Digital Advising:
How it Changed a University

Peter Novak and Gregory V. Wolcott

Digital advising requires that the diversity of people and departments in a college or university share a unified approach to advising. This shared vision of advising necessitates university-wide support from top-level administrators as well as faculty/staff involvement in advising delivery. This article describes the process of adopting digital advising as a practice that helped transform the institution.

Institutional Background

The University of San Francisco (USF) is a private, faith-based university located in a major metropolitan area known for its diversity, history, and civic engagement. The undergraduate population is approximately 5,000 students with an incoming class of 1,200 freshmen and 500 transfer students. While the institution has approximately 4,800 graduate students, the focus of this article is on the undergraduate population.

Summer Advising and Registration

The old model

Most of you know the scenario—it's early summer and incoming students have received the welcome packet and instructions with everything from immunization policies and orientation schedules to housing choices and information about the diverse range of student clubs and organizations. Special summer "Jump Start" days are about to begin, requiring students to come to the university for a day or two in order to be advised and to register for classes, while attending some pre-orientation programs for themselves and their parents. These programs necessitate an enormous amount of work from almost every office in the university, including academic departments, student affairs, and enrollment services. The programs are repeated several times throughout the summer to divide the work evenly and provide convenient times for families to attend. Although these are usually

Peter Novak (novakp@usfca.edu) is the Vice Provost for Student Life at the University of San Francisco.

Gregory V. Wolcott (gvwolcott@usfca.edu) is the Assistant Vice Provost for Student Engagement at the University of San Francisco.
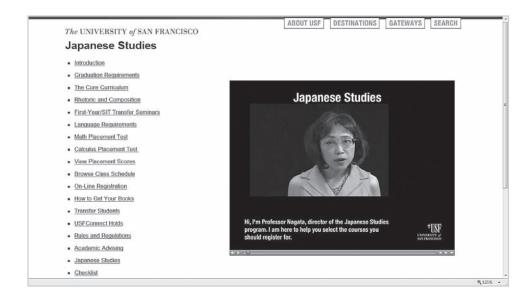
"required" programs, often one-third of the incoming class cannot attend due to vacation schedules, costs, or unexpected emergencies. This problem then impacts the fall orientation program, requiring a second program running concurrently for students who did attend a summer program.

For staff at our institution, this was a scheduling nightmare, and it seemed like controlled chaos. Students arrived in groups of about 300 and had to meet with faculty either individually or in small groups. The faculty found themselves repeating the same information, *ad nauseum*, to eager (and some not-so-eager) young minds ready for their college experience to begin. There was a lot of angst, as parents hovered and tried to get students into classes that *they* felt were important. As classes filled, students could be found in tears waiting in the hallways. From a planning perspective, everyone had expectations of what should or should not be happening in the program that takes months of preparation. Each year, small changes were made for program improvement, but inevitably the same challenge remained: coordinating a summer advising/registration program was counter-intuitive to the way our university culture worked. We needed to do something drastically different.

Like a beacon of hope in an otherwise mundane planning meeting, an idea came from a student services staff member in one of the undergraduate colleges. The idea mushroomed into a full-fledged program. The staff member asked, "What if we could create an online advising program that students could navigate on their own, and have a quiz at the end that tested their knowledge of what they had to do?" She began to pilot such a program with a small group of students and found that it could save an enormous amount of time for almost every department that contributes to academic advising. The hard part was getting buy-in from the rest of the university. Rather than explaining the negotiating process, we have chosen to describe what the program looks like now.

Webtrack - the new model

Digital advising has completely changed the way we advise all incoming students for their first semester. The program is called Webtrack (www.usfca.edu/webtrack) and is one of the many steps required of students before they come to the university. It is extremely flexible, provides a wealth of information, and students report an overall satisfaction rate with the program in the mid-90th percentile. Students learn about academic requirements: how many credits are required to graduate; CORE (general education) courses, foreign language, service learning, and cultural diversity requirements; minimum GPA expectations; how to log in; how to browse the schedule of courses; how to register for courses online; how to drop and add courses; census date (the last date to drop a class without financial penalty); and even what kinds of holds are placed on their accounts and what they mean for their registration. Most importantly, students can find their placement scores for composition courses and take online placement exams, such as in foreign languages and math, to learn what level they have been placed into, and choose those sections for themselves.

