

ONLINE ADVISING PILOT AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF VERMONT

Kimberly Nolan

Community College of Vermont

ABSTRACT

As more colleges add online courses and fully online programs, the need to offer online supports to students becomes more apparent. The connection to an adviser is critical for all students, but for online students it can serve as their primary connection to the institution. In Fall 2011 a pilot study was conducted at the Community College of Vermont (CCV) to examine online advising through a Moodle course site. Although this pilot study represented a small online advising cohort, 56 of the total 155 online students, it illustrates implications for practice and research. The advising cohort showed a slightly higher retention rate than the overall online population. Based on survey results students reported a strong desire for an adviser who stays with them throughout their educational career at the college. In Fall 2012, CCV institutionalized online advising and began a systematic approach to assisting online students. Five advisers added online students to their work assignments and all CCV advisers were informed of what services CCV would be offering online. When students applied to CCV and selected online (ONL) as a home location, they were contacted via email with an explanation of the online services available to them so that students could make a more informed decision about their home location. In Fall 2012, 286 students selected ONL as their home location and were contacted by staff; 256 students chose to remain online.

KEYWORDS

Online support, advising, community college

I. ONLINE ADVISING STUDY

As more colleges add online courses and fully online programs, the need to offer online supports to students becomes more apparent. The connection to an adviser is critical for all students, but for online students it can serve as their primary connection to the institution [1]. Online advising has evolved from phone calls and emails to Blackboard and WebCT groups [2]. Schools must be proactive in online advising since waiting for students to contact the institution for advising or help relegates remote students to “second class students” [3]. Good academic advising must be part of the online support package. Many models have been examined and there seems to be consensus that the live chat option is not a long-term solution. On-call or live-chat advising methods are for immediate and relatively simple questions. They are limited in their ability to deliver quality information to students based on time constraints. The wide range of questions and the inability to form relationships with students made online advising through the chat system difficult at best [4].

The Community College of Vermont (CCV) has increased its online offerings significantly over the last five years. In Fall 2011, CCV had 1,148 students taking only online classes, 906 of these students were CCV students and the rest were students from other institutions. These 906 students represented

approximately 14% of the total enrollment at CCV. As of Fall 2011, CCV offered no formal advising for online students unless they contacted an academic center on their own. Lack of an institutional system for advising online students left a gap in services; the gap could impact retention. Hence, a pilot study was conducted to determine if online advising would be desired by students. A random sample of degree and non-degree seeking students were chosen to approximately match CCV’s current student profile of 74% degree students and 26% non-degree students (Table 1).

	CCV Population Fall 2011	Online Advising Cohort Fall 2011
Gender		
Female	69%	68%
Male	31%	32%
Degree Status		
Non-Degree	26%	30%
Degree Seeking	74%	70%

Table 1. Online Advising Demographics, 5th Week Data

Students who were registered for fall classes and had chosen “Online” as their academic center were randomly divided into four sections of “online advising”. Each section had a Moodle classroom where there were weekly announcements to students, responses to questions, and check-ins with students. Additionally, attendance was monitored throughout the fall and returning students were offered assistance in selecting spring classes. After the fall semester, the effectiveness of the pilot was measured by retention and student satisfaction. Student retention was assessed by determining what percentage of the fall group enrolled for the spring semester. Student satisfaction was determined by analyzing the student satisfaction survey.

Of the total 56 students in the pilot study, 41 students participated in the Moodle course site. This represented 73% of the students in the study. The number of students who enter the course site is important since it indicates the number of students who were successfully able to find the advising course. Once the students found the course, it was their choice if they came back to the course site for additional information.

II. RETENTION

Of the 56 students in the advising cohort, 54% (30 students) returned to CCV in Spring 2012. This can be compared to the Fall 2010 to spring 2011 college-wide retention rate of 67%, and an online Fall to Spring retention rate of 53%. It is too early in online advising at CCV to suggest that the one percent increase in retention rates for online students is a direct result of online advising. Forty six percent (26 students) of the students did not return to CCV: one of these students is enrolled at a four-year Vermont college; one student had a medical hold rendering him unable to register; three of these students withdrew from Fall 2011 courses; seven did not pass the classes that they took in the Fall; and the other 14 students cannot be accounted for. Of the 14 students who did not return and are unaccounted for, 10 are non-degree students who may not have intended to continue after one semester.

III. STUDENT SATISFACTION

At the conclusion of the Fall semester, students were sent a survey via Survey Monkey to gauge their satisfaction with their online advising. Thirty-nine percent of the students from the online advising cohort responded to the survey (Table 2). These data show that one-half of the respondents did not report contact with their advisers. This response from half of the students calls into question what students consider “contact.” Each student was emailed a welcome to online advising message at the beginning of

the semester and received push emails during the semester from the Moodle site. Students were also emailed or called when they were reported absent from class during the semester. It appears evident that students do not consider the Moodle classroom dedicated to advising to be “contact” since 73% of students participated in the online advising sites. Perhaps students were responding to whether they initiated contact with an adviser.

