Evaluating Student Perceptions of a Course-Embedded Faculty Advising Model

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This study evaluated student perceptions of a course-embedded faculty advising model within an online MA program. Faculty advising contributes to student degree completion and career success. Instructor presence, community, the incorporation of synchronous sessions, and the use of web-conferencing software impact student engagement, which leads to increased student satisfaction and retention. The course-embedded structure of model contributes to reduced resource needs and high levels of sustainability. Structured, individual synchronous faculty advising sessions were built into 4 courses and student experience was assessed utilizing a survey. Results are discussed in the context of relevant theories and best practices.

Keywords: course embedded advising, student engagement, online advising, synchronous sessions, Self-determination Theory

INTRODUCTION

Major retention issues in conjunction with low graduation rates and budget cuts place increasing pressure on universities to generate performance outcomes (Miao, 2012). Additionally, universities that offer online programs have added challenges, as online learners have been shown to have unique needs that respond to specific skills for continued motivation and academic success (Bawa, 2016; Haydarov, Moxley, & Anderson, 2013). For example, factors related to high attrition rates among online learners include motivation, self-determination, and student misconceptions concerning expectations (Bawa,

2016), which further highlights the need to evaluate services offered. Rises in online enrollments demand an effective framework of support which is based on best practices for supporting distance learners (e.g., academic, technical, relational). Moreover, universities must thoroughly evaluate student feedback, as dissatisfied students may drop out or transfer to another institution, thereby negatively impacting the attrition rate.

A voluminous literature demonstrates that faculty advising contributes to student completion of degree programs and successful entry into careers (Augustine-Shaw, Fairbanks & Adams-Wright, 2016). Instructor presence and community, the incorporation of synchronous sessions, and the use of web-conferencing software have been shown to raise student engagement, which leads to increased student satisfaction and retention (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Bailey & Brown, 2016; King & Alperstein, 2015; Stewart, Harlow & DeBacco, 2011; Richardson et al., 2016).

This study investigated the development, implementation and review of a Course-embedded Advising Model one online programs of a small University that aims to prepare socially responsible practitioners. A Course-embedded Advising Model was presented to students (see Appendix A). The model aims to maximize meaningful interaction between students and faculty in a synchronous environment and increase individual perceptions of relevance of online course content to raise engagement. Further, this model provides faculty with guidelines for mentoring their students, engages students outside of the online classroom and contributes to the preparation of socially responsible practitioners. The model has 5 aims:

1. Maximize meaningful interaction between students and faculty in a synchronous environment, thereby increasing instructor presence.
2. Evaluate opportunities for increasing individual relevance in online courses, thereby contributing to increased levels of engagement.
3. Provide faculty with guidelines for directing students to engage in specific activities, followed by prompted dialogue, thereby contributing to career preparation.
4. Engage students outside of the online course room in meaningful ways, thereby contributing to the development of an online community of learners.
5. Contribute to the preparation of socially responsible practitioners by modeling dedication to social justice principles.

Regarding the final aim, research by Gordon, Elmore-Sanders, & Gordon (2017) provides recommendations for the preparation of socially responsible practitioners, which focus on modeling behaviors which are consistent with the principles of social justice and engaging in open dialogue regarding social justice content. Kennedy & Wheeler (2018) report that cultural competency is not clearly addressed in a significant number of graduate programs in the United States. Targeted training in social justice principles is consistent with the mission of the institution where data were collected.

The following review of the literature presents findings from past research on advising and student engagement among students enrolled in online undergraduate and graduate programs. Representative studies on academic advising outcomes, strategies for improving retention, community building and the benefits of synchronous learning were included in this analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic advising involves the provision of support services to students, in the form of coaching, informing, counseling, disciplining, mentoring or teaching, and may focus on course selection, career planning, degree progress, institutional policy review or remediation (Khun, 2008; Miller, 2012). Faculty advising plays in integral role in preparing graduate students to complete their degrees and successfully enter their chosen fields (Craft, Augustine-Shaw, Fairbanks & Adams-Wright, 2016). Chiteng (2014) reports that centralized advising impacts the likelihood of second year enrollment among online undergraduate students.

