
Academic Advising at a Distance: Proactive Programming to Assist with Student Success

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Abstract

Online learning in higher education continues to grow due to the flexibility it offers learners. Adult learners choose online learning at a rate much higher than residential learning. Adult learners in the online environment tend to be retained at a lower rate. To counteract lower retention rates, understanding student needs through targeted student satisfaction surveys is necessary. The academic advising department at The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus examined student data from a recent student satisfaction survey to understand adult learners' needs. Several proactive projects were implemented to address the identified needs with a result of increasing student satisfaction and retention. A discussion of the results and a summary view of the projects implemented are discussed.

Introduction

Online learning represents an opportunity for adult learners to earn a degree in a flexible format that fits within their busy lives. This mode of delivery has grown in popularity and requires intentional and proactive programming to assist with student success. Academic advising is an important aspect of an adult learner's institutional support to be successful and persist to graduation. Each semester The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus (PSUWC) offers a student satisfaction survey to undergraduate students soliciting feedback on current services. A review of adult learners, online learning, student satisfaction, and programming offered by World Campus academic advising is discussed.

Online Learning

Online course delivery is defined to include 80% of the course content delivered outside of a residential classroom (Allen, et al., 2018). Online learning has grown exponentially in the last several years (Ng & Baharom, 2018). Colleges and universities that feature online instruction as their primary educational format have seen marked enrollment increases at both the undergraduate and graduate level (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Adult student enrollment in online programs has been particularly robust, increasing by 5.5% in 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). This delivery method provides the desired flexibility that adult learners are seeking. Online learning has been wrongly criticized as a lesser mode of delivery due to ignoring quality factors including course design and assessment requirements

(Thongsri et al., 2019). The expected growth from adult learners choosing online programs requires a focus on intentional hands-on programming that creates opportunities for student success.

Adult Learners as Successful Learners

Adult learners return to pursue a degree in higher education through online learning for many reasons. Online learning is popular to adult learners due to flexibility of learning. Many online programs offer asynchronous learning. Asynchronous learning gives learners flexibility through no designated times to be in a classroom, compared to, synchronous learning which has designated times for learners to participate in real-time lectures (Berge & Huang, 2004). The demographic in higher education continues to shift with adult learners growing at a faster pace than traditional-aged learners. Adult learners are defined as either meeting the age criteria of 24 or of having a characteristic identified to meet the non-traditional criteria, e.g., working full time, military service (Hunter-Johnson & Niu, 2019).

Adult learners need flexibility due to time constraints with multiple priorities and choose the option of online programs to meet their needs (Ng & Baharom, 2018). Chen (2017) explained “an older student population that is qualitatively, developmentally, and socially very different from the traditional-age, late adolescent undergraduate student” (para. 9) requires institutions in higher education to become more diverse to meet individual needs. Adult learners studying online make up 47% of the higher education population (Notre Dame of Maryland University, 2018). According to Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory, adult learners have six characteristics of learning that provide a framework to use for student success programming (Twadell, 2019).

Malcolm Knowles-Developing Successful Adult Online Learners

Malcolm Knowles founded the Adult Learning Theory and it focused on six areas to assist in teaching adult learners (Knowles, 1975). The identified areas for learning can provide guidance of the importance of teaching style and how adult learner characteristics affect retention. The six areas include an understanding of why learning should occur; independent learning; using experience to understand content; identifying problems and taking a task-oriented approach; and identifying motivation (Twaddell, 2019). Incorporating these six areas when offering resources to adult learners align with the World Campus student satisfaction results discussed in a later section.

Knowles’ theory provides a framework of how programming can be offered for student satisfaction when studying online. At the forefront of supporting adult learner success is the characteristic of using experience and independence to learn a subject area. The World Campus academic advising office provides many different proactive services related to Knowles’ theory to improve satisfaction and contribute to student persistence, both inside and outside of the classroom. An introduction to Penn State World Campus explains why this theory is relevant to assisting online students in being successful.

The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus

The Pennsylvania State University is a land-grant mission higher education institution founded in 1855 that offers doctoral, master’s, bachelor’s, and associate degrees across 24 campuses (Penn State, n.d.). World Campus is the online delivery unit of The Pennsylvania State University, offering completely online degree programs with offices located at University Park, Pennsylvania. World Campus offers more than 150 programs and awards associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. World Campus has approximately 20,000 students including 11,000+ undergraduate students and 8,000+ graduate students (Penn State Office of Planning and Assessment, 2018). It is the second largest campus at Penn State behind only the University Park campus which has approximately 46,000 students (Penn State Office of Planning and Assessment, 2018).

