Advising Practices of Undergraduate Online Students in Private Higher Education

Adam Morris
Doctoral Student, Higher Education
University of Arkansas

Michael Miller
Professor, Higher Education
University of Arkansas

Abstract

Many private colleges have begun offering courses or programs in technologically-mediated formats, specifically utilizing online or internet based programs. These programs provide opportunity and access to unique student populations, and the personal relationship element of private colleges is often challenged in these distributed programs. This challenge is particularly acute in advising relationships. Subsequently, the current study was designed to explore the use of advising best practices by private colleges' online programs. As an exploratory study, baseline data were collected through a literature-based, researcher-developed survey instrument. With a 40% response rate to the survey, data suggested that many programs are not intentional in their construction of advising protocols to serve online students.

Challenges and Opportunities in Advising Undergraduate Students Online in Private Higher Education

Higher education institutions have increasingly explored non-traditional means for making their courses, programs, and instruction available to broad audiences (Mills, 2002). This has been particularly true for private colleges and universities that have made strides to diversify revenue, creating a new stream of income through distributed education programs to complement their on-campus, traditional college experience. As private colleges have expanded their program offerings to more on-line environments, they have faced a variety of challenges, including how to protect the unique elements of the college's heritage and tradition, while simultaneously making degree programs accessible and convenient to a different population of learners. This means that private colleges, unlike their public counterparts, must find creative ways to keep their value-added dimensions, such as individualized attention and low faculty-student ratios; both challenging issues for traditional academic programs that are moved into online environments.

Challenges associated with migrating to online learning environments have been increasingly common during the past decade. These challenges have been less focused on the integrity and acceptance of online instruction (Mills, 2002), and more directed at creating active teaching and learning in otherwise passive learning environments (Seo, 2007). Additionally, private colleges have particularly struggled to maintain the distinctiveness of their campus experience in online environments. This is particularly true when private colleges have relied on personal relationships between faculty and students (low faculty-staff ratios) as an integral component of their educational experience. In online environments, this challenge is most visible in the area of advising.

Academic advising can take on different formats, ranging from the highly technical experience of identifying courses and course sequences for enrollment, but can also take on very developmental aspects that include career exploration, course and program identification that meets students' expectations, and the process of encouraging self-discovery. In online and in many technologically mediated

environments, the effort to maintain personal relationships is problematic, and frequently the distinctiveness of an academic culture is dissipated (Miller & Husmann, 1996; Moore, 1993).

The current study was specifically designed to explore how private colleges and universities, those with the greatest teaching mission, operate academic advising in online environments. The focus of the research is to describe the processes that are being used for advising undergraduate students enrolled in online programs of study and the challenges and opportunities that senior level academic affairs administrators perceive regarding the advising process. Therefore, the guiding research questions for the study were: *What are the characteristics of advising in private college online programs?* And, *Which advising practices are typically employed in online programs by private college faculty and staff?*

Background of the Study

As online course offerings have increased, the impact of remoteness from campus has on student satisfaction and retention has been explored. Specifically, the issue of online advising has been identified as a challenge for online programs, particularly those that have a desire to develop a sense of community among students (Bonhomme & Knerly, 2001). One value-added dimension to private higher education has traditionally been the ability to build community among students, and they have relied on strong advising and close personal relationships to accomplish this (Birnbaum, 1988), along with the necessity to present an image that is distinct from public colleges (Steinberg, 2002). Although there are many references to advising best practices, most notably those advanced by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2005), the needs of online learners has generally been overlooked (Visser & Visser, 2000). Some specific areas that online learners need support and advising in typically include dealing with the stress and isolation related to coursework, timeliness and time management in completing assignments, counsel on continuation or knowing when to drop out, and assistance with technology.

