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## Self-Directed Advising for Online Graduate Students

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## Self-Directed Advising for Online Graduate Students

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**Abstract:** Self-directed advising provides advisees and advisors to take active roles in the advising process. The use of self-directed advising empowers online graduate students in several ways and makes advising a less prescriptive process.

**Keywords:** self-directed, advising, online education

### The Need for Advising Online Graduate Students

As the first two decades in the new millennium come to a close, the concept of advising distance graduate adult learners still plagues the academy. Advising is an important component during one's academic life and provides a support network for students that connects them to campus resources, faculty, and their peers. At this time, the literature in advising college students has slowly started to transition from residential and traditional-aged students to distance education and the adult student (Bland, 2003; Ohrablo, 2014; Steele, 2005). Advising practices have evolved by using multiple approaches and models, and new technology provides students with access to information about their academic progress, their programs, and opportunities for other learning experiences without that knowledge coming solely from their advisor. However, advising adult students engaged in graduate-level distance learning still runs the risk of being conducted in a prescriptive manner and students can often feel disconnected (Ohrablo, 2014).

### The Value of Developing a Self-Directed Advising Model

Younis and Salman (2006) encouraged educational institutions to review their advising practices and services to become meaningful interactions that blend human interaction, enrich student experiences, automate technical content (i.e., program requirements, institution expectations, etc.), honor students' time, and lessen the power and control that is often perceived as the advisor's role. Students enrolled in both graduate level studies and at a distance can benefit from these aforementioned recommendations. The following self-directed model of advising incorporates Younis and Salman's recommendations provide the national

academic community with best practices that can be beneficial for advising student populations other than traditional on-campus and undergraduate students.

Knowles (1975) described self-directed learning as:

a process in which individuals take initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes. (p.18)

From this definition, it is safe to assume learners would have to engage in certain behaviors to be considered self-directed. These behaviors would require skills such as decision making, inquiry, and self-evaluation practices. To display these behaviors, the learners must not only have confidence in their abilities but develop an internal locus of control. The proposed self-directed advising model is different from other models in that it seeks to (1) help distance students feel more connected with their peers, faculty, and services offered by the University; (2) provide opportunities for advisees to develop self-directed skills and behaviors that are transferable in real-world contexts, and (3) allow faculty advisors to be mentors rather than transaction agents.

The advising model was converted from a conceptual framework to an interactive online tool for all advisees. The interactive tool, also referred to as the self-directed advising portal, incorporates the information that advisees will need from the time of starting the program to degree completion. This includes program expectations, university services, registration information, self-assessments of self-directed behaviors and skills, goal setting, and forum discussions. The portal is accessible for all advisees to use throughout the program. Essentially, advisees are empowered to make decisions regarding their course planning and how they use the portal and are encouraged to take an active role within the advising process.

### **Phases of Implementation and Next Steps**

A pilot program is currently in progress and is scheduled to continue through the end of the 2018-19 academic year. Data will be gathered and analyzed following the first academic year (2017-2018) and the subsequent academic year (2018-2019). Data collection and analysis will include (a) student evaluations on their experiences with the advising model; (b) faculty advisors' evaluations of the process; and (c) analytics that track usage of the interactive online portal. In the true spirit of action research, reflection will be based on examination of the evidence from multiple perspectives in order to improve advising practices for the program and the institution, and revisions will occur as deemed necessary. The recommendations will inform

not only the School, College, and University but also, advisors at a national level. Informal preliminary feedback from students has been positive; however, due to not having official findings yet, the implications self-directed advising has on the advising process and the following questions will be addressed at the roundtable session held at the 2018 Adult Education Research Conference.

- What information did we glean from the first year of the pilot program that can inform us about the effectiveness of the self-directed advising portal?
- What can we change or do differently for the second year?
- What do advisors from other institutions suggest for self-directed advising practices?

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