

Examining the Practices and Challenges of Virtual Academic Advising in Higher Education During COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to explore the practice of academic advising and the challenges associated with virtual advising in California higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advising is a retention practice recognized as critical to student success because advisors are one of few personnel interactions students are guaranteed to have with a concerned institutional representative. Though advising is historically a face-to-face practice in a social profession, COVID-19 has forced advising to become remote due to public health concerns during the pandemic. Data was collected from 74 participants representing 43 higher education institutions across California through an online survey that analyzed how academic advising currently functions and how it has changed since COVID-19. Generally, reported challenges were largely technological, particularly regarding access to reliable technology. Advisors were mixed on working virtually but highly willing to combat technological challenges if it meant students benefited from the practice. Academic advisors and their institutions may consider testing alternative virtual advising platforms to determine best fit, implementing automated advising systems for minor advising tasks, offering optional virtual advising training to all appropriate faculty and staff, and creating a standard assessment method for all advising. Future research should explore virtual advising from the student perspective to better understand the role of virtual advising in student integration.

Introduction

Academic advising, a retention practice critical to student success, has long been the subject of discussion within the realm of higher education. Although the history of advising can be difficult to delineate, it has maintained a constant presence in higher education and continued to evolve since the early days of postsecondary education. Academic advising was initially limited in scope, but it is expected that most contemporary institutions employ an array of advisors catering to different student populations. In recent years, academic advising has most commonly been associated with one-on-one, face-to-face sessions between a student and an advisor. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced American colleges and universities to adapt almost exclusively to virtual advising, an uncommon but not unusual practice in the technologically savvy 21st century. Up to 83% of colleges that used mandatory academic advising for online learners in 2019 found it to be at least somewhat effective for success, retention, and completion, suggesting that virtual advising practices can be successful (Ruffalo

Noel Levitz, 2019).

The pandemic has created uncertainty in the future of traditional higher education. This uncertainty has further created a sense of urgency in the world of academic advising, in that advising must continue rapidly evolving to accommodate the changes accompanying the pandemic. The present research looks to contribute to prior research on academic advising by observing how the pandemic has affected academic advising and analyzing how potential challenges can be mitigated.

Literature Review

Good academic advising provides “perhaps the only opportunity for all students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them” (Drake, 2011, p. 10). In many cases, students are assigned to an academic advisor for an extended period. As such, when founded on strong interpersonal relationships, academic advising “influences student self-efficacy, emotional commitment to the institution, as well as persistence and loyalty” (Vianden & Barlow, 2015, p. 15).

The definition of academic advising is difficult to determine. Larson et al. (2018) stated that those involved in academic advising “did not share a common understanding, purpose, or activity” (p. 81) and these variances have created a lack of cohesion in interpretations of advising goals. However, with the use of analytic induction as discussed by Merriam (2009), Larson et al. (2018) concluded that “academic advising applies knowledge of the field to empower students and campus and community members to successfully navigate academic interactions related to higher education” (p. 89). With this interpretation in mind, one might be able to establish the services to be provided under the umbrella of an academic advisor position.

For the purpose of this research, academic advising is defined as the process of assisting students with defining, clarifying, and planning their education and future. Virtual academic advising is defined similarly with the addition of technology to accommodate students who cannot or do not want to be physically present for advising appointments. For example, video conferencing, online forums such as Cranium Cafe, phone meetings, and email communication can all be classified as virtual advising.

It should be noted that due to a general lack of unification in defining academic advising as a professional field, the features of academic advising can vary among institutions, academic departments, administrative departments, and even individuals. Larson et al. (2018) pointed out that the title of academic advisor does not encompass one specific set of practices and goals and even academic advisors within the same department can occupy distinctly separate roles. Nemeth Tuttle (2000) outlined some common advising responsibilities, including: advising students on general education requirements, serving as a liaison between students and academic departments and schools, and maintaining academic records. Hunter and White (2004) have expressed the value of advising succinctly:

Under the guidance of an academic adviser, students can clarify the purposes of their college attendance, achieve vital personal connections with mentors, plan for the future, determine their role and responsibilities in a democratic society, and come to understand how they can achieve their potential. (para. 4)

