Academic Advising During a Global Pandemic

Brooke Musmacker
Department of Education, SUNY New Paltz
Honors Program Thesis
5/15/2020

Abstract

A major goal that nearly all undergraduate students have is to graduate. But how to do that? What do they have to do? Who can they go to with questions during their most stressful days? Advisors. Advisors are key individuals that students in the college and university settings depend upon for support and guidance during their journeys to discover their passion, themselves, their career paths, and to graduate. During the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, schools, colleges, and non-essential businesses have become remote. With these closures, colleges have been forced to transition, not only classes, but also support systems to an alternative, and somewhat unfamiliar, communication style. Primarily, advising is reliant on in-person meetings and creating genuine connections, a feat that becomes much more difficult when human interaction is limited or cut off. The following will focus on crisis adaptation and whether or not incorporating remote advising could be beneficial when in-person advising is a possibility.

Keywords; early childhood/ childhood education, advising, academic, advisor, pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus

Introduction

My name is Brooke Musmacker and I have been a student at the State University of New York at New Paltz since 2016 studying early childhood and childhood education. The university closures due to the pandemic have come during my student teaching experience. Due to the timing of the pandemic, I have had a first-hand look at how both the higher education system and the k-12 public education system in the state of New York have been handling the Coronavirus.

I have chosen to focus primarily on advising on account of my personal experience in the field through extracurricular activities. I worked at SUNY New Paltz as an Orientation Leader, Senior Orientation Leader, and Peer Mentor. These jobs allowed me to oversee incoming first year students as they made their very first college academic schedules. Seeing the stress and confusion on my students faces and having the ability to relieve that stress has been my inspiration for delving deeper into the world of academic advising. I have done so by applying for other positions that would allow me to guide and understand my peers. I became a Peer Academic Success Coach, a Peer Advisor, and a Subject Tutor. All of these jobs have provided me the opportunity to see what other students of varying years and majors are struggling with academically, what they primarily seek out help for, and their satisfaction with their general, major, concentration, and minor advisors. I also served as a student participant on a task force for the Excellence of Academic Advising initiative that my college took part in under the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). My desire to improve the experience that students have with Academic Advisors and the ever changing climate of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic are the driving forces behind my choice to research remote advising during a crisis and the implications that new measures being taken can have to better advising options in the future.

World Conditions

      The year 2020 has brought a global pandemic that caused an unprecedented shut-down of colleges, schools, and several workplaces. Many people around the world have been ordered to work from home, and businesses deemed non-essential have been ordered to shut-down. Life as we know it has altered completely as many people are quarantined to their homes. The World Health Organization (WHO) has asked countries to put protocols in place "with the aim of slowing down transmission and flattening the curve" of the impact of COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). COVID-19 is a disease that can be transmitted via contact or through the air whose main symptoms include fever, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, and cough (Lake, 2020). With social distancing orders put in place, schools, universities, and colleges have been transitioned to online learning. While the academic buildings are physically closed, education continues on in a way that is new and unprecedented for students, staff, and faculty alike. Technology was a part of learning prior to the pandemic for many. As the pandemic continues, remote learning and technology become the only way to provide education to the American children and students.

      In accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), many colleges and universities nationwide cancelled in-person classes for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Following these cancellations, the majority of public institutions mandated that students housed on-campus move out all of their belongings and return home. Exceptions could be made for students who have an extenuating circumstance. The result of these actions being that very few students remain in campus housing. With campuses colossally decreasing the number of people, students, staff, and faculty

alike, on campus, many resources are not available to students in the way they were before, one of these resources being academic advising.

In recent years, it has become more prevalent for universities and colleges to adopt software in order to increase efficiency, degree completion, and lower costs of advising. A study conducted at a variety of higher education institutions revealed a desire in both students and faculty to have some sort of online software to aid in class selection, resource availability, and performance tracking (Horn, Reinert & Reis, 2015). One school that has begun to incorporate such a software is SUNY New Paltz.

Prior to the pandemic, the common advising model at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz consisted of a blend of online and in person advising, with an emphasis on in person advising. Students had the choice of reaching out to their advisor with a question or for a meeting at any time, while being mandated to meet with their designated academic advisor a minimum of one time each semester. Students are also enrolled in a software known as Starfish, an extension of the software Blackboard. This software gives you access to several supports on campus through one easy-to-use forum (Center for Student Success, 2020). Starfish allows professors to flag students, and allows students to flag themselves, if the professor or student feels that the student is struggling in a specific class. It also provides students the ability to contact professors and advisors. The flag can be viewed by an advisor and this student becomes seen as "at-risk" prompting more support from faculty and staff (Yaskin & Horak, 2009). This software is only one of many that promotes the blend of in-person and online advising.

