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# Virtual Advising: Delivering Student Services

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## **Introduction**

In the increasingly digitized world of higher education, student support services such as advising more often than not have lagged behind the infusion of technology into the curriculum. With a growing nontraditional, working student population, more students utilizing distance education options, and limited student services resources, advisers are looking at ways to use technology to assist with the process of academic advising. An investigation of current online support services shows that colleges and universities vary in their development of web based services. For those who are just beginning to assess the use of technology to support the diverse needs of students, there are some colleges and universities that can serve as models of how we can reconcile the "high touch" services like advisement with the impersonal "high tech" environment of the World Wide Web (Helfgot, 1995). This paper will examine the current objectives and traditional purposes of academic advising and the current methods of bringing support services online in light of those objectives.

As distance education became a prominent feature on the landscape of higher education, a comprehensive network of student support services was destined to follow. Some services easily lent themselves to distance formats, but a preliminary examination of the National Association of Academic Advisor (NACADA) documents describing core values and standards, gives us some insight as to why distance academic advisement has not developed at the same rate as other distance services. NACADA's professional core values reflect a belief that advisement is a personal and individualized process which forms a critical link between students and their institutions. Advisors are to "nurture, encourage, inform, and support" students during their academic careers. An academic advising program ideally promotes learning and also encourages students to develop intellectually, physically, and personally (NACADA Standards and Guidelines and Core Values Statements). In other words, advisement is not simply the process of selecting classes each academic term, but in fact, when done well, involves many people and departments on campus working as a team.

## **Current Practices Integrating Technology and Advisement**

Through a grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) was able to evaluate online student support offerings at colleges and universities in the 15 states they represent and select the current best practices. The services evaluated range in type from registration and financial aid to advisement and personal counseling. Let us briefly examine what WICHE selected under academic advisement.

- Indiana State University offers a complete virtual index of support. From a main page, students can access a wide variety of services including email access to an advisor, calculating GPA, exploring scholarships, declaring a major, policy information and more.
- Indiana University-Purdue offers an academic advising page from which students can access information on exploring majors, academic probation, transfer, and orientation as well as getting answers to some frequently asked questions ([www.columbus.iupui.edu/iupucss/academic.html](http://www.columbus.iupui.edu/iupucss/academic.html)).
- North Dakota University developed convenient online general education documents arranged by area ([www.ndsu.edu/ndsu/deott/registrar/geneds.stm](http://www.ndsu.edu/ndsu/deott/registrar/geneds.stm)).
- The University of Colorado at Boulder offers the PLUS—personal lookup system. Students can search and register for classes, access grades, apply for financial aid, and explore scholarships ([www.colorado.edu/PLUS/plusguide.html](http://www.colorado.edu/PLUS/plusguide.html)).
- Washington State University developed a comprehensive student advising and online advising resource manual. The manual includes 12 main sections covering all aspects of advising from admissions and general education requirements to advising and self help information. ([salc.wsu.edu/Advising/newman/default.asp](http://salc.wsu.edu/Advising/newman/default.asp)).
- Weber State University offers a variety of online student services including email access to an advisor and a career counselor, tutoring, and self help tips especially for online students ([wsuonline.weber.edu/advising](http://wsuonline.weber.edu/advising)).

Current best practices in advisement and technology primarily utilize the World Wide Web. In light of that, what are the essential elements of a good advising web page? The research to date is fairly consistent. According to the WICHE and NACADA guidelines for developing an advisor's web page (Wellborn, 1998 and Carnevale, 2000), the basis for a comprehensive advising site should include the following elements:

1. A clear and concise explanation of core curriculum (or general education) requirements. Advisement usually involves a comprehensive explanation of curriculum requirements and a review of what a student has left to complete. Making this information available online will free up some time, will give students greater control and responsibility for the advisement process, and is essential information for students trying to determine course selection if they are unable to meet with an advisor.
2. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section. Every advisor spends a portion of the day repeating answers to the same questions. Putting answers to FAQs online saves time for staff and gives students access to answers as needed.
3. Informational pages for special populations/self help assistance. While there are certain common needs among students, there are segments of the population with additional unique concerns. Freshmen, students without declared majors, students on academic probation, and commuters are examples of groups with additional needs for support. Examples of information to include for advisement: career/major information, study skills building worksheets, an explanation of the academic standing policy, information on how to get computer access and technical support.
4. Links to related university sites. Holistic advisement involves supporting a student both academically and personally. Links to campus services such as student activities calendars, campus organization pages, career services and academic lab locations and hours, and intramural offerings are needed to make sure all needs are being met.
5. One-on-one access to advisors. To generate a more personal environment and provide opportunities for interaction, advisors are experimenting with various forms of electronic communications. This is the most critical element in a comprehensive advising web site. If advising were simply a matter of giving students a standardized package of information, there

would be no reason to have advisors. Access to a qualified advisor can be achieved through the use of chat rooms, list serves, and email, to mention a few of the most common methods.