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a lack of uniformity within the field of academic advising. While campus closures were initially expected to be temporary, many American campuses were forced to transition to virtual learning throughout the pandemic. These changes produced many unexpected consequences, leaving students, faculty, and staff underprepared and overwhelmed, while every institution navigated the transition differently. Perhaps at the forefront of these consequences is the mental health and well-being of college students. Suspending classes and evacuating campuses may leave students struggling with loneliness and isolation; feelings of anxiety and depression; betrayal over the loss of a homelike atmosphere; and frustration surrounding either the potential of delayed graduation or the loss of access to their research projects, internships, jobs, and counseling services (Zhai & Du, 2020). Although academic advising has been thoroughly researched, virtual academic advising practices have not been examined quite as exhaustively. Despite the existence of virtual academic advising prior to COVID-19, most research surrounding its use related more to inclusion within a host of other services. Moore (2012) laid out several virtual methods of communication an advisor could use with each advisee, including email, telephone, and web conferencing, all of which can be used during the pandemic as well as with on-ground advising.

Best Practices in Academic Advising

Folsom, et al. (2015) suggested one practice foregone by many advisors: planning and preparing for the advising session. The first step in this process requires advisors to be proactive in their communication with advisees. There need not be a specific goal in mind with advisor outreach, but advisors should be consistent with communication and use it to invite students in for a session, congratulate students on an achievement, or check on students' academic progress (Folsom et al., 2015). The final step is planning uninterrupted time with each advisee. Folsom, et al. (2015) highlighted that technology has made this increasingly difficult with incoming phone calls, popup notifications, and email distractions, further enhancing the value of scheduled appointments as opposed to drop-in sessions. Scheduled appointments give advisors time to silence notifications in preparation for their upcoming meeting with a student.

Moses (2015) found that community college advisors listed such practices as building working relationships with faculty, one-on-one contact with students several times during the semester, and professional learning and development as key practices in the implementation of successful advising programs. Alternatively, Moses (2015) found that advisors at four-year institutions focused instead on the inclusion of a First Year Experience; consistency and accuracy of information; central advising systems that require all freshman to complete career exploration and course planning before being assigned a faculty advisor; mandatory advising at least twice per semester; training and professional development; and aiding online students in finding a connection and sense of community by providing them with an advocate. Additionally, Bryant (2016) suggested connecting students with faculty advisors early in their academic career, encouraging advisors to develop relationships with their advisees beyond the bare minimum, and offering triage services for students during peak hours.

Issues and Challenges with Virtual Academic Advising

Prior research suggests that the umbrella of technology is a common challenge with virtual advising, specifically the learning curve and depersonalization of increased technology use (Leonard, 2004). The means of communication Moore (2012) laid out also carry their own set of challenges, including the overuse of email and the need for advanced scheduling for phone or video conferencing. Dhawan (2020) additionally noted the inequities highlighted by the digital divide among higher education students.

Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-methods research study was to examine the practice of academic advising during COVID-19 and explore challenges associated with virtual advising in higher education institutions across California. The research question guiding this study was: How has the practice of academic advising been affected by COVID-19?

Participants

The targeted population for this study was individuals employed in roles involving academic advising services within California institutions of higher education. Accredited, non-profit institutions were randomly selected by type: private four-year universities; public four-year universities; and two-year colleges. Individuals were selected from each institution based on availability of contact information on the institutions' websites. Individuals invited to participate were asked to participate only if they provided academic advising services in their current role. All individuals invited to participate received an email invitation with a link to an anonymous online survey that included a consent form outlining the parameters of the study.

Research Instruments

All data was collected through the anonymous online survey platform, SurveyPlanet. Participants were first presented with a consent form and those who selected "I do NOT agree" were immediately removed. Survey questions (see Appendix) were primarily qualitative to establish participants' thoughts and perspectives about virtual academic advising practices at their respective institutions. Responses were categorized by similarity and compared against other categories or against the responses of participants from other institutional types as necessary.

