Chapter 5

Utilizing a Virtual Environment for Academic Advising

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ABSTRACT

Students, regardless of age, need access to an assigned academic advisor with which they can develop a long term, mutual relationship during their college tenure. An academic advisor assists students with the difficult transition into college, and ensures that each advisee has the opportunity to gain the professional, personal, interpersonal, career, and/or academic skills necessary for college success. In the past, academic advising was viewed as a prescriptive, non developmental service; today academic advisors are making every effort to support students’ holistic growth. The development approach of advising will require an advisor to have a greater presence in the student’s life, thus meaning an increased time commitment, availability, and interaction with advisees. While traditional, face-to-face methods have been effectively used since the 1900’s to advise students, in a virtual world, more advisors are utilizing virtual and Web 2.0 technologies in an effort to educate, empower, interact, and inform students. These technologies include: Facebook, Instant Message (IM), Skype, chat sessions, electronic mailing lists, blogs, Twitter, online testing, and training.

TRANSITION TO COLLEGE OVERVIEW

The transition to college is difficult for most students. For a traditional-aged student this transition means leaving behind his/her high school network of friends, and for an adult learner it might mean making arrangements to secure daycare for children that she has been caring for over an extended period of time. Schlossberg (1984) researched how transition affects a person’s ability to adapt to a changing environment. According to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory (1984), transition is “any event or nonevent that results in change in
relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics” (p. 43).

Thus, when a student enters college, he/she begins to embark on a new experience that will most likely require a change in his/her past identity (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). Tinto (1993) describes the college transition as a time when a student moves “between membership in past communities and membership in the new communities of the college” (p. 125). During this transition it is essential that students have access to support services, mentors, and academic advisors who can assist in alleviating some of the challenges and stress associated with the transition. Together this network can offer assistance in the areas of social, emotional, academic, and career decisions in an effort to increase a student’s chance of experiencing a successful college transition while decreasing the potential of departure (Tinto, 1993). Departure is a serious concern, as only about 58 percent of students who enter a four-year institution will persist to earn bachelor degrees within six years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Therefore, more than ever an academic advisor plays a pertinent role in acclimating and ensuring student success in college.

ASSISTING STUDENTS WITH THE COLLEGE TRANSITION

It is necessary for academic advisors to intervene and assist in the college transition, because many students arrive on campus lacking the academic skills necessary for success (Light, 2001). A traditional-aged student may struggle with deciding on a possible major of study, while an adult learner may need additional support in locating classes that fit into her schedule to enable her to balance a part-time work schedule, college, and a family. In the past, students were often required to learn how to be successful in college largely on their own. Tinto (1993) determined that successes and/or failures that a student experiences may positively or negatively influence the student’s entire higher education experience. Furthermore, it is not surprising that Tinto (1993) also discerned that when a student fails to become integrated into the institutional environment, he/she is at a higher risk for departure. Lack of integration mostly affects students who do not reside on campus such as commuter students and adult learners.

Today, the need for students to acclimate and integrate successfully into college is a distant memory. Academic advisors are making every effort to support students traditionally through face-to-face methods as well as utilizing virtual and Web 2.0 technologies to advise, educate, register, and inform students. Gone are the days when a student had to present a proposed paper schedule to his/her advisor in person to receive approval to take semester courses, then upon approval wait in line at another office to have the Registrar enter those courses. Technology has given students the option to perform tasks such as interacting with an advisor, registering for class, and accessing grades without ever having to leave the comforts of their dorm room, homes, or offices. Though, technology has the potential to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and overall student satisfaction of academic advising. It is essential to first understand the history and foundational need of academic advising to be able to make use of virtual and Web 2.0 technologies.

ACADEMIC ADVISING OVERVIEW

Academic advising began in the 19th century as a way for faculty members to assist students in making appropriate academic choices (Frost, 2000). Early advising involved a faculty member supervising a student’s academic studies, living environment, and religious worship as opposed to student development (Frost, 2000). Advising was viewed as a form of parenting and referred