Many college students can benefit from having a good relationship with their academic advisor (Lorenzetti, 2004). The relationship between advisor and student becomes more critical for online students because the advisor may be the student's only point of contact for the institution, and may in fact be one of a few points of reference for a student as coursework is taken (Lorenzetti, 2004). Online students can feel isolated and alone while completing coursework, as students are not physically on a campus interacting face-to-face with their fellow students and faculty members (LaPadula, 2003). This feeling of isolation can result in frustration directed at courses, the institution, and the entire experience, and can be especially problematic when students cannot readily find or get answers to their questions. This isolation can hinder the student's performance academically and can subsequently lead to withdrawal from the institution. Students, through advising, have the potential to feel better connected to their institution, and as a result, institutions need to explore how advising is factored into the overall program experience. Also, with many private colleges reliance on tuition, it is important for them to retain their students (Tang, Tang & Tang, 2004).

Online students, as with all students, expect to have a timely response to their questions and concerns. One of the problems with online programs and complete reliance on e-mail (although the telephone is still an effective tool) is the easy procrastinate to answering a student's question when there is no physically presence. Advisors, though frequent communication, can motivate and guide their advisees (Lorenzetti, 2004). An online student can be easily frustrated when calls and e-mails are not returned in a timely manner, and as most online students live at a distance or cannot take time off of their jobs for regular business day appointments with advisors. A key strategy for reducing stress and frustration among online students is active communication initiated by the institution (Lorenzetti, 2004). Also, when an advisor is actively seeking out student concerns, future problems and confusion can be prevented or resolved before they lead to negative consequences or student drop-out. The essential activity for powerful advising is that the student experiences an environment where there is real care and attention directed toward all students and that there is an effort to communicate important information about the entire program.

Online students must have been described as needing 'high quality' and 'high touch' advising for institutions to have good retention (Dahl, 2004). This means that advising is purposeful, direct, and is of a high frequency. This is not substantially different than advising for traditional students, but it does

mean that methods of contacting the student are different. One of the primary differences is that in face-to-face advising, students and the advisor can spend informal time getting to know and understand each other and to make value judgments about the worth of intended and unintended conversation. In online environments, in particular, there is little to no informal conversation that can lead to a better understanding of unspoken meanings and messages. Advisors must find a way to learn the unspoken about students, those sensory descriptors of students that can not be found in commonly used technologically mediated communication (namely email and text messaging, although personal streaming video may allow for increased and visually enhanced determinations of informal messages). One tool that has been described as helpful for advisors is a strong data base management system that can provide such information as follow-up contacts or automated warning messages (Lorenzetti, 2004). Unfortunately, most college faculty have limited exposure and experience in the growing variety of data base management schemes that are used in both the public and private sectors.

Online students expect to have high quality when interacting with their advisors online (Lorenzetti, 2006). Students are used to web-sites with online tutorials, downloads, video images, and being able to have continuous access to any product they may want to view and purchase. Online services have become a habitual experience, and students expect the same services from higher education as they would get when shopping online (Lorenzetti, 2006). This puts a tremendous pressure on the small private college that may have had online programming for only a limited time. Online learners may be patient initially; however the importance of having the technology equivalent to other industries will be necessary in order to be competitive in the online higher education market.

Research Methods

As a largely descriptive study based on the conceptual issue of the importance of advising to private colleges as an element that helps create a 'value-added' perception and helps to justify higher tuition costs, the study employed the creation of a survey instrument. The research-team developed instrument was divided into two sections, the first of which requested baseline information about online program offering. This baseline information included basic descriptors about how verifying respondents use of online programs, in what disciplines the programs are offered, and who participates in advising. The second section was based on the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2005) desirable student learning and development outcomes. Study participants were asked to review nine learning and development outcomes and rate them on a continuum between "never" and "always."

The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts and determined to have face validity for the exploratory purpose of the study. The panel included four private college senior academic affairs officers and two directors of distance education in private liberal arts colleges. The review panel offered suggestions for clarifying wording, and all agreed that the inclusion of the best practice advising strategies as defined by CAS were accurate and applicable for the design of the study.

The sample was selected from private liberal arts colleges listed in the Higher Education Directory (Burke, 2006). The sample size of 150 was selected based on Alreck and Settle's (1985) finding that sample response variation changes little in samples over 100. The initial size of 100 was expanded to initially account for non-respondents. The sample was identified by first randomly selecting the institutions from the 2006 Higher Education Directory, and then looking at each selected institution on the internet to identify the senior academic affairs officer. This individual's contact information was identified, and was included in the study.