Advising has traditionally been characterized by prescriptive, intrusive or developmental approaches, while more recent approaches have focused on appreciative advising (He & Hudson, 2016), which

emphasizes a collaborative approach to advising. Specifically, appreciative advising involves asking open-ended questions and focusing on goals and the achievement of potential. Further, an emphasis on securing trust and establishing roles in virtual advising have both been shown to contribute to better student outcomes (Ranglung et al., 2017). Students enrolled in online programs represent a growing population with unique needs, due to their distributed geographical locations (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Online student retention rates are often impacted by opportunities for meaningful interactions with faculty and peers (Bawa, 2016).

A great body of research has focused on strategies for improving the experience and, consequently, the retention, of online students (Bailey & Brown, 2016; Infande, 2013; Reed, 2015). Instructor presence, which refers to a sense that the faculty member is approachable, responsive and engaged, has been shown to contribute to increased student engagement (Petty & Farinde, 2013; Richardson et al, 2016). Frequent interactions with faculty impact student perceptions of instructor presence (Banna et al., 2015; James, Swan & Daston, 2016).

Building a sense of community in online courses is key to effectively engaging students (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Grahm, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013). Research by Stone (2016) provides recommendations for the development of community in online courses. Specifically, implementing effective online orientation programs, facilitating community space, adopting and integrating synchronous technology and employing instructional designers for the development and review of curriculum have been shown to contribute to student perceptions of community in online courses. Shea, Stone, & Delahunty (2015) report that students in online programs which include meaningful contact with faculty and other students report high levels of engagement. Granda, Garcia, Nuno & Suarez (2010) explored the utility of synchronous e-learning platforms as a way to create community. Another important factor which predicts student experience in online courses is relevance.

Erickson & Neset (2014) report on the importance of creating relevance in the online classroom in terms of its impact on effective community building. O'Malley (2017), in an analysis of faculty experiences of building community in online courses, reports that humanizing online courses, incorporating video, group work and synchronous sessions and requiring regular interactions are key factors which contribute to community. Synchronous opportunities have also been shown to have a significant impact on student engagement and learning in online courses (Hrastinski, 2010; Stewart, Harlow & DeBacco, 2011).

Steele & Thurmond (2009) report that the use of technology in virtual advising offers significant opportunities for student engagement. Specifically, the use of technology impacts student engagement in virtual academic advising (Gains, 2014; Waldner, McDaniel and Widener, 2011). Video-conferencing software, for instance, provides students with the opportunity to interact with their advisors in real time (King & Alperstein, 2015). Han (2013) demonstrated that non-verbal emotional cues impact facets of relationship building in online advising sessions conducted via web conferencing systems. These strategies represent an effort to raise student engagement through increased instructor presence.

In the program from which data were collected, students were required to meet with course faculty during 4 select courses. Student-faculty meeting duration ranged from 15 to 20 minutes and students received a grade of pass/fail for session attendance. Participation in course-embedded advising sessions is required in this program but it does not impact the formal grade received for the course.

In this advising model, the first appointment takes place during the first term of the students' degree program. This session is scheduled during the fourth week of the 8-week course and requires students to visit the program's Virtual Career Center. Students consider the prompts below and discuss their responses with the faculty member who taught their course:

1. How do you plan to make use of the Virtual Career Center during your time in the program?
2. How can assessment tools be useful for evaluating organizational fit?
3. Identify at least one (1) strategy for reducing the potential for discrimination in the evaluation of organizational fit.

Following the completion of the appointment, students are asked to prepare a reflection, which is submitted during week 6 of the course and graded as pass/fail.