Findings

Results of this study are discussed by the following institutional types: California State University (CSU), University of California (UC), Private, or Two-Year (community college). Individuals from 13 of the 23 CSU campuses, all 10 UC campuses, 8 private universities, and 18 of the 116 California Community Colleges were invited to participate in this research. Responses were received from 74 individuals representing 43 of the 47 invited institutions,

yielding an institutional participation rate of 91.5%. Participants most frequently listed their titles as being some variation of “Academic Advisor” (n=32), “Academic Counselor” (n=15), or “Instructor” (n=13), though many participants reported various responsibilities. Approximately 39% of participants reported they were faculty and 61% reported being staff advisors (See Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Faculty Advisors and Staff Advisors

Institutional Type	Faculty	Staff	Total
CSU	10	24	34
UC	0	14	14
Private	1	7	8
Two-Year	18	0	18
Total	29	45	74

Participants were asked to elaborate on any training made available by their institution for virtual advising during COVID-19. Several noted that training was made available only to faculty, geared toward teaching online instead of advising online, or that trainings provided were not for advising but may have had a module for advising included. Table 2 depicts how training differed by institutional type.

Table 2: Trainings Offered by Institutional Type

Institutional Type	Yes	No	Faculty Only	Unsure / Unused	Total
CSU	16	11	3	4	34
UC	5	8	1	0	14
Private	4	3	1	0	8
Two-Year	17	0	1	0	18
Total	42	22	6	4	74

Note: Because participants were not asked to specify whether available training was specific to certain employees, some responses may not accurately reflect the institutions’ offerings.

Participants were also asked how long they had held a position involving academic advising services at their institution of employment at the time of this study (see Table 3). Most participants (n=24) selected that they had been employed for over 10 years and 21 participants noted that they had been employed for three to five years.

Table 3: Length of Employment by Institutional Type

Length of Employment	CSU	UC	Private	Two-Year	Total
Under 6 months	0	1	0	0	1
6-12 months	0	3	0	1	4
1-2 years	5	4	1	1	11
3-5 years	8	4	5	4	21
6-10 years	8	1	1	3	13
Over 10 years	13	1	1	9	24
Total	34	14	8	18	74

When asked if advising is mandatory for students at their institutions, 54.1% (n=40) of participants reported that advising is mandatory only for specific student subpopulations, 25.7% (n=19) listed advising as not being mandatory for any students, and 20.3% (n=15) listed advising as being mandatory for all students. Private universities were the only institutional type to list advising as mandatory for all students, as compared to some or no students, most frequently.

Participants were asked to discuss whether their institution provided any virtual advising practices prior to COVID-19. Participants' responses were analyzed and grouped according to the following common thematic categories: email, phone, video, other, and none/unsure. Table 4 breaks down participants' responses.

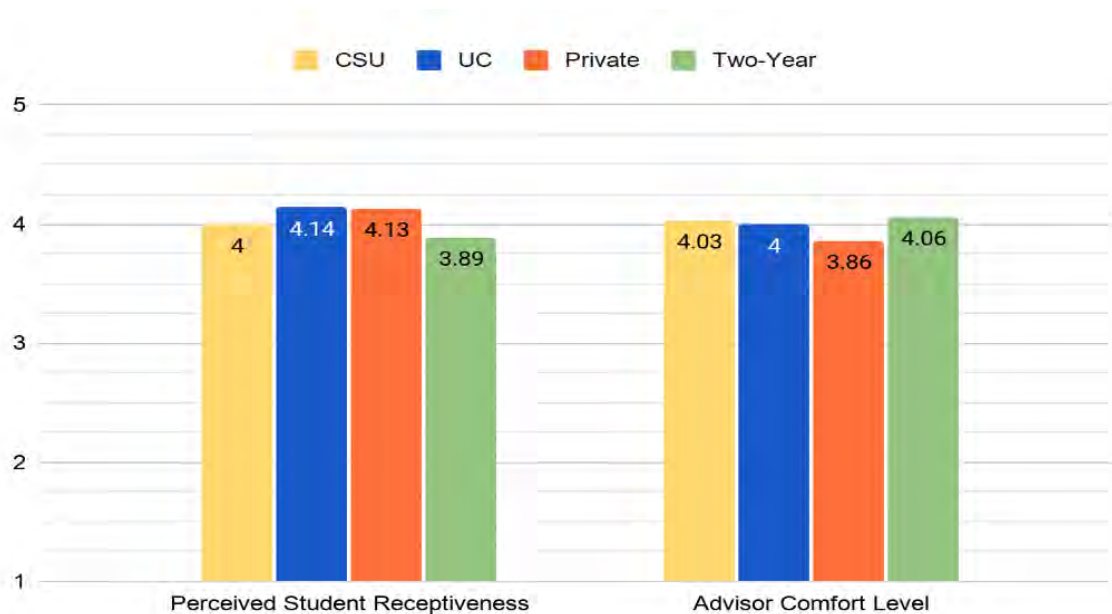
Table 4: Types of Virtual Advising Offered Pre-Covid-19