There is a higher percentage of adult learners (82%) at World Campus compared to traditional-aged students (18%). (*U. S. News & World Report*, 2020). The average age of the undergraduate student population is 32 (Outreach & Online Analytics, 2020). There is an equal proportion of male and

female students (50%) each for undergraduate students (Outreach & Online Analytics, 2020). Undergraduate students make up a higher percentage of part-time students who attend World Campus (73%) (Outreach & Online Analytics, 2020). In terms of student demographics, 67% of undergraduate students attending World Campus identify primarily as White, 11.3 % are Hispanic, 7.6% identify as Black or African American and smaller background percentages include Asian, two or more races, unknown, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and International (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2020). Additionally, students attend online classes from the United States and several other countries including, China, Canada, Korea, India, United Arab Emirates, and South Africa.

World Campus Undergraduate Student Success

The World Campus Market Research department conducts a student satisfaction survey each spring and fall semester for all active undergraduate students. The following analysis focuses on the satisfaction survey results from the 2019–2020 academic year. The survey questions were designed to gather feedback from World Campus students regarding their experiences, including those with Academic Advising. Included in the survey were 30 open-ended, multiple choice, or yes/no questions that focused on student satisfaction related to faculty, courses, resources, and staff interactions. The survey included five demographic questions including student academic level, degree program intended, gender, enrollment status, and military affiliation.

Participants included 982 responses out of 1,902 polled World Campus undergraduate students. A representative sample was not selected because all responses were welcome and because of the diverse background of students (Claxton & Michael, 2020). Students were sent an email requesting that they complete the survey in the spring semester if they did not complete it in the fall semester. The data was analyzed by reviewing an average weight of each question and through common themes presented within the open-ended questions. All of the percentages presented below increased from the 2018-2019 academic year and after implementation of the projects implemented by the Academic Advising team.

Results

The common themes presented in the findings were class design, student resources, cost, customer service, affinity, and technology. For the purposes of this paper, the results shared will only include data related to student support services satisfaction. The overall satisfaction of World Campus undergraduate students is either extremely satisfied or satisfied (83%) compared to 12% neutral, not satisfied, or not satisfied at all. The overall satisfaction area is inclusive of all areas related to World Campus. Customer service, which includes Academic Advising, ratings are similar at 83% extremely satisfied or satisfied compared to 11% neutral, not satisfied, or not at all satisfied. Identifying proactive programming opportunities required a closer look at individual student satisfaction areas of affinity and connection.

Gauging affinity required students to choose from categories of very unhappy, unhappy, neutral, happy, and very happy. Affinity was broken down into two areas, affinity by student welcome gift and affinity by customer service satisfaction. Both had the majority of students sharing they felt either happy or very happy about World Campus, student welcome gift group was at 87% and customer service group was at 96%. Affinity for an institution is tied to connection and is an important factor to consider for student satisfaction.

There is an equal number of students who feel they are connected to World Campus (51%) compared to those who are neutral or do not feel they are connected (50%). However, when asked how students feel about World Campus, the majority of students are happy or extremely happy (84%), compared to neutral, unhappy, or extremely unhappy (11%). Although students are not feeling as connected, they are, in general, happy with World Campus and may not need to feel connected. Adult learners have competing priorities and may not have the time or motivation to build connection through activities outside of the classroom.

Two categories were reviewed for student support services, familiarity and satisfaction. Student support services include academic support, career services, co-curricular programs, disability programs, library services, mental health services, and military student services. Familiarity with each area had a high percentage range of 67 to 91% based on the individual area rated. Satisfaction had a slightly lower percentage range of 61 to 91% based on the individual area rated. Identifying preemptive programming in these individual areas was important to maintain the higher percentages in student contentment.

A mixture of positive comments and recommended improvements were included in the open-ended feedback area of the survey. Three thematic areas of recommended improvements for student support services were technology, communication, and the ease of understanding degree requirements. Technology included software to track degree progress and the learning management system, Canvas. Communication included updates from the university on important dates and academic advisor interactions, and degree progress included understanding degree requirements both from advisor interaction and from the student information system.