Appointment 2 is scheduled during the fourth course in the 12-course sequence of the program. As in the case of the former session, students meet with the faculty member instructing the course during week 4 and submit a reflection during week 6. Although the majority of student participating in this course-embedded advising session were in the fourth session of their program, some students take this course out of sequence. The following prompts are prepared prior to the individual student-faculty meeting:

1. Would enjoy serving as a producer or as a consumer of social research within the area of industrial and organizational psychology?
2. What are some issues which relate to social justice in our field about which you are passionate?
3. What are some specific strategies you might utilize when attempting to improve justice through social research?

The third appointment takes place during course 8, of 12. Students are required to visit the Virtual Career Center and complete a vocational assessment tool of their choice, prior to preparing responses to the prompts below:

1. Identify the vocational assessment you completed.
2. Summarize your results.
3. Describe the implications of your results.

The final appointment takes place during the final program course. Students are asked to prepare the prompts below prior to meeting with their faculty member during week 4 and to submit a reflection during week 6 of the course:

1. Describe the ways in which your social responsibility action plan relates to your career goals.
2. Identify at least one way that you will demonstrate social responsibility in your future career.

The current study investigated student perceptions of the impact and utility of the Course-embedded Advising Model described above through the administration of a Student Experience Survey (see Appendix B). Survey question design was informed by research on the construct of engagement in online courses (Banna, Lin, Stewart. & Fialkowski, 2015) and faculty presence as a predictor of student perceptions of community (O'Malley, 2017). The following research questions were evaluated from a student perspective:

1. Does course-embedded advising contribute to community in online courses?
2. Does course-embedded advising impact student perceptions of faculty presence?
3. Does course-embedded advising impact perceived engagement?
4. Does course-embedded advising prepare students to serve as socially responsible practitioners?
5. Does course-embedded advising contribute to greater networking opportunities with faculty?
6. Does the Course-embedded Advising Model contribute to enhanced student-faculty relationships?
7. Does course-embedded advising impact perceptions of career-readiness?
8. What improvements to the model do students recommend?

METHOD

Participants

All participants (n = 13) in this study were MA level students enrolled in an online program who a) had already completed or b) were currently enrolled in one or more of the four courses which included course-embedded advising during the summer and fall terms of 2019. All thirteen students had participated in session one, while 77% of participants (n = 10) participated in session two. Sixty-two % of students (n = 8) participated in session three and 15% of students (n = 2) participated in the fourth and final session.

Materials

The study consent form was included in the survey and listed as item one. Contents of the consent form used included the purpose of the research study, procedures involved, potential benefits, possible risks/discomforts, confidentiality, participant rights and a list of contacts for participant questions and concerns. Additional materials included the Student Experience Survey, which was used to examine student perceptions of the impact and utility of the Course-embedded Advising Model. Survey question design was informed by research on the construct of engagement in online courses (Banna, Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015) and faculty presence as a predictor of student perceptions of community (O'Malley, 2017). The survey contained 16 items. One item asked participants to indicate the session(s) in which they had participated. Three items asked participants to rate aspects of the course-embedded advising experience using a 5-point Likert-type scale with a range from significantly negative to significantly positive. Seven items asked the participants to rate aspects of the course-embedded advising experience using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and one item asked the participants to rate their overall evaluation of the course-embedded advising program on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from poor to excellent. The last two survey questions were open-ended, asking participants to share a positive experience they had during, following, or preceding a course-embedded advising session and asking participants what improvements, if any, they would recommend to the course-embedded advising experience.