Percentage Breakdown	N/A (29 participants)	Other (22 participants)	Video (20 participants)	Phone (16 p participants)	Email (9 participants)
Highest %	Private (75%)	Two-year (50%)	Two-year (38.9%)	CSU (29.4%)	Two-year (27.8%)
Second Highest %	UC (50%)	UC (35.7%)	CSU (26.5%)	Two-year (27.8%)	CSU (8.8%)
Third Highest %	CSU (35.3%)	CSU (20.6%)	UC (21.4%)	Private (12.5%)	UC (7.1%)
Lowest %	Two-year (22.2%)	Private (12.5%)	Private (12.5%)	UC (0%)	Private (0%)

Note: Percentages are participants per institutional type, not per the total number of participants.

Participants were asked to use a scale of one to five to rate how receptive they perceived their students to be to virtual advising practices and how comfortable they personally felt with using virtual advising services to advise. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of participants' responses by institutional type.

Figure 1: Average Participant Scores



Note. The total average perceived student receptiveness score from all 74 participants was 3.97. The total average advisor comfort level among all 73 participants who responded was 4.01.

Finally, participants were asked to discuss challenges they encountered both with the transition to virtual advising and with the practice of virtual advising. Responses were analyzed to uncover any common themes and categorized accordingly. The most frequently listed challenges were related to technology and interpersonal communication. Technological challenges included poor Wi-Fi connectivity, power outages, subpar home office equipment, and lack of availability of the necessary equipment. Interpersonal challenges included the lack of a human element and difficulties reading non-verbal cues, building a sense of community among advisors and students, gauging student comprehension and satisfaction, and learning the appropriate boundaries between students and faculty.

Analysis

Results of the survey were unfortunately scattered in nature. Participants frequently cited

conflicting opinions with one another, making it difficult to accurately compare results by job title, institutional type, or most other categorical divisions. One interesting aspect to compare was the participants' perception of student receptiveness. Their perception of student receptiveness was somewhat in line with the average reported student satisfaction scores outlined a Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) (2016) report in the following areas: advisor's knowledgeability about major requirements, advisor's approachability, and advisor's concern about individual student success. The RNL report (2016) listed private schools as having the highest student satisfaction with an average of 66%, while the present study showed the UC system and private universities as having almost identical average perceived student receptiveness scores. Like the RNL report, community colleges provided the lowest average score. In the RNL report (2016), community college students were the least satisfied with their advising experiences overall, with an average of 59% satisfaction, while the perceived student receptiveness in this study was 77.8% for community colleges. Although student receptiveness is not interchangeable with student satisfaction, this is a compelling comparison to note because both the reported student satisfaction levels and the reported student receptiveness exhibit relatively similar trends. Had more private university participants been included in the study, the results may have more accurately reflected the student satisfaction reported by RNL because the results of the present study showed a difference of only .01 in the student receptiveness scores between private universities and UC institutions.