The survey instrument was sent as an electronic e-mail attachment in the summer of 2007. This distribution strategy resulted in the study accepting the assumption that technology is embraced to some relatively high extent at the participating colleges, where completion of an online survey would be considered acceptable or routine. Following one week after the email was sent, an additional email was sent to remind senior academic affairs officers to participate. A third reminder was sent the following week.

Findings

In the first two weeks following the initial email and offer to participate in the study, 60 responses were

received. This 40% response rate was accepted, based on several scholars work that has indicated that this is level of participation is to be expected with computer related surveys (Larson & Smith, 1994; Schmacher & Morahan-Martin, 2001; Lee, 2003). An additional 75 institutions were selected at random and emailed the survey, and none of them responded within a ten day period of time. As an attempt to create baseline, descriptions of these online programs the researchers accepted the 40% response rate

Of the respondents, 11 senior academic affairs officers indicated that they did offer undergraduate degree programs online, 41 indicated that they did not offer any online programs, and one offered a program in a hybrid format (see Table 1). These 11 institutions offered a total of 51 exclusively online bachelor's degree programs (averaging nearly 5 degrees per institution), and a large number of hybrid programs (n=24) that utilized both online and in-person instruction. The majority of these programs were identified as being offered in a business related field or in the liberal arts, and five institutions indicated that they made use of professional advisors for their online programs, and six institutions indicated that they relied on faculty advising. One institution indicated that they utilized a staff member as an advisor (see Table 1).

The next section of the survey provided an opportunity for respondents to indicate their advising practices in relation to the CAS Standards for Academic Advising. These nine statements were adapted from the CAS Standards (2005), with the prompt "do your online advisors" added to precede the advising objective. The senior academic affairs officer at each institution was asked to indicate if this was activity was pursued or accomplished with the online advising always, frequently, rarely, or never.

Over half of the respondents indicated that three of the activities were undertaken by advisors frequently or always. As shown in Table 2, these included *encouraging meaningful interpersonal relationships with staff, faculty, and students* (100% of respondents), *promoting diversity* (67% of respondents), and *setting personal and educational goals* (58% of respondents). Conversely, these senior academic affairs officers also indicated that three of the practices were rarely or never undertaken by advisors. These included *assisting their advisees in becoming effective communicators* (66.5% indicated rarely or never), *promoting healthy behaviors* (75% rarely/never), and *assisting in developing a satisfying and productive lifestyle* (67% rarely/never).

As shown in Table 3, data were stratified by type of advisor utilized, categorizing respondents into two categories: those using professional advisors (n=5) and those using faculty advisors (n=6). Mean scores were then computed based on the frequency of advising practices, assigning numeric values to the frequency labels of always (4), frequently (3), rarely (2), and never (1).

There was consensus among the groups, and the overall mean score, that *encouraging meaningful relationships with staff, faculty, and students* (professional advisors 3.5, faculty advisors 2.6, and overall 3.36) was the most commonly applied advising practice. The least engaged in activity was the promotion of healthy behaviors (professionals, 2.3, faculty, 2.0, and overall 2.08). And although the overall mean for professional advisors was 2.75 and faculty advisors was 2.35, an ANOVA identified no statistically significant difference between the two sets of responses (f=6.25, p>.05).

Discussion

Although the response rate for the survey was determined to be acceptable, the usable number of responses returned for data analysis was disappointing. However, as a descriptive, exploratory study, the responses did provide an important insight into how advising is being handled in online programs. A follow-up study could be conducted with the surveys being directed to private institutions that indicate online programs. This may increase the total number of responses to the survey.

Advising in online programs is often relegated to navigating a student through sequential, structured coursework with little variability. The response patterns identified in this study related to the CAS Standards reinforce this, as online advising appeared to be more of an enrollment management tool than a developmental or educational activity. This is a contrary approach to much of the literature about effective advising in higher education generally, and is particularly contrary to the assumptions about value-added advising in private colleges. Additionally, with many private institutions pursuing online programs to expand enrollments and to open new revenue streams, advising may well be seen as an

afterthought to program development and profitability, suggesting the narrow view of program development as a set of prescribed courses rather than a holistic academic program, again running counter to conceptions of private higher education being concerned with the entire individual student's development. This should be a concern for academic administrators as it costs less to recruit a student than retain them. Private colleges are focused on growing their enrollment numbers, however adequate advising for the online learner should not be over looked.

