

Online Academic Advising Using Blackboard 2003 OLN Conference

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Abstract

College student engagement can be increased with the use of web portals such as Blackboard, which presents a new and unique strategy for faculty and professional staff academic advisors to interact with students, both on campus and at a distance. We will demonstrate how Blackboard communities are being used to increase the effectiveness of academic advising for students through the use of features such as Discussion Board, Groups, External Links, Calendar, and Tasks.

Student Engagement

Engagement in learning has been the focus of research related to student success and educational goal completion (Tinto, 1987). Faculty and professional staff academic advising has the potential to increase student engagement and thereby contribute to student success. The Blackboard community portal and similar technology presents a new and unique strategy for faculty and staff academic advisors to engage students, both on campus and at a distance (Jacobson, 2000).

Convergence of Technology

A few years ago, the list of technology available to advisors would include applications such as e-mail, chat, bulletin boards, and listserv used separately (Steele, Leonard, Haberle & Lipschultz, 1999). In the Internet's current form, these communication modes have converged into a single "portal" model, which Spicer (2003) defines as an "active, personalizable interface." A portal takes many types of communication modes and ties them together into a single, linked interface.

Power of Databases

Along with this trend toward convergence, a shift has occurred in Internet technology in the last few years that has allowed for a dynamic flow of information between the individual user and large databases of information. As recently as 5 years ago, the Internet was largely static information limited in viewing by the author of the web page. Now, the Internet user is able to customize information that the user needs based on inputs which determines what information is extracted from the database (Spicer, 2003).

Social Learning Theory

Pittinsky (2003) has argued for the important role that social learning plays in higher education. Interactive technology is one means to reinforce the social learning of students by providing a ubiquitous means for interaction 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Technology allows the social learning of students to extend beyond the 3 hour-per-week in-class experience.

Blackboard

The Blackboard portal is one manifestation of this new application of database technology described above. The blackboard system integrates text as well as rich multimedia information, which can be displayed in a customized way by the student user, and integrates the formerly

separate functions of email, chat, and bulletin board into one interface. It provides a way for social learning to take place outside of class.

Blackboard Features

Discussion Board – asynchronous communication (not “real time”) allows for the posting of “threads” of discussion within a related discussion Forum.

Email - allows user to send email to a single user, the instructor, or all members of the community or groups within the community

Groups – instructor-determined sub-groups of the community. Groups have separate functions accessible only to their own group members (Discussion Board, Email, etc).

External Links – a collection of links to Internet resources outside the Blackboard portal.

Calendar – instructor or student-created deadlines, announcements, events, etc.

Tasks – instructor or student-created to-do list

Chat – synchronous communication (“real time”) allows for a live conversation with a large group of people.

Benefit of Blackboard and Similar Technology for Academic Advisors

In addition to the delivery of service to students, Blackboard and similar portals can also be used for the professional development of academic advisors. The NACADA Technology in Advising Commission (1998) has identified the following technology related issues important to the work of academic advisors that can be addressed using Blackboard and similar technology:

- Advisor training/development - Technology education
- Technical support for advisors
- Communication with computer support representatives - articulating advising needs/convincing others of advising importance
- Need for clearinghouse of advising technology information and referrals/FAQ's
- Integrating Web applications with student information systems and independent systems (interactive advising focus)
- Taming technology - maintaining one-on-one personal contact
- Need to research technology's impact on advising (how students use it; what students think)
- Role of advisors in distance education

University of Cincinnati Academic Advising Bb Community Pilot

- Public, commuter, research extensive, 33,000 total, 26,000 undergraduates
- Bb community initiated September, 2002
- 119 students enrolled in community
- Survey results (18 surveys returned)
 - Heard about the site through browsing the Bb site
 - Use the site quarterly
 - Want a response to a discussion board post within 24 hours
 - Prefer in-person advising (individual or group)
 - Receive advising quarterly

- Suggestions for new features include: perspective from more seasoned advisor, combined academic audit and class scheduler, announcements & deadlines, advising appointments

Conclusion

The effect that academic advising has on the success of college students can be amplified with the use of technology portals such as Blackboard. The 24/7 nature of the Internet provides a convenient, continuous opportunity for student engagement, known to positively effect student persistence to graduation. Faculty advisors and professional staff advisors can use such technology to make their work more efficient and enjoyable.

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