Paradoxically, while private universities listed one of the higher levels of student receptiveness, they reported the lowest scores in advisor comfort level. Conversely, community colleges listed the lowest student receptiveness but reported the highest advisor comfort level. This may be attributed to the availability of training reported by community college participants. Community colleges indicated the highest reported rate of available training; all participants stated that training was offered (one stated that training was available to faculty only). However, because all 18 community college participants were faculty members and participants were not asked to specify to whom any available training was provided, the available training may have been largely specific to faculty and online teaching. This thereby provided participants from community colleges with a general advantage regarding the use of virtual practices. In addition to training, community college participants also reported the availability of virtual advising practices prior to COVID-19 most frequently.

Community college participants, all of whom were faculty members, tended to report the most experience, the most training, and the highest advisor comfort level with virtual practices. This suggests that faculty members would be best suited to advising and community college students would have an advantage over other students regarding virtual advising outcomes. However, it should be noted that community college participants also reported the lowest overall perceived student receptiveness to virtual advising practices. The question of whether advising was mandatory may play a role in this comparison. Community college participants were more likely to report that advising was not mandatory for any students at their institutions, while private universities were more likely to report that advising was mandatory for all students at their institutions. Comparatively, community college participants had the lowest overall student receptiveness rating while private universities had the highest overall student receptiveness rating, suggesting the potential for mandatory academic advising also having a positive effect.

Perhaps most noticeable in this study was the disorganization with which academic

advising is provided to students in higher education. As Larson et al. (2018) highlighted, due to the general lack of unification in defining academic advising as a professional field, the features of academic advising can vary, and the title of “academic advisor” does not encompass one specific set of practices and goals. Even academic advisors within the same department can occupy distinctly separate roles. By inviting individuals who provided academic advising services to participate in this study, all participants exemplified this concept quite clearly with about 20% of participants listing job titles that are not included under the umbrella of academic advisor, academic counselor, or instructor (presumably a faculty advisor). One participant suggested that their institution should move away from faculty advising because, as the students’ secondary advisor, they saw inconsistencies in the faculty advising system. It was not clear whether every listed job title included advising services. The mixed results of this study and the fact that nearly every participant filled several roles at their respective institution implies that there may be significant variation in their professional roles. That variation supports the lack of unification pointed out by Larson et al. (2018) and suggests that even professional academic advisors may depict a certain level of inconsistency within their field.

Another significant point was the distinct representation of the “no one-size-fits-all” concept. Participants frequently offered conflicting information with very mixed responses to questions. The clearest presentation of this was in response to questions about training. Beyond reporting different levels of training provided by their institutions, participants reported mixed feelings about training. Some wanted more; some were happy with what they received; and some were adamantly against training, stating that they were “allergic” to it or that any trainings provided by their institution “defy physics in that they simultaneously suck and blow”. There was also no theme or similarity in responses among participants from a single institutional type, suggesting that there is no consensus within any of the California public or private institutions. This was an interesting detail considering at least one community college participant’s reference to the California Community Colleges system and the system-wide training it provided or a top-down general preference for platforms to be implemented system-wide during COVID-19.

Recommendations

An analysis of the data presented in this study suggests the following considerations:

- Increase collaboration between faculty advisors and staff advisors to improve the uniformity of advising services.
- Assign faculty advisors early in students’ academic career to ensure they receive consistent advising and regular access to knowledgeable professionals in their field.
- Make advising mandatory for all students.
- Reallocate resources for students and staff. For example: create stipends, loanable technology, or optional paid training opportunities.
- Create and provide alternative accessibility options such as transcriptions sent by email following a meeting or presentation, subtitles in students’ native languages during a video meeting, or staggered and socially distanced in-person meetings.

Limitations

- Academic advising was only observed within institutions located in California, which may create a lack of applicability to institutions in other states.
- Not all California institutions were included in the study, so results of this study may not apply as well in some cases, such as for-profit institutions.
- All participants were from institutions listing employee contact information publicly on their websites, reducing the researcher's ability to fully randomize invitations. This created uneven representation among types of advisors and students they advise (i.e., graduate versus undergraduate).
- There were no student participants, so certain factors may have a higher bias considering the one-sided perspectives of an all-employee participant group.
- There was no differentiation between different types of advising when inviting individuals for participation, resulting in mixed responses that may have obscured important results.
- Heavy use of open-ended questions resulted in several unclear responses from participants and a survey method does not allow for additional clarifying questions.
- Participant responses often brought up other interesting or relevant points that could not be further discussed due to lack of information or further questions on that topic.