The survey results informed the World Campus Academic Advising department on areas where students would like to see changes. The goal of an academic advisor is to build positive relationships that will help a student persist to graduation. Building positive relationships requires trust, knowledge, and creating valuable services of support. The next section provides an overview of how the programming developed to provide proactive advising services met student need and are examples of programming other institutions can provide to increase student satisfaction and success.

World Campus Academic Advising: A Proactive Approach

There were several projects implemented for academic advisors to support student success at World Campus. A comprehensive student welcome process, an understanding of why students earn an unsuccessful grade or drop out, an inclusive academic recovery process, a learning management system warning report, a provisional admission status process, and other resource allocation was developed to meet student needs. Each area will be discussed with a reference to the impact they made on the student satisfaction results from the 2018-2019 academic year compared to the 2019-2020 academic year.

Student Welcome process. World Campus has a rolling admission cycle which means that students can be accepted several months before they are ready to start. Past students can re-enroll for any semester until two weeks prior to a semester start. This means that new and re-enrolled students at World Campus are often anxious to begin activities that start them off effectively. They are particularly anxious to schedule courses and are often concerned that there are limited course choices or seats in classes they feel are important for them. Building relationships with students at the beginning of their educational journey is very important (Cannon, 2013). This process is one example of how academic advisers from any institution can encourage positive relationships with students. World Campus uses a priority scheduling process that gives students with higher academic standing the option to schedule first. At times, this means that incoming students cannot schedule as soon as they are accepted. The closer to the start of the semester, the more students become concerned about their beginning activities. The student welcome process was developed with four intentional goals, to welcome students, to provide next steps, to increase affinity and connection with World Campus, and to ensure students have all the resources necessary prior to the start of the semester. According to the student satisfaction survey 90% of all World Campus students use or know about student related resources (World Campus Market Research, 2020).

The welcome process includes a personal phone call from an office assistant within the academic advising office as soon as students accept their offer of admission. This ensures that students feel immediately connected to World Campus. Supporting students through personal contact helps them to navigate next steps through a review of a checklist of items that need to be completed. Additionally, remaining connected until classes begins creates affinity, so an appointment with an

academic advisor is offered. The development of this comprehensive process contributed to an increase in affinity from a response of extremely satisfied percentage from 41% in 2018–19 to 44% in 2019–2020.

Students who struggle in courses tend to have lower satisfaction than those who are successful in earning a passing grade. Understanding the resources needed to assist students in earning grades that help them persist is necessary for student retention. The next program that was implemented provided intrusive services to both identify needed resources as well as to build positive relationships with academic advisors. The program is focused on reaching out to students who earn a D or F grade, or who have dropped a course or withdrawn from World Campus for a semester.

DFWLD Project. Students with one or more D (D grade), F (F grade), W (withdrawal), or LD (Late Drop) in their first semester significantly negatively impacts the likelihood of retention into the second year. This outreach project consists of contacting students and having an intervention conversation about the outcome of the course(s), with the three project goals. The goals include identifying causes for the D, F, Withdrawal, or Late Drop; identifying supports, resources, or other interventions that may have potentially prevented the D, F, Withdrawal, or Late Drop; and identifying next steps to get the student back on a successful path, including ways to increase self-efficacy.

The World Campus Academic Advising team helped increase student awareness of support services as evidenced by the World Campus Student Experience survey data showing that 94% of students have used or heard of these services in the 2019–20 academic year compared to 89% in 2016–17, 92% in 2017–18, and 91% in 2018–19 academic years (World Campus Market Research, 2020). Maintaining regular contact with students fosters strong relationships and models care from academic advisers (Cannon, 2013). Building a similar type of programming into an academic advising program is one example of increasing the ability for academic advisers to have a stronger connection with assigned advisees.

The DFWLD project includes helping students increase their self-efficacy. There are two types of self-efficacy to consider—academic self-efficacy and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning. Self-efficacy partly determines whether a person expects to succeed at something (Hayat, et al., 2020). This can affect a person’s performance and behavior, including the decision to enroll for courses the next semester. One of the services provided for students is the Penn State library. According to the survey data, 96% of students utilized or were aware of Penn State library services and were extremely satisfied with this resource (World Campus Market Research, 2020). The next project focuses on students who are in academic difficulty and how academic advisers assists them during the recovery process.

