

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term:SP 2013

Department:Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

Degree:PhD

Title:Academic Advising at a Distance: A Case Study Where No Face-to-Face Interactions Occur

ABSTRACT

As online learning in higher education has been growing (to the tune of over 4 million students enrolled online and over \$225 billion annually in tuition dollars earned by colleges that offer college coursework for credit), online learning has become an important but new form of learning. Additionally, the primary student populations attracted to online coursework are adult women and minority students over the age of 30 who work full-time and attend college online because of their many obligations to work and family. Online learners have also been found to be first generation college students who have often not been successful in their prior attempts at completing a college degree.

Advisors in traditional college settings have been found to contribute to not only student satisfaction but also to aid in student retention to course and/or degree completion. But although online learning has been growing, very little research has been accomplished on what happens when the advisor and advisee never meet one another as well as whether it is the same or different than face to face advising. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what was occurring at one postsecondary distance education institution where undergraduates earned their degrees completely online and worked with academic advisors without ever meeting face-to-face.

The results indicated that distance advising relationships were not simple matters but rather complex relationships that involved completing a number of tasks and goals as advisors taught students how to function successfully in the virtual college environment. Advisors directed or facilitated learning (teaching presence) through activities and interactions that enabled individual and group identities to be formed online (social presence) to construct knowledge (cognitive presence) that would enable students to be successful to degree completion. These activities and interactions included times where the advisor was in control of the relationship (prescriptive advising) and times where shared responsibilities between advisors and students (developmental advising) most benefitted the accomplishment of goals and tasks and relationship development.

Further, the study revealed that relationships did not develop nor were tasks and goals completed effectively or efficiently without advisors sharing their social capital with students. This was best accomplished when network ties and connections provided for interactions with more than just the advisor (such as through the use of list-serve communities). These informal social networks helped students understand the norms, obligations, and expectations of being a college student and reduced feelings of anxiety and isolation, especially when advisors were unavailable or not helpful.

Students who participated in list-serve communities as well as interacting with advisors were found to gain valuable information and resources (social capital) as a result of developing common language and shared stories or narratives. And the social capital they gained as a result helped increase and influence their knowledge and goal attainment.

The case study also revealed that positive relationships could be developed even without F2F interaction but they needed time and continuous maintenance to stay effective. Also, because students were more likely to be part-time, the distance advising relationship was also elongated, sometimes to more than seven years from admissions to graduations.

For students, goal completion was ultimately realized by higher grade point averages, an awakening of self-worth and self-advocacy as well as retention to graduation. For the advisor, goal completion was often the result of seeing more of their students be successful and to be recognized by the organization that advisors

understood and aided student success.

Compared to face to face advising, distance advising utilized a different communication medium online, and this impacted the ways in which resources were provided. The accelerated pace of the college terms and the amount of students advised by one advisor also varied from face to face advising as advisors online worked with thousands rather than hundreds of students per 8-week term. Accommodating so many students was made possible because there was no need for face to face appointments to communicate. But to address common questions, online advisors developed templates for e-mail responses.

The case study also revealed that advising online was indeed a form of teaching and learning. Through appropriate facilitating and directing from the advisor, intentional individual interactions and activities between advisors and advisees appeared to strengthen feelings of connectedness and shared meanings to each other and to the institution all the while furthering knowledge acquisition and application. But, without interactions that were satisfying in some way to the individual, students and advisors reported feeling disconnected and dissatisfied with one another as well as the college.

Students in the study also did not appear to have a well-developed social network amongst family and friends outside the college who could provide needed guidance on college structures or strategies for success. Instead, students often relied on the social capital of advisors and those on the advising list-serves to be a new social network that could provide the necessary resources and advice for their success as students. But it was certainly not a perfect fit as many advisors did not always know or understand the unique needs of these diverse students, even with training on diverse student populations and their needs. If they were able to develop supportive and trusting relationships that encouraged students to access all of the social capital resources the advisor knew about and could help them access then student success followed. But without that support and trust, students were more likely to disregard advisors and sometimes failed as a result.

College leadership indicated they trusted and valued advisor knowledge on students and student success but when it came to policy decisions, advisors opinions were sometimes overlooked or overruled. This was found to be due in part to the leadership's desire to provide what the student "customers" wanted while also adding to the college coffers. Unfortunately, these decisions proved costly for students sometimes in terms of their time, money, ability to succeed in classes and in terms of adequate preparation for future endeavors in and beyond college. This also negatively impacted relations between advisors and advisees as advisors were seen as hindering students rather than serving as knowledgeable advocates for student success. Online student enrollment was also found to be highly profitable to the college leadership in its efforts to find ways to support its continued operation. But, the college leadership also tried to balance those goals with also wanting quality educational experiences for diverse students. However in their haste to provide the most services they could to and for the most students they could, online students were sometimes disadvantaged. The college system included 30-plus campuses and with Virtual University (a pseudonym) being the newest, they sometimes failed to understand the differences between face to face operations and virtual operations. Thus they relied on policies and practices that worked well for them in face to face settings and were surprised that these did not always have the same effect online. As online colleges have not been in existence that long, there was much less information available to them regarding how to organize for success.

