaining answers to issues, questions, and problems quickly. The addition of these support courses has been a win-win situation for all participants.

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