# Online Academic Advising



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## INTRODUCTION

With the vast majority of higher education institutions now being populated with millennial students and distance learners, it is necessary to change the way academic advising is conducted on the typical college campus. Howe and Strauss (2000) define millennial students as the generation born from 1982-2000. These students are known for being technologically confident and overly involved in scheduled activities (Howe & Strauss, 2003). The millennial generation spends less time than earlier generations on creative play and watching television, and more time on the computer and involved in structured activities. In addition, more students are enrolling in courses that are conducted online via the Internet instead of in the traditional classroom setting. These students are known as distance learners. This population needs to be successfully advised, even though they may never physically step foot on their degree granting college campus, has become a focus of higher educational institutions. Most distance learners are working adults who have other responsibilities, such as families. More millennials are also being drawn to online education because of the time flexibility it offers students (Steele, 2005).

To keep up with the busy schedules and time-constraints of these student populations, it is important that college administrators understand and acknowledge the need to implement technology-assisted academic advising. This technology can be in the form of computer-assisted information systems, digital communication options, and the Internet (NBCC, 2007). The following article will address what can be implemented into an academic advising program to add a technological advantage to both students and advisors alike.

## BACKGROUND

In the 1960s, large mainframe computers were replaced with personal computers. The cost to use technology was greatly reduced, and the idea of utilizing technology for advising purposes immerged on college campuses (Granello, 2000). The first virtual counselor came to fruition in 1966, named ELIZA (http://www-ai.ijs.si/eliza/eliza.html). It still functions today, though basic in comparison to the extensive technology-based counseling systems that institutions now employ (Kostin, 2003). The use of virtual counseling continued to grow into the 1980s, as computer systems were developed that could combat and assist counselors in the area of cognitive psychology. For example, two that changed the realm of cognitive therapy include MORTON and PlatoDCS. MORTON was utilized in the treatment of mental illnesses, such as depression and PlatoDCS was utilized to assist clients with solving dilemmas and decision making (Selmi, Klein, Griest, & Harris, 1982; Wagman & Keber, 1984).

The computer explosion continued to enhance and change the way counseling was conducted. One might predict that technology will continue to surmount traditional, face-to-face academic advising in the future (Garcia & Ruiz, 2005). It is also important to note that even if a student prefers to meet individually, in-person with an advisor, technology can be implemented to greatly enhance that experience (Granello, 2000). Today, the use of the technology for offering guidance regarding academics has been termed virtual, Web-based, cyber, and online advising or counseling (NBCC, 2007). It can be described simply, as the delivery of information, instruction, and/or advice that occurs when a student and advisor are in remote locations. This virtual communication can occur asynchronously (occurring at different times) or synchronously (occurring simultaneously).

The millennial generation has changed the genre of student services on a college campus in three ways. First, millennial students contact and partake in more visits to support services, such as academic advising, tutoring, mental health counseling, and the career center on a regular basis. This can lead to over-worked, understaffed educational employees, which may persuade higher education institutions to development and design autonomous advising and counseling systems, like the

ELIZA, that will be able to offer students support 24 hours a day. Second, this generation is technologically savvy and has grown up relying on modern electronics in their everyday lives. However, it is important to mention that millennials are not the first generation to be ingrained, enthralled, and raised in a technological world. Much of today's technology was designed by the generation prior to the millennial one, generation X. According to Howe and Strauss (2004), these students have never experienced a television that did not have a remote control, an automobile without a compact disc player, or a store that did not have a scanner at the checkout. Millennials enter college with the premise that higher education will also encompass technology that will make their lives more convenient.

Finally, this generation posses a consumer like mentality and expect immediate responses and information regarding their concerns 24 hours a day. This can put the traditional academic advisor in a predicament. In the past, it was adequate for students to participate in traditional academic advising where an advisor and student met one-on-one, in person, at a scheduled time to discuss course registration, academic, personal, or career issues. Most advising offices are open during the typical working hours of 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., times when the majority of the millennial students are attending class or engaging in activities that comprise the college experience, while distance learners are working full-time jobs. Students are now requesting that an academic advisor be available during untraditional hours, such as in the evenings. This demand has lead to the initiation and acceptance of utilizing technology to assist in the advising process on college campuses all over the country. As with all colleges, retention of students is crucial. The need to offer competitive and supportive services is of the highest importance; therefore, it becomes necessary for administration to look to the arena of technology.

## ONLINE ACADEMIC ADVISING TOOLS, TRENDS, AND CHALLENGES

Today, much of our daily lives are infused with technology. We bring our laptops, which store our interactive PowerPoint presentations, with us when we conduct group advising sessions; we look up a student's academic record or midterm grades utilizing an online data management system; and we e-mail an advisee the answer to a registration question. Without technology, it seems life would move at a much slower and perhaps less effective pace. As advisors, we cannot discard or ignore all the modern technologies that are at our fingertips. Gone are the days when students presented paper schedules to their advisors that highlighted their next semester courses; then, upon approval, waited in line to have the Registrar enter those courses into a database. Some advisors remember those days and were ecstatic when scheduling went digital. However, there are many institutions behind the eight ball when it comes to utilizing technology for online advising. Habley (2004) assessed technology used to enhance academic advising, and his results determined that only 2 out of 10 technologies necessary for virtual advising were on half of college campuses, those being online registration and degree audit systems. There are institutions that issue laptops to all incoming students, offer free Internet access in the resident halls, and maintain a wireless Internet connection across campus; nevertheless, these are not typical offerings on most college campuses.

So begins the review of available online services and methods that can be utilized for improving academic advising practices. First, the most common and preferred technological tool in use today is electronic mail, referred to as e-mail (Moneta, 1997). Electronic communication is rapidly growing due to campuses becoming "wired," which means being connected through Intranet and/or Internet capabilities. The design of e-mail packages, such as Outlook, have allowed advisors, to manage distribution lists, post auto-replies for extended absences, and disseminate announcements, directions, information, and/or newsletters at the click of a button via the Internet. An added benefit of e-mail is it provides a record of communication and allows the information to be distributed to others in a timely manner.

Conversely, e-mail does have some disadvantages. E-mail can wreak havoc on a busy advisor who is inundated with a steady flow of messages. It also has the ability to be forwarded to individuals whom the original writer might have not wanted shared with others. This can, and has, led to legal action regarding redistribution of information without the consent of the student. For example, it is illegal without a student's consent to forward a letter of recommendation via the Internet to a graduate school or potential employer. Therefore, it becomes important for educational staff to be trained on