The UNIVERSITY of SAN FRANCISCO

ABOUT USF | DESTINATIONS | GATEWAYS | SEARCH

Japanese Studies

- Introduction
- Graduation Requirements
- The Core Curriculum
- Rhetoric and Composition
- First-Year/SIT Transfer Seminars
- Language Requirements
- Math Placement Test
- Calculus Placement Test
- View Placement Scores
- Browse Class Schedule
- On-Line Registration
- How to Get Your Books
- Transfer Students
- USFConnect Holds
- Rules and Regulations
- Academic Advising
- Japanese Studies
- Checklist

Japanese Studies

Hi, I'm Professor Nagata, director of the Japanese Studies program. I am here to help you select the courses you should register for.

†USF
UNIVERSITY of
SAN FRANCISCO

Webtrack created a more equitable and just registration program because it did not require students to travel to campus in order to register for their courses. Therefore, it did not punish those students who lived farther from campus and could only come to campus before the start of school. All students, regardless of area of the country and even international students, had the benefit of registering for their courses from the convenience of their own homes.

The most fundamental reason for the program's success is based on the premise that all incoming students are usually limited in their choice of courses. For example, all first-year students must take a college composition course, begin their study of a foreign language, and enroll in a first-year seminar (which are also CORE courses). With four, four-credit courses as the norm, three of those courses have been, in some sense, pre-selected. In order to get started in a major, most departments require an introductory course in the major. Although it may seem there are many choices (i.e., choosing among 14 foreign languages, 40 first-year seminars, 100 sections of composition, an introductory course in their major), for the vast majority of students their choices are really quite limited. It is the exceptions to the majority that make any advising program more complicated.

The video-based online tutorial included in Webtrack lasts approximately 45 minutes. Students can pause, replay, or come back to the program at any time. A key to the program is the final quiz, for which each student logs in (thereby creating a record of when they completed the program), and once they have successfully answered all of the questions, the program releases their advising hold, and they can register for courses. One of the statements that students much acknowledge has proven to be most valuable: "I acknowledge that I am responsible for understanding these requirements and all the requirements needed to graduate as listed in the academic catalogue as well as in Webtrack." This has significantly

reduced the number of times students say, "But no one ever told me I needed to…," because staff can look up the date they completed the online tutorial and quiz. Staff can clearly let them know that this information is available in many places and that the student themselves had indicated that they had been informed. In addition to the online course, a PDF of the material is available for download for international students whose Web access might be limited.

After registering, students are asked to sign-up for individualized advising phone appointments from faculty or professional staff members. This process ensures they have selected the appropriate classes, and provides students an opportunity to ask any additional questions. The faculty/staff advisors review each student's schedule, regardless of a phone appointment, to ensure accuracy. Mistakes are caught ahead of time and can be adjusted accordingly. The program allows Dean's offices as well as the registrar's office to cancel under-enrolled courses earlier in the summer rather than waiting until the first day of classes.

Evaluation

In its first year of adoption, the Webtrack program illustrated positive results. Statistics indicate that 91% of students register for their courses online at USF after viewing the tutorial and taking the quiz, while 76% of incoming students felt that the follow-up phone call with a faculty member was helpful.

From a faculty/staff perspective, there are improvements to be made. Creating the video modules can be time intensive and challenging when changes to course requirements are made. Financial support to hire faculty/staff advisors in the summer to conduct phone advising needs to be institutionalized. Furthermore, additional improvements could be made to broaden the international scope of the online materials for various international students whose first language may not be English.

Conclusion

The adoption of digital advising has changed the service delivery and satisfaction among our new students in securing their fall classes in a more efficient and friendly manner. The results have also been beneficial to faculty and staff in terms of decreasing demands on program coordination and resources during the summer. Additional benefits include allowing for improvements to our fall orientation program and extending orientation activities into the fall semester, such as welcome weekends. Overall, digital advising has helped us shape a new culture for the university and over time will further promote the engagement and retention of our incoming classes of students.