



CHAPTER 8

Engaging First-Year Students in Academic Planning

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Academic planning is a central component of effective academic advising. During a time when opportunities for in-person conversations about academic planning may not be possible, Johnson reminds us that affordable and accessible technological tools exist to engage first-year students in academic planning.

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Using Technology to Support Academic Planning

Students continue to come to college with a wide range of technological experiences and expectations. According to a 2014 survey (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014) with a representative sample of 10,000 U.S. undergraduates, 67% of respondents believed they had acquired adequate technological skills before entering college. Students also reported getting more involved in courses (49%) and more connected to instructors (54%) when technology is used than when it is not (Dahlstrom & Bichsel, 2014). Based on the learning-centered advising model, one can surmise that technology use in academic planning can exert a similar positive influence on students in an advising session as it does for them in the classroom. Technology enhances knowledge construction, provides an authentic context to support learning by doing, and serves as a reflective tool and social medium (Jonassen et al., 2008).

Learning Management Systems

A learning management system (LMS) supports face-to-face courses and delivers online instruction. Features within an LMS may include customizable modules, or folders, containing course resources organized by week or topic, discussion forums, calendars, announcements, messaging systems, web authoring and grading tools, and assessments. Available at 99% of U.S. higher education institutions (Lang & Pirani, 2014), the LMS gives all students access to an e-learning platform. Although primarily used in course-based environments, advisors can harness the features and analytics for academic planning (see chapter 10).

Students using LMSs for face-to-face and online courses see the potential applications for academic planning. According to the survey conducted by Dahlstrom and Bichsel (2014), 69% were very or extremely interested in having personalized support and degree progress information available through their LMS. Another 68% of surveyed students responded positively to suggestions that administrators and faculty members use LMS analytics to create personalized messages about students' academic progress. In fact, 89% of respondents indicated at least moderate interest in use of analytics to provide course recommendations.

Using the findings from the Dahlstrom and Bichsel (2014) survey, advisors could create a virtual advising environment through the LMS and enroll new students in the same manner as the registrar adds them in classes. Advisors could use the announcement and calendar features to post prescriptive information, such as important policies and academic deadlines, and thereby free meeting times for conversations about the academic curriculum. Because of the convenient messaging aspects of the LMS, students may connect with their advisors frequently, deepening and enhancing the relationship between them. Activity modules, web-authoring tools, and assessments encourage student reflection upon the knowledge they have gained and provide a basis for conversation starters during the advising session.

Electronic Portfolios

Through the purposeful collection of digital artifacts that showcase a student's efforts, progress, and achievements, the electronic- or e-portfolio represents a student's best work over time, demonstrates achievement of certain standards, or serves as an external performance evaluation shared with stakeholders (Jonassen et al., 2008). Reflection characterizes both the process of assembling the e-portfolio and is articulated as a specific component within the collection. An instructor or advisor assigns the specifications of the e-portfolio by

considering the overall purpose, the learning outcomes to be demonstrated, the artifacts that might represent each outcome, and the intended audience (Jonassen et al., 2008).

An instructor-assigned e-portfolio might represent a body of work throughout one course or throughout a student's entire education. Such a collection of artifacts prompts students to synthesize the various components of the curriculum as well as consider the greater purpose behind their own education. Alongside their students, advisors can review the e-portfolio in progressive stages that culminate in a capstone appointment at graduation.

In sessions held during the student's first college year, advisors may use the e-portfolio to develop student learning outcomes and subsequently to discuss opportunities for meeting those outcomes through courses and activities. This planning tool may aid first-year students in understanding the sequenced learning experiences necessary to meet long-term objectives (Lowenstein, 2005). Advisors can also use e-portfolios to flip the advising learning experience by allowing students to review their academic decision making and planning prior to the advising session (Ambrose, Martin, & Page, 2014). By preparing before the meeting, the student and advisor can capitalize on their time together to discuss the outcomes associated with the e-portfolio. Through their reflection of academic decisions and plans as part of the flipped learning experience, students also maximize their own investment in their education (Ambrose et al., 2014).

Although stand-alone e-portfolio platforms are available at a range of price points, some LMSs include an e-portfolio component at no additional cost. Likewise, students can use free blogging applications to create e-portfolios at many institutions. The LMS and blog options for an e-portfolio provide free, shareable spaces for students to curate their artifacts and reflections.

Concept Mapping

Concept maps help students “to generate ideas, to design a complex structure, to communicate complex ideas, to aid learning by explicitly integrating new and old knowledge, and to assess understanding or diagnose misunderstanding” (Dykeman & Mackenzie, 2009, p. 197). The learner begins the mapping process by addressing a focus question, identifying concepts related to that question, and then drawing the connections on a visual map (Novak & Canas, 2007). This graphical representation of relationships among ideas can produce a powerful, purposeful learning opportunity.

In the classroom, instructors use concept mapping to teach a deeper understanding of topics covered in the course. In advising, concept mapping may help students visualize the relationships among curricular components and make plans for meeting the previously identified learning outcomes. Johnson, Podjed, and Taasan (2013) presented online concept mapping in a first-year seminar to help students brainstorm opportunities for involvement throughout their undergraduate careers. The authors found that the assignment helped students “visualize, organize, and prioritize their goals” (p. 81) as well as conduct in-depth research for determining the opportunities to include on their maps.

Similar to instructors in a first-year seminar, academic advisors can encourage students to develop concept maps of their long- and short-term educational goals. They can collaborate with first-year students to construct maps on paper during an advising session, or students can use online tools to create a concept map that they share electronically with the advisor (see chapter 11). The online map presents advantages in term of saving, editing, and sharing it with others, including those on social media.

Although not the only technological tools available for advisors and advisees, LMSs, e-portfolios, and concept maps are easily accessible, customizable, and affordable. In addition, they confer opportunities to construct intentional plans and spaces for reflection with first-year students in support of their entire educational curriculum for the remainder of their degree program.

References

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