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E-Advising: Expanding Advising for Distance LIS Students

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ABSTRACT

Online instruction and programming have expanded the universe of LIS education but have also expanded the needs of online students for assistance navigating institutional structures and requirements. With 24-7 access to coursework, accounts, and the university website, students expect prompt answers to questions through electronic or e-advising. From recruitment to alumni relations, LIS programs and their universities are seeking to expand how they reach distance students in online programs. We will share innovative uses of technology and staffing for e-advising along with what online students have told us in a survey about the kinds of advising they need and expect.

TOPICS:

Online learning

INTRODUCTION

Online instruction and programming have expanded the universe of LIS education. Across the field, we have worked to convert our courses into the online environment and to implement pedagogies appropriate for online teaching and learning. However, the physical classroom is not the only aspect of graduate education impacted by moving to an online space. The changes in instruction and advising have not just changed at the course level, but also at the program and university levels. From recruitment to alumni relations, LIS programs and their universities are seeking to expand and adjust how they reach distance students in online programs.

For the online student, the challenge of commuting to campus and hunting for a parking space has been replaced with navigating course management systems and other online technologies. Yet students report that it is not technology that is most challenging, but a sense of isolation and lack of confidence as students (Combes & Anderson, 2006). These are issues we need to address with human contact at the program and university levels, and with an expanding focus on electronic or e-advising for online students (Luna and Medina, 2007; Waldner, McDaniel & Widener, 2011).

RELEVANT LITERATURE

With the increase of availability and demand in distance learning (Ortagas, 2017), more of our students will never physically set foot on our campuses, let alone in a faculty office. Distance education provides more flexible opportunities for students who live in rural areas or non-traditional students who have full-time jobs and/or family responsibilities. LIS students choose programs that are entirely online because they aren't required to relocate (Oguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015). Students in online MLIS programs are, on average, older than those choosing a

blended or face-to-face program (Oguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015). Nontraditional students, employed full-time, are more likely to choose an online program, with the flexibility to work asynchronously and keep their current job (Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009).

In their survey of online students in MLIS programs, Oguz, Chu, and Chow (2015) found that areas needing improvement for online students included advising, mentoring, and career services. Combes & Anderson (2006) studied the sources of anxiety and frustration in online LIS students. They found students who experienced isolation wanted earlier and more consistent contact with their instructors, more information on their courses, and a more detailed explanation of overall university expectations. These students felt they were missing the contact and information available to on-campus students. They specifically asked for an online orientation and more transparency about university procedures. When this study was completed in 2006, students identified technology as a barrier, but not as strong a barrier as feelings of isolation and anxiety. Over a decade later, we would argue that technologies have improved but the emotions experienced by online students and need for human contact are still very real.

Time is a particular barrier exacerbated for online students, especially students who work during university office hours or live in different time zones. They may become accustomed to 24-7 access to courses, the university website, their accounts, and library databases, possibly resulting in frustration when questions arise with any of these outlets and they cannot receive immediate answers. Buchanan (2004) studied students in a web-based MLIS program and noted their frustration navigating the university's maze of information and trying to get answers through emails and phone calls regarding finances, registration, field work, and graduation. Online students do not experience the same affordances as those who can come to campus and wait in offices until they receive assistance. Buchanan (2004) suggests that institutions create the infrastructure necessary to support online students, providing them the same service and human connection that on-campus students receive.

Mellon and Kester (2004) surveyed online LIS students to determine program satisfaction and areas for improvement. A need for human interaction was one of their primary findings. The program featured a student manager as point of contact for early and immediate interaction with online students, to help with completing paperwork, and to be a "caring individual" (p. 217) for those students. Aversa and MacCall's (2013) case study of a synchronous, online LIS program that was successful in retaining and graduating students also reported using a "distance education coordinator" to assist students. Additionally, the program in the Aversa & MacCall case study implemented town hall meetings every semester where students had access to the program director and faculty for questions about scheduling and other issues.

While there are indications that some efforts are being made by LIS programs to provide the appropriate advising for their online students, the literature has little to share on best practices to ensure that online students have the best chance at success.

Findings and Potential Impact

To help mitigate some of the challenges and barriers to online learning for students, we have taken several proactive steps in our online LIS program to provide e-advising to our students throughout our program. These include a program advisor with responsibility for initial and continuing contact with students from the first inquiry through admissions, program of

study, other program requirements, and graduation. In the proposed paper, we will detail course interventions and other innovative uses of technology and staffing for e-advising. We will share what online students have told us in a survey about the kinds of advising they need and expect. Finally, we hope to provoke a discussion and sharing of best practices with the audience.

The expanding universe of online learning means an expansion in online needs for individual and personalized assistance. As LIS educators, we need a more holistic view of online education focused on student success not just in our courses, but throughout the entire program of study. We need to expand our discussion of best practices to include e-advising.

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