	Survey Respondents	Online Cohort
Total Number of Students	56	22 (39%)
Gender		
Female	38	17 (77%)
Male	18	5 (23%)
Degree Status		
Non-Degree	17	7 (32%)
Degree Seeking	39	15 (68%)

Table 2: Survey Respondents

The majority of the students, 77%, reported that they knew how to access the Moodle class. Of the remaining respondents, 18% reported being unsure of how to access the class and 5% reported that they did not know how to access the class. Students were asked what was helpful about the online advising experience, and nine reported that the announcements were helpful, two reported talking to other students was helpful, eight reported having a specific adviser was helpful, and seven reported that additional resources were helpful.

Students were asked what additional resources would be useful; 60% reported library resources, and 46% chose study tips and time management tips. Only 18% of the students reported that they wanted more discussion in the Moodle classroom. One student wrote that they would like tutoring resources in the advising site. When students were asked if online students could do without an adviser, 15 of the 16 respondents disagreed, indicating that online students have a strong desire to have an adviser (Figure 1).

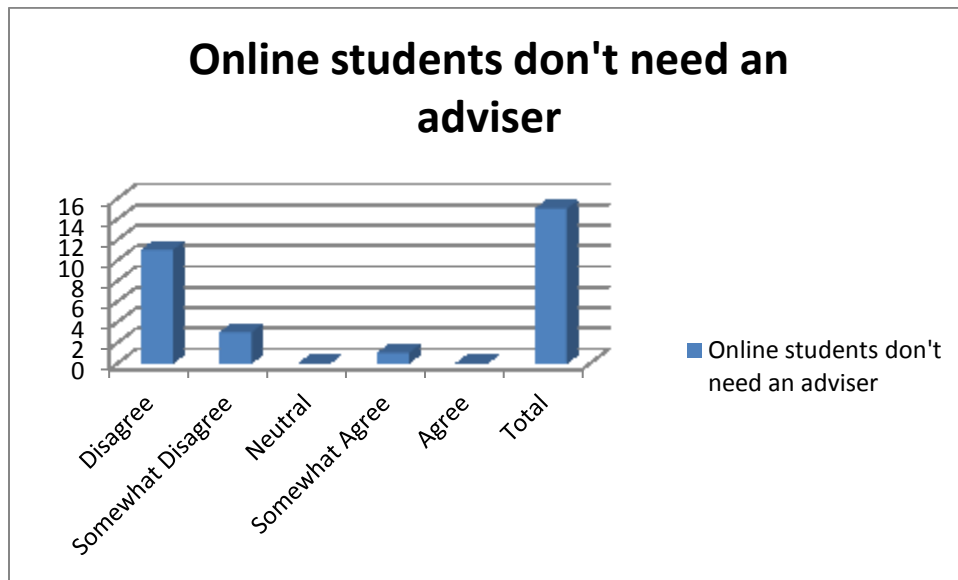


Figure 1. Responses to the surveys statement that students don't need an adviser

The final question on the survey asked students for their comments about the online experience; sample student responses included:

- I learned very useful and helpful knowledge in online classes.
- As a pretty independent and experienced student, I really didn't rely on an adviser, but I think that online advising is crucial to students who are new to college and/or the online experience.
- Very helpful and useful knowledge I learned from online classes.
- Online classes are more complicated to fit into a schedule than classroom classes.
- I think it is very important to have an adviser whether online or not.
- Thanks for being there, just in case!
- I think this is a great concept. I think it would be great if there would be more information on where to find the online adviser and maybe weekly or biweekly check-ins

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

In Fall 2012 CCV institutionalized online advising and began a systematic approach to assisting online students. Five advisers added online students to their work assignments and all CCV advisers were informed of what services CCV would be offering online. When students applied to CCV and selected online (ONL) as a home location, they were contacted via email with an explanation of the online services available to them so students could make a more informed decision about their home location. In Fall 2012, 286 students were contacted and 256 chose to remain online. Many of the 30 students who chose to be assigned to a center stated that they chose an ONL home location so they could take online classes but, they were unaware that they could meet with an adviser at a center and still take online classes. Through conversations with students it became clear that we were not adequately explaining the differentiation between where students receive services and where they take classes. Additionally, in the effort to contact each student individually and record their preference for online or center based advising, not all students who chose online were put into the online community in Moodle. This oversight will be solved in the future semesters when all students with an ONL home location as of the first day of classes will be entered into the Moodle community rather than trying to register them individually.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Although this pilot study in Fall 2011 represents a small online advising cohort, 56 of the total 155 online students, it illustrates implications for practice and research. The advising cohort showed a slightly higher retention rate than the overall online population. Based on survey results, students reported a strong desire for an adviser who stays with them throughout their educational career at the college. Since the literature tells us that best practice is to connect students with advisers for long-term student success, institutions should develop formalized online advising practices to create relationships between students and advisers.

The benefits of this online advising model described at CCV include an adviser of record who receives attendance and checks in with students, an administrator for faculty to contact when there is a concern with an online student and a point of contact for students. Future research needs to examine if the “course model” of advising best meets students’ needs by additional surveying and examination of retention data. While students reported that having a specific adviser and receiving regular communication was important, future research needs to determine what the best method of communication with students is for long term advising relationships.

VI. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Nolan, Ed.D. is a Coordinator of Academic Services at the Community College of Vermont and a faculty member at Northeastern University's College of Professional Studies in the Ed.D Program. Dr. Nolan was a science teacher and middle school administrator prior to working in higher education. Her Ed.D. in Education and Policy Studies is from the University of Vermont.

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