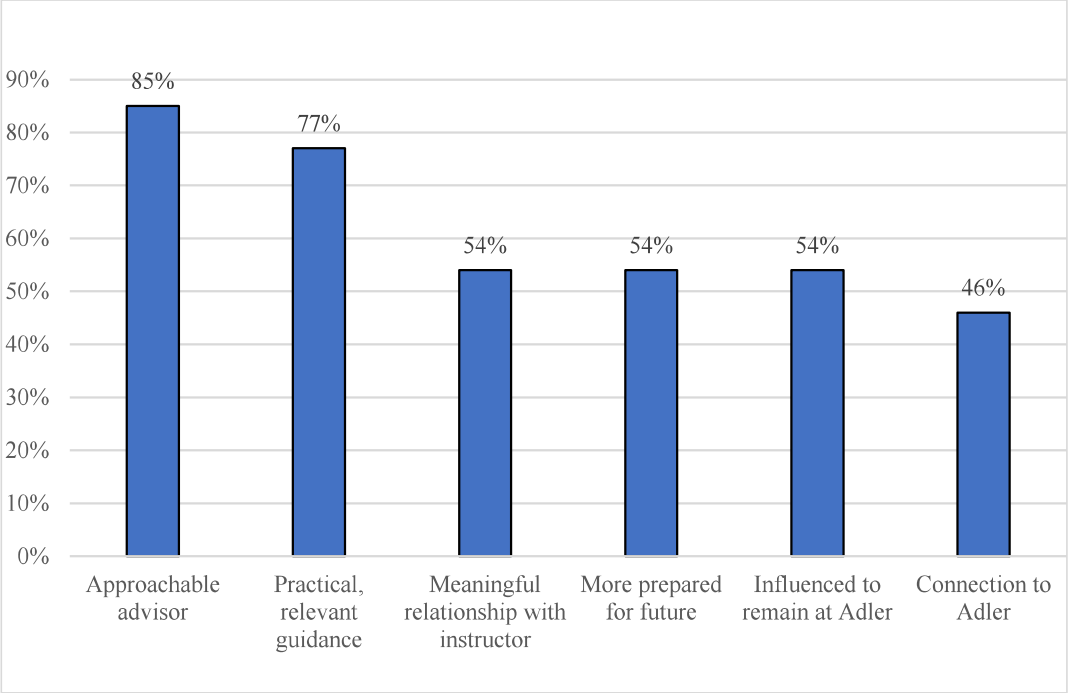
Procedures

The design of this study was non-experimental and exploratory in nature, investigating student perceptions of the impact and the utility of the Course-embedded Advising Model described above, through the administration of a Student Experience Survey. The independent variable was participation in course-embedded advising. The seven dependent variables included 1) community in online courses, 2) faculty presence, 3) perceived engagement, 4) preparation to serve as socially responsible practitioners, 5) networking opportunities, 6) student-faculty relationships, and 7) career-readiness.

RESULTS

Overall, student perceptions of the impact and the utility of the Course-embedded Advising Model were positive (see Figure 1). Out of thirteen participants, 67% indicated that their participation in course-embedded advising influenced their overall program experience and 58% of participants rated the overall course-embedded advising program as good. Further, results indicated that the course-embedded advising program may be particularly useful in improving student-faculty relationships, strengthening connections between students and the university, and contributing to students' career preparedness. Out of thirteen participants, 85% indicated that their advisor was approachable, 54% indicated that the course-embedded advising program enabled them to develop a deeper, more meaningful relationship with their instructor, 54% indicated that the course-embedded advising experience positively impacted their commitment to remain at the institution and 46% indicated that their course-embedded advising experience increased their connection to the university. Additionally, 77% of participants indicated that the course-embedded advising experience provided them with practical, relevant guidance and 54% indicated that they are now more prepared for their future career because of the course-embedded program.

FIGURE 1
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS (N=13) INDICATING POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF THE COURSE EMBEDDED ADVISING MODEL



Unexpected results were found in the area of social responsibility and grade-point average. Specifically, out of twelve participants, 67% indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that the course-embedded advising experience helped them become more socially responsible. Out of thirteen participants, only 38% indicated that the course-embedded advising program had a positive impact on their GPA, with 62% of participants indicating that the course-embedded advising program had neither a positive nor negative impact on their GPA.

The response rate to the open-ended questions was 54%. The first open-ended question asked students to share a positive aspect of the course-embedded advising process. Two main themes emerged, including career preparation and the ability to talk, connect with and relate to the instructor. The second open-ended item asked participants about improvements they might make to the course-embedded advising process. Three themes were identified, one of which focused on scheduling. Several students reported that week two might be a better time to schedule sessions than week 4. The second theme related to applicability, with students indicating that a greater emphasis on career readiness and networking would be useful. The final theme related to clarity. Specifically, students thought that additional information regarding the aims of the advising process should be provided at the start of their programs.