Academic Recovery. Probationary students in academic warning and academic suspension are required to engage in an intrusive recovery process that is designed to help them address the issue(s) hindering academic success and progress. The goal of academic recovery is to help the student meet their goal of graduation and to persist from one semester to another. Providing individualized plans, providing an inventory of resources, and leveraging technology are important factors to include in any early intervention plan (Asbury, Lively, & Eckery, 2014). Early intervention is the objective and intent behind these policies and procedures and academic advisers are charged with developing individualized recovery plans that identify the academic barriers for each student. These plans help students to focus on improvement areas, such as time management.

Intervention advising sessions with probationary students have identified that time management is a significant impediment to student academic achievement. World Campus advisers have sought to improve probationary students’ time management skills by providing actionable guidance designed to help them create distraction-free study sessions, schedule reserved study time periods, and underscore the importance of establishing calendar reminders for class assignment due dates. The

advising staff's efforts to help students effectively manage their educational, family, and professional work responsibilities has been reflected in recent World Campus Student Experience survey data which has demonstrated a 3% increase of satisfaction from the 2018–19 academic year to the 2019–20 academic year (World Campus Market Research, 2020). Academic advisors review the learning management system student participation to assist with this population of students as well as all active World Campus students.

Canvas early warning report. Outreach designed to detect student non-participation is a hallmark advising practice in the academic advising office. The early warning report captures learning management system login data for the second and third weeks of a semester and identifies students that are not active course participants. Academic advisors use this data to engage with their assigned students that appear on the early warning report to determine how students are managing course work. Advisors are aware that not all courses require daily and active Canvas participation, and known courses that do not require frequent logins are removed from the report. Since course login requirements can vary widely, advisors conduct early semester check-ins with students listed on the early warning report to further establish rapport and to determine if interventional advising assistance or guidance is needed. Advisors take special note of students listed on the report who are enrolled in and have not actively participated in multiple courses.

Advisors record their student communication experiences in a notes column on the report. The report has categories for advisor response data including contacted, no response; course not in Canvas; and already contacted for an early progress report (EPR) flag. If advisors have already made student contact because of an EPR flag in a course, they will note on the report about current communication. Online learning academic advisors are dependent on the technology and tools available to them when maintaining connections. Using a learning management system data report connects students with advisors continuing an opportunity to encourage the current positive relationship that has been built. These practices are designed to support student success as a central reason that student satisfaction with World Campus staff has shown a 4% increase from the 2018–19 academic year to the 2019–20 academic year (World Campus Market Research, 2020). In the next section, an example is provided of how academic advisers can assist conditionally admitted students to become prepared, a barrier to many students in this population.

Conditionally Admitted Students. The World Campus advising office employs seven specially trained advisors who provide an intensive level of proactive academic support and guidance to conditionally admitted students. Students admitted into the Division of Undergraduate Studies with Conditions program are applicants for degree status who have high school diplomas, or the equivalent, but lack the credentials required for full admission into a specific degree program. Advisors ensure that students who are conditionally enrolled are aware that they are limited to 36 credits at Penn State in this status, at which point they must seek enrollment in a degree program. The development of viable action plans for transitioning out of conditional status is a central focus for advisors working with this student cohort. Asking questions during the advisor and student appointment is key to matching students with the appropriate resources (Cannon, 2013). Through asking questions and tracking the answers, time management is the most common barrier for World Campus students. Advisors place an emphasis on teaching effective time management strategies and detailing methods on how to strike an acceptable balance with the educational, family, and professional responsibilities that conditional students often encounter. The task management skills that advisors build with conditional students establishes a pathway for effective academic achievement and scholarship when students matriculate to degree status. The advocacy of advisors who partner with conditional students has contributed to an overall 3% year-over-year increase in satisfaction with the benefits offered from an education at World Campus (World Campus Market Research, 2020). World Campus Academic advisors reviewed individual conditional student needs to develop a process that promoted persistence. Modeling the creation of this project in any advising program promotes persistence for students who begin with academic barriers.

Summary

Intentional and proactive academic advising in an online environment contributes to student satisfaction and success. The World Campus Academic Advising department created several outreach projects targeting the entire student lifecycle to support student success. The projects that were created have been shown to increase student satisfaction. Students who are satisfied with an institution have a higher rate of affinity and tend to be motivated to meet graduation goals. An intentional advising relationship creates rapport, trust, and affinity, and positively impacts student satisfaction and success, as shown in the World Campus student satisfaction survey results.

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