

Work in Progress: How to Use Flipped Advising to Promote First Year Success

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Introduction:

Providing developmental advising to first year engineering students often presents a number of challenges due to high student-to-advisor ratios. Our objective was to design and implement a student centered “flipped” advising experience using the University of Florida’s learning management system (LMS) to promote developmental advising and encourage student self-authorship.

Methods:

The Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering requires mandatory advising through the use of holds to prevent registration. Each First Year Engineering student is assigned an advisor that they will work with throughout their first year.

During the spring semester of 2016 we began requiring all first year engineering student to complete a five-semester plan before their mandatory meeting with their advisor during the registration period. Originally we had students upload their plan to Microsoft SharePoint, which was not part of our university’s LMS. For the fall 2016 semester we created a section for all entering first year students in Canvas, our LMS. Students already use Canvas for all of their university courses and therefore are familiar with its design and structure. The benefit of using an LMS is that it allows users to “organize content and multimedia resources into modules” (Steele, 2016). Our First Year Engineering module included basic information from advisors such as the First Year Engineering Advising syllabus and required students to upload their plan along with answering basic questions concerning their involvement with the university.

In the spring 2017 semester, we required students to update their plan, and added a series of short answer questions designed to help students reflect on their college experience and promote introspection about their values, i.e. who they are, who they want to be and what motivates them.

We have also developed a new orientation module for our newly admitted freshmen on Canvas. This will focus on presenting them with FAQs and other needed information pertaining to the college, as well as prompt students to begin the process of self-authorship.

Results:

97% Completion Rate of Canvas assignments during the 2016 – 2017 academic year and a 94% completion rate in the 2017 – 2018 academic year.

Reduction in number of students on probation from 25% down to 15% during the 2016 - 2017 academic year. A further reduction in the probation rate from 15% down to 12% during the 2017 - 2018 academic year.

Discussion

Providing effective developmental advising for first year students can be challenging even under ideal circumstances. However, when factoring in large student-to-advisor caseloads, this task can seem nearly impossible. Our caseloads at the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering at the University of Florida, have grown to over 430-1 in the First Year Advising program, putting a strain on resources and lessening the amount of time advisors have to spend on developmental advising with our students. Most of our time has been taken up helping students plan courses rather than helping them explore their interests and expectations. The question of how to flip this script and empower students to take charge of their own planning, their own academic and personal story, became paramount.

The role of the advisor continues to evolve beyond that of just helping the student to succeed academically. NACADA Executive Director Charlie Nutt has said advisors are now “teaching reflection and encouraging students to use what they learned in college and apply it to the rest of their lives” (Harborth, 2015, p 19). In keeping with this philosophy, we have sought methods to help our advisors have the time to do more than course planning. Effective advising helps students take stock of their interests and values and connect them to their academic, professional and personal goals. In other words, effective advising promotes introspection and reflection. Over the past two and a half years, we have transformed our advising program using a flipped classroom approach, combined with a series of questions designed to promote introspection and reflection in the student.

The Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering requires students to meet with an advisor once per semester. To ensure this meeting occurs, a hold preventing registration is placed on each student at the beginning of the semester. Each student has an assigned advisor who they will work with throughout the first year. With a student-to-advisor ratio of over 430 – 1, students were only allotted 20 minutes to meet with their advisor during the advance registration period. Advisors primarily worked with students to help them plan courses during these sessions, without much time for development and reflective advising.

The First Year Advising Program, in order to move away from this more prescriptive approach, implemented a flipped advising model in the spring 2016 semester. In this model, the student is asked to complete assignments before attending the advising session. These assignments are geared toward helping the student create their own plan in advance of meeting their advisor, and also to reflect introspectively on their own personal and academic development. The “goal is to diminish the need of the advisor to use the advising session as a means of primarily presenting information to students. Instead, the focus of the session shifts to helping students make meaning of their academic and career planning” (Steele, 2016).

Initially, we decided not to use our university’s LMS and opted for Microsoft SharePoint to host flipped advising assignments. Students were not familiar with SharePoint and there was confusion

on how to access and upload documents to our site. We then switched over to Canvas, our institutional LMS, in the fall 2016 semester with much better results. Students, already familiar with Canvas due to its use in their other courses, were much more likely to complete advising assignments.

The initial set of assignments focused on the student academic plan, and asked students to understand their general education and critical tracking requirements. In order to help students realize that their education was more than just the classroom we encouraged students to incorporate their extracurricular activities and plan out involvement such as leadership and study abroad. To gain a better picture of our student population, we also developed a questionnaire that was implemented as a survey within Canvas. This focused on collecting data about which extracurricular activities students were participating in, which tracking courses they planned to take, and where students lived in relation to campus. This provided our office with an overview, but also allowed advisors to evaluate individual answers and discuss them with the student.

These activities were a useful first step in engaging our individual advisees within the developmental advising process. The plan helped students clarify their educational goals and the questionnaire gave the advisor insight into student's involvement and interest. This led to productive conversations during the mandatory advising sessions thereby achieving one of our goals of diminishing the need to treat the session as informational and planning oriented.

Having achieved this first goal we decided to implement a reflection component to help students begin to make meaning out of their academic experiences. By including a series of short answer questions focused on reflection, we encouraged students to consider the reasons behind their academic pursuits and the values that supported them. This helped students begin to take ownership of their education while at the same time providing advisors with personalized accounts of their advisees' first-year experiences. In reviewing the short answers, certain communalities between students' experiences were identified. One such example was the family dynamic, i.e. being away from home for the first time. Students were able to express something in writing that they might not be able to verbalize in an in person meeting.

Also, through student responses, we identified the need for an orientation. Students were confused about college policies and the nature of engineering education. The Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering currently does not have a freshmen orientation, as all entering first year students attend a University of Florida preview session where they are given a general overview of majors and select classes. In order to address this need, we are launching a three phase flipped program that will begin this summer. It will consist of an online summer orientation that will help connect engineering students to the college, a continuation of our student plans and questionnaires to help students clarify their goals in the fall semester, and in spring, short answers focused on reflection that will help students take ownership of their education.

Conclusion

The flipped model has been very effective in helping our office implement developmental advising and has had a direct impact on our probation numbers. We look forward to further assessment regarding achievement of learning outcomes and student satisfaction with the flipped model.

References

Steele, G. (2016). Creating a Flipped Advising Approach. *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Creating-a-Flipped-Advising-Approach.aspx>

Harborth, A. (2015). The Developing Role of Student Advising: An Interview with Charlie Nutt. *Journal of Developmental Education*.