

Chapter 72

Effectiveness of Online Advising on Honors Student Retention and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Academic advising is an important component of a student's education, and more often universities are turning to technology to aid in this task. This paper presents a case study of an online advising system that complements a university degree audit system by providing honors students and advisors up-to-date details on individual progress towards completing the honors curriculum and on the level of engagement in the honors co-curricular programming. By leveraging the features of Google Apps for Education, this advising system allows faculty and students to securely and easily access accurate information during schedule planning, and frees up honors staff from repetitive tasks allowing them to dedicate more time to helping students plan their educational journey. Effectiveness of this new system is measured by accuracy of information, time spent by the administration in maintaining the system, student retention and completion of the honors curriculum, and student engagement in honors co-curricular programming. The Google Script described in this paper can be adapted for mail-merge and automatic web page generation in several educational settings beyond academic advising.

INTRODUCTION

“[T]here is probably nothing else that has had a significant impact on advising in the past ten years as the introduction of new technologies” (Leonard, 2008, p. 292). Among other things, technology can help manage some of the more routine activities such as communicating basic schedule and curriculum requirements so that students and advisors may have a more meaningful and substantial interaction during limited one-on-one advising sessions (Leonard, 1996). Furthermore, technology is also making an impact in the way that universities encourage and track extra- and co-curricular engagement (Elias & Drea, 2013; Student Affairs Leadership Council, 2009).

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By design, honors programs are tasked with supporting students from diverse majors and backgrounds who have specialized advising needs. Honors programs at small to mid-sized schools often have a limited or non-existent honors advising staff and must rely on a decentralized network of academic major advisors to guide students through their educational journey. While these programs have a definite need for advising software to aid in the process, they might not have high enough enrollment or large enough budgets to justify purchasing off-the-shelf advising software. Unique to honors programs too is the administration of honors programming and co-curricular activities that distinguish them from traditional academic departments.

This paper examines a partially online and relatively inexpensive advising process which takes advantage of the university-wide switch to Google Apps for Education. This process is based on a Google Script which is general enough to be applied to several academic and administrative settings that require customized, automated interaction with records of a spreadsheet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cloud Computing in Education and FERPA

Since 2006 when Google announced its Google Apps for Education Edition, many universities began exploring “software-as-a-service” (SaaS) cloud-based tools such as email, calendars, and document creation and sharing (Gray, 2010; Katz, Goldstein, Yanosky, & Rushlo, 2010; Mutkoski, 2014). In 2015, the Google Apps for Education website claims over 40 million student-, teacher-, and administrator-users.

With the increased reliance of educational institutions on cloud computing such as Google Apps for Education, The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a concern. In a guide for school administrators and legal counsel on cloud computing, Mutkowski (p. 521, 2014) writes:

We can see from the [Department of Education] guidance that many new technologies are likely to result in the storage or transmission of information that will be considered an education record under FERPA. It may be prudent for school policy to include a presumption that all data created by students, teachers, and staff be considered education records for purposes of directing third party technology providers as to how they should handle the data, how they can use it, and with whom they can share it.

The Google Apps for Education Compliance (n.d.) website maintains that “Google Apps for Education complies with the U.S. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and our commitment to do so is included in our agreements.”

In this paper we discuss an example of how small or decentralized units within a university can leverage SaaS products similar to Google Apps to improve administration, bookkeeping, and communication. In the past, these units may have had to sit low on prioritization lists waiting for their internal IT departments to create unit-specific applications. Now, these applications can be created in-house using features such as Google Scripts. Our example concerns tracking and communicating honors course completion and student engagement in the advising process.

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