Online students at Virtual University were also found to be very diverse students who sometimes lacked academic competence, had attended many campuses before, and often had difficulty managing their time. They also sometimes came to Virtual University with poor language skills, criminal backgrounds and even disability issues more prevalent than those enrolled at the face to face campuses in the system, and more geographically isolated from the college. Thus, increased enrollment of these diverse students at Virtual University also saw an increase in isolation, alienation and frustration as well as increases in drop-out rates and a much larger amount of students on probation.

Organizational structures, policies and practices in the college did not adequately prepare admissions staff, advisors, transcript evaluators, career advisors, or those who managed outside of class experiences to address these needs when the campus was created. As a result, the college often played catch up, trying to add services, train staff and address policies and practices as time and further assessment allowed. Unfortunately, in the process this conveyed mixed messages to everyone in the system about the value and quality of online experiences compared to face to face experiences. All of which sometimes had negative impacts on the quality of advising provided to students, the relationship development between advisors-advisees, and the success enjoyed by online students.

Implications for Action and Research

Case studies are time, place and individual contingent, thus conclusions from the study can only be applied

to this case and may not represent the perspectives of other advisors and students in Virtual University. However, by providing detailed descriptions of the case as well as suggestions for further implications and directions to take research, readers can evaluate the case and determine for themselves if there are enough similarities to other settings to be transferable from this case study. Thus it is hoped that the case study may serve to add to the knowledge we have about distance advising that might not otherwise be known. Below are some recommendations for both actions and research.

Advising appeared to be best at Virtual University when it included both individual and team advising structures to support students and advisors in this 24-hour a day, 7 day a week online learning environment. Students repeated again and again in the study that they liked teams but that they did not want teams to replace individual advising. But some sort of compromise between individual and group attention could perhaps better address the needs of immediacy and isolation for students at Virtual University as well as other online college settings if students had access and contact with others at the institution besides their assigned advisor.

Also, the idea of having peer leaders from amongst the students in the online setting to reduce isolation was a common topic amongst both advisors and students at Virtual University. Peers could act as an additional resource to newer students in an online college so long as they were trained and encouraged to be positive leaders. This would also serve as an additional way to provide connections to others at the institution and leadership experiences for students in Virtual University.

College leaders have an obligation to weigh educational as well as financial decisions regarding college operations carefully as this case study revealed that there may be unintended consequences of employing F2F policies and practices to online environments. Open enrollment/open admissions policies may attract students online that are geographically separated from the campus. But campus leaders hoping to develop online degree programs need to determine carefully if admissions policies that vary from their face to face locations serve their purposes and can be supported by their current structure or what would need to be added to make it so as policies like open admissions/open enrollment attracts a different type of student than more selective admissions policies do. Also, where will the college leadership draw the line between access and timing of first enrollments given that online learners have often attended quite a few colleges and credits will need to be evaluated in a timely fashion? Additionally, as enrollment continues to grow, student populations' change and technology moves forward, processes will need to be in place that allow for continual re-evaluation of services and find new way in which to address these changes without affecting the quality of services and relationships. College leaders will also want to determine who will be involved in the decision-making regarding policies and practices. This is especially critical given that in most online college environments, advisors may be the only administrator who "sees" students from admissions to graduation and thus may be extremely useful in helping provide assessments of current and future needs for students.

Adult, minority, disabled, first generation and military students who work and have children are currently amongst the majority student populations when it comes to online colleges. Some are up to the challenge of college and some are not. The ones who find continued success are those who not only learn and practice academic skills but who also know how to navigate their way through the college environment with the minimum in delays and challenges. For college leaders thinking of starting or expanding online degree completion programs, some sort of assessment of student readiness for online learning might be in order so as not to further disadvantage these populations by admitting them but then not supporting them fully to succeed.

Distance education does not appear to be going away and as a result, distance advising is likely to remain a critical step in the retention and completion of students in colleges. If new or strengthened methods could be advanced, it would be most beneficial for not only the student, but also the advisor and the institution. Particularly important is how we help students who obviously want to further their educations but for whom the traditional models of both education and advising may not work for them. Research could aid in stripping away the structures that constrict certain students from achieving and allowing students to concentrate more on their educational pursuits and less on the navigational road blocks implemented at the college level. I am not advocating that everyone should earn a college degree or that they should do so online, but rather the opportunities should not be predicated on how much hurdles a student is willing to overcome outside of the educational process.

It is hoped that that the findings of this study will add to the body of knowledge of academic advising in distance education. If we understood more about how it is similar and yet different from face-to-face advising we might be able to better organize for the success of students. The findings may also have

implications for technology designers and for administrators who develop policies, practices and technology for this communication format as well as those are in academic advising roles. But of course the limitations are that this is a small study of one online college setting and may not represent other online college settings. However, it is hoped that continued research in this area will trigger more interest and more knowledge in this burgeoning area of higher education.