DISCUSSION

Overall, student perceptions of the impact and the utility of the Course-embedded Advising Model were positive, and findings indicated that the model may be particularly useful for improving student-faculty relationships, strengthening connections between students and the university, and contributing to students' career preparedness.

Contribution to Community, Faculty Presence, and Perceived Engagement

It was hypothesized that the Course-embedded Advising Model would contribute to enhancing community and perceived engagement in online course environments. This was based on previous research that illustrated the impact of instructor presence, community, the incorporation of synchronous sessions, and the use of web-conferencing software on student satisfaction and retention (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Bailey & Brown, 2016; King & Alperstein, 2015; Stewart, Harlow & DeBacco, 2011; Richardson et al., 2016). Most students reported that the course-embedded advising process enhanced their overall program experience, and the majority of students indicated that it increased their overall connection to the university and positively impacted their commitment to remain at the institution.

It was hypothesized that course-embedded advising would positively impact student perceptions of faculty presence. This was based on studies which have shown that student perceptions of a faculty member's approachability, responsiveness, and level of engagement contribute to increased student engagement (Petty & Farinde, 2013; Richardson et al., 2016). Findings were in support of this hypothesis, as the majority of students indicated that their advisor was approachable and that the faculty leading the course-embedded advising session positively impacted their learning. These results are promising for the Course-embedded Advising Model, as faculty presence is a key predictor of student perceptions of community (O'Malley, 2017).

Preparation of Socially Responsible Practitioners

Contributing to the development of socially responsible practitioners was one of the aims of this study, particularly given that cultural competency is often not addressed in graduate programs (Kennedy & Wheeler, 2018). Findings were not in support of the hypothesis, as more than half of the participants indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that the course-embedded advising experience helped them to become more socially responsible. Given the limited number of participants (n=2) who reported attending session four, where socially responsible practice is most explicitly addressed, these findings should be further explored. Additionally, future iterations of the Course-embedded Advising Model could more clearly address socially responsible practice in sessions one, two and three.

Enhanced Student-Faculty Relationships

It was hypothesized that course-embedded advising would contribute to enhanced student-faculty relationships. This was based on previous studies which found that online programs often experience lower retention rates, due in part to fewer meaningful interactions between students and faculty (Bawa, 2016) and on research that demonstrated how an emphasis on securing trust and establishing roles in e-advising has been shown to contribute to better student outcomes (Ranglung et al., 2017). Further, research which has shown that online programs which include meaningful contact with faculty and other students report high levels of engagement (Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015) and this area of research also supported this hypothesis.

Over half of the participants indicated that the faculty members leading course-embedded advising sessions were approachable and positively impacted their learning. Additionally, over half of the students indicated that the course-embedded advising experience enabled them to develop a deeper, more meaningful relationship with the instructor. These findings are in support of previous research that demonstrated the benefit that synchronous sessions may have, through their facilitation of community in online courses (Granda, Garcia, Nuno & Suarez, 2010).

Impact on Perceptions of Career-Readiness and Grade Point Average

It was hypothesized that course-embedded advising would positively impact perceptions of career-readiness. This was based on previous research which demonstrated the contribution of faculty advising to student completion of degree programs and successful entry into relevant positions (Augustine-Shaw, Fairbanks & Adams-Wright, 2016). Although more than half of students indicated that the course-embedded advising program had neither a positive nor negative impact on their GPA, the majority of students did indicate that that the course-embedded advising experience provided them with practical,

relevant guidance, and that because of the course-embedded advising experience, they are now more prepared for their future careers. This is important because, as Erickson & Neset (2014) demonstrate, creating relevance in the online classroom is essential to effective community building.

