

# A New Challenge in Online Distance Education: "E-Advising" and Digital Student Affairs

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## Abstract

While many higher education institutions enthusiastically push forward to create new online courses, are important student affairs functions, such as advising and counseling, keeping pace? Survey results from a random sample of 60 universities offering online distance education courses are used to explore issues of "digital" student affairs. Senior student affairs administrators give feedback on their own institution's efforts related to (1) "e-Advising," (2) "e-Counseling," (3) online student forms, and (4) future efforts in this area. Results presented here will be used to shape a larger study.

## Introduction

Information technology and online distance education—teaching and learning via the Internet—have the potential to transform higher education in new directions that we are only beginning to understand. The new "virtual" classroom—a computerized version of the traditional and familiar learning environment—is having an effect at colleges and universities in more ways than the revision of teaching methods and adaptation to computer-mediated learning. How we view many administrative activities on campus are being reshaped and altered in fundamental ways as a result of changes in how, when and where people learn (Johnson, 2003).

Along with transformation comes the requisite growing pains, including in the area of student affairs administration. Each year, hundreds of new online courses are added at colleges and universities across the nation, but a review of the literature reveals only limited tools for student advising and counseling exist. Not surprisingly, technology is well out in front of policy and administration in this area. Before distance education via the Internet gets too far out ahead of itself, it is important to make these sorts of student affairs services available to those who rarely (if ever) come to campus.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which Web-based services are being offered to online distance education students. Our hypothesis was that these services, such as "e-Advising" and "e-Counseling," have not kept pace with the exponential growth in online course offerings.

## Survey Methods

Our goal was to get feedback from senior student affairs administrators about their own institution's efforts in this new area of "digital" student affairs. This exploratory study will assist in the development of a broader and more comprehensive survey of the efforts of colleges and universities in providing services for students taking online courses. One hundred twenty senior student affairs administrators from 60 universities were asked via email survey to respond to questions about each of the three areas: "e-Advising," "e-Counseling," and online student forms. Participants were offered the option to complete the survey online, with the web address link available in the email. To improve the survey response rate, a second "reminder" email was used.

Survey design encouraged participants to provide comments and feedback about online advising, forms, and the future of digital student affairs in general. These responses provide texture and qualitative richness to the findings. Thirty-four senior student affairs administrators from 26 universities responded to the survey.

The survey included the following questions:

1. *E-Advising*: Participants were asked, "Does your school currently have some kind of online 'e-Advising' program?" Yes/No and comment.
2. *Characterize your efforts*: "Which of the following best characterizes your online 'e-Advising' effort?" Answers included (a) E-mail link on web site for student questions, (b) Online form available for students to type in question and submit, (c) "Virtual advisor" is ready to interact with students online during business hours, and (d) Other (please comment).
3. *Plans to increase efforts*: "Do you have plans to expand your 'e-Advising,' 'e-Counseling,' or 'digital' student affairs efforts?" Yes/No and comment.
4. *Online forms*: "Are many/most of your school's student forms available online, either for downloading or completing online?" Yes/No and comment.
5. *Future of digital student affairs*: "Any other general comments and/or recommendations for improving 'e-Advising,' 'e-Counseling,' or 'digital' student affairs?"

## Findings

Students expect to use technology as part of their collegiate experience, prompting schools to integrate technology into many aspects of student life: classrooms, the registrar's office, student unions, cafeterias, and housing (Everhart, 2001). Our findings suggest that only a small minority of universities are currently integrating online assistance such as "e-Advising" or "e-Counseling" as part of the student services.

## Comments & Feedback

*"We are trying to use e-advising to create more flexibility in the schedule of professional advisors, so that they have more time to meet face-to-face with students who have critical needs. We are not replacing face-to-face advisement with e-advising, rather we are using e-advising in a strategic manner."*

*"E-counseling is a significant concern professionally and fraught with potential problems... because e-mail is not a secure medium of communication and because they adhere to the ethical standards of ACA and NACE, (our university) does not encourage any "counseling" electronically."*

*"E-advising helps keep good records that allows both students and advisors to have a reliable copy of the advisement notes."*

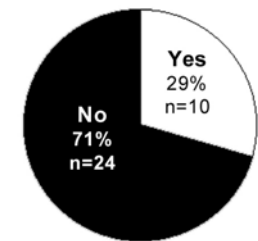
*"We believe that the role of the academic advisor on campus is changing. Students no longer need to go to the advisor to know what classes are needed for graduation. Students don't want to wait weeks to see an advisor to get information they can get on-line. Our challenge is to train the advisors to be more interactive, sometimes even more intrusive..."*

*At (our university), we have developed a number of on-line courses, but we have not developed requisite student affairs services to serve these students."*

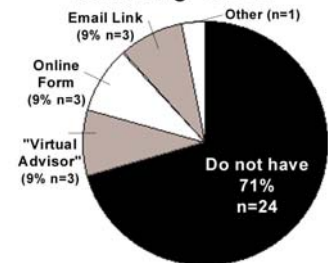
## References

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- Johnson, J.L. (2003). [Distance education: the complete guide to design, delivery, and improvement](#). NY: Teachers College Press.

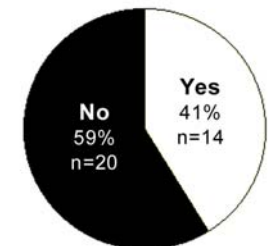
**Question 1**  
Does your school currently have some kind of "e-Advising" program?



**Question 2**  
Which of the following best characterizes your online "e-Advising" effort?



**Question 3**  
Do you have plans to expand your "e-Advising," "e-Counseling," or "digital" student affairs efforts?



**Question 4**  
Are many/most of your school's student forms available online, either for downloading or completing online?