While a blended model may be beneficial to some campus centered colleges and universities, there are also several higher education schools based completely online, or that

provide students the opportunity to earn their degrees exclusively through online classes. For students attending school online only, advising models are also solely existent online. These online models appeared successful for a cohort attending a Vermont school that was provided with advising via Moodle, as they maintained a retention rate that was higher than that of the total population (Nolan, 2013). When advising was expanded to the entire online population, many students expressed a strong desire to remain with the same advisor throughout all of their years attending the college (Nolan, 2013). By wanting to keep the same advisor, students are revealing the importance of having a genuine connection, and the comfort of having an advisor you have already gotten to know.

Having an existing relationship with the advisor may also help students to improve their advising experience, as they may be more likely to reach out and pose their own solutions to problems as opposed to listening to and following exactly what an advisor may say. While some students may perceive the most effective relationship between a student and advisor to be prescriptive, in which the student presents a question and the advisor divulges an answer and one specific way to remedy the situation; there is another approach that may produce more developmental growth. This approach is known as developmental advising, a method of advising in which the relationship is emphasized between advisor and student, decisions are made together, a focus is placed on a student's potential, and trust is a key component (Crookston, 2009). An approach centered around potential and trust may help to build a student's intrinsic motivation, along with their confidence levels. With these two aspects increased, a student may be more likely to reach out with both small-scale and large-scale questions. By having their questions answered, and the comfort to discuss possible approaches

to issues and stressors, students may be more likely to graduate on time and to be aware of how to succeed in the college setting.

Human connection is emphasized in all of the studies mentioned above. In times of crisis when people lack the ability to meet face to face, the importance of making genuine relationships and connections are not diminished. On the contrary, these connections should become even more crucial, as a pandemic and forced social isolation can cause immense stress for many. Social isolation in particular has been shown to increase daily cortisol output levels, indicating that people become more stressed out (Grant, Hamer, & Steptoe, 2009). Advisors and students alike must work to help the other succeed in their goals and find a way to improve advising not only during a crisis, but after as well.

Research Questions

While online and remote models for advising do exist, they are not prominent among colleges and universities that focus on mainly in-person classes. For this reason, the question arises as to how advisors adapt to advising in a crisis situation and how the methods found throughout crisis can be used in normal scenarios to improve overall advising.

As someone who has worked to advise both students considered at risk and students who have chosen to come see a Peer Academic Success Coach or a Peer Advisor, I am coming into this research with a preconceived notion. While advising students, I had one initial goal in mind: make them feel comfortable. I found that when a student felt comfortable enough to share their struggles and their successes with me, then I would truly be able to help and advise them. The major struggles I would see among students in person were lack of motivation, difficulty with time management, and general confusion. Using what I had learned about a student from prior

conversation, I would then use the rapport to help them discover their motivator and plan their time. Doing so left me and the student feeling much more positive.

While I am by no means a professional advisor, my experience with my peers has led me to believe that advisors will adapt by depending on already formed relationships. I expect that advisors will use technology to maintain these relationships and create new ones as well. I also believe that technology can be more utilized by professionals in higher education. The possibility of finding, new, engaging, and effective ways to communicate, provide, and receive feedback are endless. If my hypothesis is correct, I hope that advisors will use these newly formed and strengthened relationships to benefit their students and themselves in the future.

Methods

I conducted an interview with a SUNY New Paltz advisor in the education department who advises both incoming first year students interested in education, early childhood and childhood education students throughout their first and second year, and incoming transfer students interested in education. The interview was performed via phone call and the advisor was not provided with the questions before they were asked. The advisor was approached with questions regarding common methods of communication, academic struggles of students, how the global pandemic has affected advising, and the implications new or less common advising practices becoming prevalent may have for the future. Research articles and journals were explored to answer the research questions asked. Personal experience with academic advisors and students was also used to collect observational data.

Results

It was found that in the School of Education at SUNY New Paltz, several advisors were communicating with their students mainly via in person meetings and email. However, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication proceeded mainly by way of WebEx calls, Zoom calls, real-time instant messaging, phone calls, and e-mail primarily (Schroer, 2020). The advisor interviewed specifically found thoughtful emails and phone calls to be most effective unless a student specifically requested otherwise. This advisor stated that the main goals of an advisor are to help students recognize and realize the goals that they have for themselves academically, personally, and professionally by creating a support system for the student and ensuring that they feel supported. This statement aligned with her personal philosophy that she believes works best for advising; that advisors must build relationships. The interviewed advisor confirmed that many of her colleagues consider building relationships to be vital as well. She likes to do so by viewing each student as an individual to build relationships with, as having a dependable source and connection will form a foundation for their academic success at the college or university. She says that forming a connection with each student remains a priority throughout the pandemic.

Despite prioritizing connection, crisis conditions force advisors to focus on the most essential proponents of their students' needs. These needs include but are not limited to registration clearance for the upcoming semester, helping students to identify the courses they should be registering for, and maintaining frequent contact with students flagged by professors. An essential practice also includes calling all advisees to check-in and ask if they have questions, though these calls must be kept short to ensure registration is possible for all. This advisor clarified that each advisor was pushed to learn technological approaches that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. These new approaches are taught through online professional staff

development webinars. Advisors were also given the chance to test their own methods with remote advising and choose what works best for them, whether it be video, phone, email, etc.