LIMITATIONS

This study was not without its limitations. The sample size was small, the response rate for open-ended questions was low, and there were threats to internal and external validity. Regarding threats to internal validity, the threat of history (i.e., a change in student resulting from an external or historical event rather than the course-embedded advising process) was present, as there was no comparison group used in this study. In terms of external validity, given that nonprobability sampling (i.e., convenience sampling, purposive sampling) was used, it is important to note that findings cannot be generalized beyond the sample. It is also important to note that the reliability and validity of the Student Satisfaction Survey was not assessed prior to use.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Advising models continue to be critical for student success. Future research could address the consistency in advising experiences. With today's cloud-based learning environment, educational delivery systems must evolve with the times. Because course-embedded advising closes the gap between academics and advising, it is necessary for future studies to focus on embedded advising models. Potential questions to explore include:

- Is there a significant difference in response themes or rates when comparing students from different courses or working with different instructors? If so, which variables are responsible for the statistically significant difference in responses?
- What other strategies could be introduced to more effectively engage students within degree programs, in addition to course-embedded advising?
- What is the reliability and validity of the Student Satisfaction Survey?

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APPENDIX A

COURSE-EMBEDDED ADVISING MODEL

Overview

Students enrolled in the following courses meet with course faculty via web-conferencing software (e.g., Zoom, Skype for Business) during the specified week of the course in which they are enrolled: Organizational Theory, Research Methods, Talent Selection and Recruitment, and Social Responsibility Action Plan. Student-Faculty meeting duration is should range from 15 to 20 minutes. Students receive a grade of pass/fail for session attendance. Participation is required but does not impact the formal grade received for the course. Students are required to submit a reflection following the completion of their session. Reflections are graded as pass/fail but do not contribute to the course grade.

Aims

1. Maximize meaningful interaction between students and faculty in a synchronous environment, thereby increasing instructor presence.
2. Evaluate opportunities for increasing individual relevance in online courses, thereby contributing to increased levels of engagement.
4. Provide faculty with guidelines for directing students to engage in specific activities, followed by prompted dialogue, thereby contributing to career preparation.
5. Engage students outside of the online course room in meaningful ways, thereby contributing to the development of an online community of learners.
6. Contribute to the preparation of socially responsible practitioners by modeling dedication to social justice principles.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEY

1. Statement of consent:
I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By selecting the *I agree* radial and *Submit*, I agree to participate in this research project. If you do not wish to participate, simply close your browser to exist the online survey.

- ○ I agree.
- ○ I do not agree.

2. Select all sessions in which you participated:
Session I
Session II
Session III
Session IV

3. What impact did the faculty leading course-embedded advising sessions have on your learning?

Significantly Negative	Moderately Negative	Neutral	Moderately Positive	Significantly Positive
1	2	3	4	5

4. What impact did the course-embedded advising program have on your GPA?

Significantly Negative	Moderately Negative	Neutral	Moderately Positive	Significantly Positive
1	2	3	4	5

5. The course-embedded advising experience provided me with practical, relevant guidance.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

6. Because of my course-embedded advising experience, I am now more prepared for my future career.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. I felt the faculty members leading course-embedded advising sessions were approachable.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

8. What impact did the course-embedded advising program have on networking opportunities with faculty?

Significantly Negative	Moderately Negative	Neutral	Moderately Positive	Significantly Positive
1	2	3	4	5

9. The course-embedded advising experience enabled me to develop a deeper, more meaningful relationship with my instructor.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

10. My course-embedded advising experience helped me become more socially responsible (e.g., awareness, sustainability, humanitarian pursuits).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

11. The course-embedded advising enhanced my overall program experience.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

12. The course-embedded advising increased my connection to the University.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

13. The course-embedded advising experience positively impacted my commitment to remain at my institution.

No Opinion	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
0	1	2	3	4	5

14. My overall evaluation of the course-embedded advising program is:

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

15. Please share a positive experience you had during, following or preceding a course-embedded advising session if applicable.

16. What improvements, if any, to the course-embedded advising program would you recommend?