## **Discussion**

Assuming my own institution is typical of a mid-sized, regional university, many student services including advisement continue to be campus-bound, face-to-face enterprises. As it has grown, the responsibility for advisement has been divided among various departments on campus. This was done in part to distribute the workload among the limited campus resources and to link students with common needs to departments best able to support them. As a result, we have: (1) students being advised by faculty in their major departments; (2) undecided students and some pre-majors advised in the Freshman Center by a combination of specially trained faculty volunteers and professional advisors; (3) students with learning disabilities advised by counselors in Student Development (the university's counseling center); (4) students with remedial English, reading, and/or math requirements advised by the staff in Learning Support who teach the remedial classes; (5) Honors students advised by Honors College faculty and staff or by trained peer advisors. These attempts at providing personal attention to all of our students have resulted in a fragmented distribution of information and non-standardized methods of advising. Many of the departments involved have put information on their various web pages. An examination of the advising-related web pages reveals that many of the essential components of an advising site already exist. Some advising examples from the university web page include:

- Banner is our student information system. Available from the main page, it allows students to look at course offerings, search for open classes, register for classes, adjust schedules, and access personal financial and academic information.
- The bookstore is fully online and students are able to purchase books, shirts, and other supplies over the web.
- Financial Aid has a comprehensive page from which students can apply for aid, contact their counselor, get answers to frequently asked questions, and print off forms.
- The library makes it easy for students to conduct research and have materials sent to them over the web.
- The Vice President for Academic Affairs site has a comprehensive explanation of the core curriculum requirements by area and the beginnings of an "advising manual" from which students can learn how to explore majors, find an advisor, and examine various academic policies.
- The Freshman Center has a "core curriculum guide" and a campus resource referral form, both of which can be filled out online and printed.
- Each department has a homepage on which it explains major program requirements.

In our eagerness to help students using the available technology, we have put a lot of information on the university's web site, but to find all of these services, a student must search and sort through the university's entire web suite. The result is something not unlike an automated answering system—shuffle from one connection to another with no guarantee of ever being adequately served. However, many of the elements of a comprehensive advising site exist. For those of us feeling the crunch to use effectively existing resources to provide all students with quality support services, much of the groundwork has been done.

## **Conclusion**

NACADA's Commission on Advisement and Technology continues to examine the use of technology in advisement. There is no question that for many of us--staff, faculty, and students--

our lives have been made easier through the use of technology. It was not so many years ago that we were working from paper records that at times necessitated students going from office to office to gather all the information needed for advisement. Arguably one of the best tools has been the development of comprehensive student information systems which contain students' academic records and personal information. Having this information compiled in one source greatly reduces the amount of time spent on clerical tasks and provides easy access to pertinent information during advisement. Email gives us the opportunity to connect with students 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The World Wide Web gives us the capability to access information at the touch of a button. These advances enhance the advisement process, but we must remain mindful that while the "high tech" of computers should not replace the "high touch" of the advisor, technology can further enhance the advisement process and make services more accessible for our students.

In higher education where the sharing of information and knowledge is our lifeblood, technology has provided us the means to deliver more information, faster, and to increasingly more people. Compared to Student Services, at most colleges and universities Academic Affairs is further advanced in the use of technology to enhance students' educational experiences. Some observers fear that we sacrifice personal attention for speed, convenience, and the ability to reach more students with fewer human resources. How does an institution use technology to deliver the comprehensive "whole health" advisement described by NACADA and still hold true to its mission of providing educational excellence in a personal environment? With increased demands for non-standard hour access to student services, there is pressure to examine current offerings and explore ways to deliver quality support services online. In the technological era we live in, traditional, face-to-face, time and location defined services are no longer adequate for all students. As WICHE acknowledged after evaluating the current best practices in its area, no one institution does it all well (Carnevale, 2000). This is a developmental process that changes as rapidly as the technology with which we work. As technological communications continue to advance, the quality of our personal interactions via the web will improve. The challenge at this stage is to provide all our students, especially our under-served populations, with the breadth and quality of support in a user-friendly format so they can be nurtured, encouraged and supported throughout their academic careers.

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