While the interviewed advisor maintained a very positive and hopeful outlook on the situation in her response to a question of possibilities this pandemic may open in the future, she did state that many students are struggling to find motivation for academic work and that the in-person community provided by a campus experience has been lost. Despite this loss, the advisor feels as though an emphasis on thoughtful written communication has been gained and expressed that more outreach and constant communication with advisees is her hope for the future. The advisor also feels as though the developmental webinars she attended to prepare her during the COVID-19 crisis will benefit her in her future advising endeavors regardless of outside conditions.

Discussion

While video calls between professionals and students are increasing in popularity, it is possible that there is more artificiality that comes along with a video call when compared to a phone call. The reason behind this observation being a discussion with the interviewed advisor regarding the lack of a lag in reaction time on a phone call, whereas a time lag often occurs when on a video call. It is also possible that a phone call is a more appropriate means of contact, as some students may feel uncomfortable having a professional see their home, view their personal space, or may not have access to the internet. A sense of discomfort will likely damage the attempt of the advisor to form a genuine connection with a student, especially one with whom the advisor has not had a relationship in the past.

With advisors discovering the usefulness and success of different communication styles, such as real time instant messaging and phone calls, it may be beneficial to continue offering advising sessions to students by these means. By allowing students to choose between different communication styles, the relationship between student and advisor has the potential to improve, especially when taking access to technology into account. At the present time, many students have access to some type of technology, whether it be a cell phone, landline, laptop, tablet, or desktop. Using one of these objects to communicate is likely easier and more convenient for several students than going into an office for multiple meetings. Online or phone meetings are also more accessible options for students who may not physically be able to enter the office of an advisor, whether for reasons related to illness, injury, or disability. Successful remote access and advisor connection for these students are critical regardless of a pandemic.

By students and advisors both showing openness to a blended online and in-person advising approach, the potential for advisor-advisee relationships to strengthen arises. Something as simple as a well-worded, well-intentioned email from either party can create a sense of comfort and trust between the two. Frequent communication, no matter the medium, will improve the connection and relationship, setting the stage for a student's success at the institution and providing all involved the opportunity to learn.

Implications

The findings of this paper will likely be most useful to those in the advising and education fields. The approaches advisors have taken and found successful during this time of crisis will continue to be relevant when life returns to a non-critical state. While I would like to say "when life returns to normal", I believe the pandemic will create a new normal, making that

statement obsolete. The pandemic has provided the chance for advisors and educators to learn

and grow, using new techniques and focusing on the importance of human connections. When

in-person education resumes, the techniques discovered during the COVID-19 shutdown can be

applied to students who lack the ability to come in for a meeting for any reason, and to create a

deeper connection with students in general.

References

Center for Student Success. (2020, May 6). *Starfish*. Newpaltz.edu.

    https://www.newpaltz.edu/studentsuccess/starfish/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. (2020, March 18). *Interim Guidance for*

    Administrators of US Institutions of Higher Education. CDC.gov.

    https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-ihe-response.html

Crookston, B. B. (2009). A developmental view of academic advising as teaching. *NACADA*

    Journal, *29*(1), 78-82.

Grant, N., Hamer, M., & Steptoe, A. (2009). Social isolation and stress-related cardiovascular,

    lipid, and cortisol responses. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, *37*(1), 29-37.

Horn, A. S., Reinert, L., & Reis, M. (2015). Campus-Based Practices for Promoting Student

    Success: Software Solutions. Research Brief. *Midwestern Higher Education Compact*.

Lake, M. A. (2020). What we know so far: COVID-19 current clinical knowledge and research.

    Clinical Medicine, *20*(2), 124.

Nolan, K. (2013). Online Advising Pilot at the Community College of Vermont. *Journal of*

    Asynchronous Learning Networks, *17*(1), 47-51.

Schroer, Joanna (2020, May 1). Phone interview.

World Health Organization (2020, March 18). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the*

    Media Briefing on COVID-19 -18 March 2020. WHO.int.

https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-

   media-briefing-on-covid-19---18-march-2020

Yaskin, D. A., & Horak, N. (2010). *U.S. Patent Application No. 12/499,368*.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Do you mind if I quote you or use you as a reference in my paper?

What do you believe are the goals for advising?

Do you consider some of these goals more important than others?

Do you feel as though these goals, or the order of importance of these goals, have changed during the pandemic?

What do you think students are struggling with most academically during this time?

How are you communicating with students currently?

Has an optimal method emerged?

What changes have been made in the advising approach since the onset of the pandemic?

 How were these changes decided upon?

Were any strategies tried and then dropped because you felt they were ineffective?

Do you think that the remote methods we've been using lately will still be used when life returns to normal?

Will this make you more prepared for something similar to this in the future?

What, if anything, has been "lost" in this shift towards remote advising?

What, if anything, has been "gained"?

Is Starfish used widely among staff and faculty as a means of communication?