Conclusion

The practice of academic advising continues to be integral to the overall success of students in higher education. However, COVID-19 has effectively created a roadblock in the path of traditional advising. While some institutions of higher education were already beginning the transition to virtual educational practices, many institutions had not yet begun the transition to virtual academic advising. The present study aims to contribute to prior research on academic advising by observing how the pandemic has affected advising and analyzing how potential challenges with virtual practices can be mitigated. The purpose of this research was to examine the practice of academic advising among institutions of higher education across California during COVID-19 as it adapted to virtual practices. Based on the data collected as part of this research study, despite the technological and interpersonal challenges encountered, advisors were passionate about the job and the success of their students. However, with technology often making communication more difficult and creating additional distractions for both advisor and student, academic advisors cannot expect to provide suitable virtual advising to at-risk students. Valuable suggestions for improvement include increased optional training and professional development opportunities, adjusting how faculty advises, increasing resources for advisors and students, and creating alternative accessibility options for virtual advising. Limitations of this research suggest that future researchers should expand the participant pool to increase the applicability of the results, add student participants to gain a more comprehensive perspective on virtual advising, and use a different research method such as an interview or follow-up surveys to expand on unclear participant responses.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. How long have you been in a position involving academic advising services at your current institution?
 - a. Under 6 months
 - b. 6-12 months
 - c. 1-2 years
 - d. 3-5 years
 - e. 6-10 years
 - f. 10+ years
2. How and in what way has academic advising changed for you since Covid-19?
3. Please list or describe any issues that you have personally encountered or found challenging regarding the transition from traditional (on-ground) academic advising to virtual or distance academic advising.
4. Please list or describe any issues you have personally encountered or found challenging with the actual practice of virtual/distance academic advising.
5. If budget and resources were not an issue, what could your institution or department do to improve the practice of virtual/distance academic advising for you specifically and/or for your students?
6. What, if any, positive outcomes have you personally encountered as a result of transitioning to distance or virtual academic advising?
7. If your institution offered any virtual or distance academic advising practices/opportunities prior to Covid-19, please explain what sort of virtual or distance advising practices were available. (if not, put N/A)
8. Has your institution or department provided any kind of training for current virtual or distance academic advising practices? If yes, please elaborate.
9. Were you given options to develop a virtual/distance advising model as a department or were you given a preset procedure to follow?
 - a. We worked as a department
 - b. We were given a preset procedure
 - c. Other
10. Approximately how many students did you advise during the average quarter/semester (depending on which option your institution uses) prior to Covid-19? Approximately how many students have you advised on average in the most recent quarter/semester since Covid-19?
11. Is academic advising mandatory for students at your institution? If yes, is this for all students?
 - a. No, advising is optional
 - b. Yes, all students
 - c. Yes, only specific students (please specify by student subpopulation)
12. Are any students at your institution assigned to specific academic advisors? (e.g., by last name, by concentration)

- a. No, they select their own
 - b. No, there is only walk-in advising
 - c. Yes, all students have assigned academic advisors
 - d. Yes, some students have assigned academic advisors (please elaborate)
13. How receptive do you personally believe the students at your institution have been to the changes in academic advising practices?
- a. 1 (not receptive at all) to 5 (very receptive)
14. How comfortable are you with the current virtual/distance academic advising practices in your department or institution considering any prior or current experiences and any training?
- a. 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 5 (extremely comfortable)
15. Do you primarily serve undergraduates, graduates, or both?
16. Which of the following best describes the type of academic advising you are responsible for? (select all that apply)
- a. General advising from a central advising office available to all students
 - b. Program advising for a specific school/major/concentration
 - c. Advising for a specific student subpopulation (e.g., transfers, EOP, online students)
 - d. Other (please explain)
17. Are you a faculty member?
18. What is your official job title?
19. What is the name of the institution you are currently employed by?