

# Advising Strategies That Increase Online Student Persistence

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Dr Bradfield is the Director of Distance and Post-traditional Student Services, in the School of Distance Education at Andrews University. This ongoing study informs plans for continuous improvement in the orientation, advising, and wholistic support of online learners.

### Academic Advising is...

A continuous process of assisting the student in identifying and clarifying goals, formulating plans, and then evaluating how academic progress is contributing to achieving their calling.

A review of literature suggests that the most important distance advising strategy is to build **caring relationships** with students wherever they are, flexibly using varied communication modes.

### Persistence Factors

A crucial factor to student persistence is the quality of student relationship with at least one person in the university community, often the academic advisor. One-stop advising is ideal.

Three practices most affecting online retention:

- student support and institutional connection
- quality of faculty-student interaction
- student self-discipline (Heyman, 2010)

### Action Research

Mixed methods study, using ongoing survey and interviews re significance and types of support, challenges, impact on vocation, and advice for students beginning online studies. Initial 2015 study included 11 undergrad distance degree seniors (median age 38). Qualitative email interview data was triangulated with annual academic advisor quantitative survey data.

Several noted that academic advisors contributed more than academic support, valued for their dedication to reducing the distance through communicating personably and regularly.

### Appreciative Advising

- Build a positive relationship; video conference
- Ask about calling, strengths, experience, to establish individualized goals
- Affirm prior learning, study and tech skills, then recommending resources
- Help students envision success through honest reflection and action planning following failure
- Celebrate successful completion of each term, immediately discussing next steps to success



### Proactive Advising

- Require orientation course completion
- Discuss time management & study plans
- Address fears re starting online, back to college
- Remind of support services at decision times
- Send just-in-time encouragements and reminders as automated emails
- Act on early alerts, revisit degree plans together
- Mandate academic coaching sessions or educational assessment for probation recovery
- Be accessible. Anticipate. Follow up.

### Advisor Qualities

- Respectful, caring for whole person
- Understanding of student goals
- Knowledgeable of policies, procedures & careers
- Think outside the box to kindly introduce a better way to do things
- Truly there 24/7 to assist and support
- One-stop support, the university's main contact

### Results

Higher course completion rates and reduced helpdesk queries with online advising approach. Qualitative interview and quantitative advisor survey results indicate that appreciative and proactive academic advising approaches implemented with undergraduate online programs are increasing student persistence.

Literature review and action research has informed decisions to improve supporting technology, protocols, and cross-training, in order to expand quality service to the growing online student population. Academic advisors are the first point of contact once students are admitted.

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