Indeed, one of the greatest challenges in academic program management is to build and preserve programs, and not merely collections of courses. On-campus, live, traditional programs often struggle with intentionally designing activities for students, but they often do so informally, offering speakers, facilities for students to gather, bulletin boards, etc. With online programs, much of that informal networking is lost, and in fact the process of getting online to explore happenings even with those programs that attempt to offer virtual discussion or chat rooms requires a certain level of intentionality. Steps need to be taken for the online learner to feel connected to their institution. Online advising is a way for this connection to happen. This connection cannot happen without a comprehensive plan to reach the online learner. Just as programs would be planned and implemented for the traditional on-ground student the same type of programs must exist for students in technological-mediated formats. Institutions will need to "think outside the box" when it comes to programming since their student population cannot physically be on campus on a regular basis. With a concentrated effort advisors can have an impact on their online population leading to higher satisfaction and better retention.

Table 1

Participant Self-Report Program Description
N=53

Characteristic	Frequency
Number of undergraduate degree programs that are	
Exclusively on-line	51
Compressed/interactive video	0
Combination online and on-campus (can be remote campus site)	24
Mostly "live" courses with web/video supplement	14
Mostly Postal mail services with web/video/"live" supplements	0
Other	1
Disciplines with largest online undergraduate degree enrollment	
Liberal arts, studies, or humanities	3
University studies	0
Education	1
Business	5
Science	0
Agriculture	0
Social Sciences (including communications)	0
Applied studies	1
Other	2
Type of advisors primarily used for students in online/hybrid programs	
Professional advisors (full-time)	5
Faculty advisors	6
Staff advisors	1

Table 2.
Online Advising Practices Utilized by Private Higher Education Institutions

Characteristic	Always/Frequently	Rarely/Never
Do advisors set personal and educational goals for their advisees?	58%	42%
Do advisors assist their advisees in their career choices?	42	58
Do advisors assist their advisees in developing collaboration skills?	42	58
Do advisors assist their advisees in becoming effective communicators?	33.5	66.5
Do advisors promote healthy behaviors in their advisees?	25	75
Do advisors encourage meaningful interpersonal relationships with staff, faculty, and students in their advisees?	100	0
Do advisors promote diversity in their advisees?	67	33
Do advisors assist advisees in developing a satisfying and productive lifestyle?	33	67
Do advisors assist advisees in developing leadership skills?	41	59

Table 3.
Online Advising Practices Utilized by Private Higher Education Institutions

Characteristic	Professional Advisors (SD)	Faculty Advisors (SD)	Overall Mean (SD)
Do advisors set personal and educational goals for their advisees?	3.33 (.516)	2.4 (.894)	2.83 (.835)
Do advisors assist their advisees in their career choices?	2.33 (.516)	2.6 (.548)	2.42 (.515)
Do advisors assist their advisees in developing collaboration skills?	2.5 (.547)	2.4 (.548)	2.33 (.651)
Do advisors assist their advisees in becoming effective communicators?	2.67 (.816)	2.2 (.447)	2.33 (.778)
Do advisors promote healthy behaviors in their advisees?	2.33 (.816)	2.0 (.001)	2.08 (.669)
Do advisors encourage meaningful interpersonal relationships with staff, faculty, and students in their advisees?	3.5 (.547)	2.6 (.500)	3.36 (.505)
Do advisors promote diversity in their advisees?	3.17 (.752)	2.6 (.548)	2.75 (.866)
Do advisors assist advisees in developing a satisfying and productive lifestyle?	2.5 (.547)	2.0 (.707)	2.17 (.718)
Do advisors assist advisees in developing leadership skills?	2.5 (.547)	2.4 (1.14)	2.33 (.888)

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