



Academic advising via Facebook: Examining student help seeking

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ABSTRACT

The influx of technology into institutions of higher education has demanded changes to the traditional support structures at colleges and universities. Higher education students are using technology as a means to communicate with, and seek help from, university personnel, including academic advisors. This study focuses on how six university students used and understood an electronic social network to seek help from an academic advisor. Results indicate that participants used the social network site to seek prescriptive academic advising help and acquire information about university academic matters. Findings indicate that participants considered use of the electronic social network beneficial for seeking help and were receptive to interacting with higher education personnel electronically.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Demands for technology

Recent increases in technology integration in institutions of higher education have demanded changes in the practices, implementation, and organization of student support services (Junco, 2010; Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, & Jerrolds, 2012). Current higher education student populations “have grown up with instant messaging, text messaging, blogging, and using electronic social network sites,” leading them to expect increased uses of technology from higher education institutions (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007, p. 37). As higher education institutions work to meet increased technology demands, they have been encouraged by legislators, researchers, students, and the public to increase their focus and effort to provide additional resources to improve retention and success rates (Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), 2009; Junco, 2010; Montag, Campo, Weissman, Walmsley, & Snell, 2012; Schwebel et al., 2012). As a result, higher education institutions have worked to make changes and provide support structures through academic and student affairs initiatives that encourage student success by fostering relationships between students and support staff through repeated interactions (Hollins, 2009; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Academic advisors have commonly been charged with cultivating these repeated interactions because they function in a role that promotes sustained relationships, which often encourages students to seek academic help when needed. Traditionally, academic advising has centered

on in-person advising appointments; however, in recent years student demand for repeated interactions through interactive mediums has increased. In fact, Junco (2010) argues that these relationships can materialize in person, through social media, or through online communicatory sources. Likewise, “to support and communicate well with college students, student affairs staff must embrace and explore new technologies,” thus highlighting the need for increased technology use for academic advising (Herberger & Harper, 2008, p. 32; Montag et al., 2012).

1.2. Integrating advising and Facebook

Despite the demand to infuse technology into academic and student affairs initiatives, such as academic advising, few studies have examined the intersection of academic advising in higher education institutions and the use of electronic social networks, such as Facebook, for delivering advising. Many studies have focused on the relationships between students and faculty and their uses of the Internet (i.e. Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), but the link between electronic social network use and academic advising for seeking support has been understudied. As a result, the intersection among higher education students, electronic social networks, and academic advising is important for understanding how higher education students seek academic help using the Internet. As a result, the purpose of this study is to understand how and why higher education students use Facebook to seek help from an academic advisor. Understanding how and why students use the electronic social network is important for understanding how to build and maintain relationships with students to increase retention and success. As a result, this study focuses on the following questions: 1) How do students use and understand Facebook to seek help from an academic advisor? 2) Why do students use Facebook to seek help from an academic advisor?

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2. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the theoretical framework of help seeking, which purports that individuals who seek help are active agents in the process of learning (Alexitch, 2006; Karabenick, 2004; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). Originally, the notion of help seeking was considered to be admittance of failure on the part of the person asking for assistance, casting a passive persona on those needing assistance (Winterbottom, 1958). In a seminal study, Nelson-Le Gall (1981) transformed the theory of help seeking through a paradigm shift refocusing the help seeker as an active participant in the help seeking transaction. Following this shift, “help-seeking is conceptualized as an achievement behavior involving the search for and employment of a strategy to obtain success” (p. 1654). Prototypical instances of help seeking involve an individual with a defined need, which could be eliminated if the person sought assistance from other individuals (White & Bembenuddy, 2013). In the process of seeking formal and informal help, students search for people who can relate to their situations and offer assistance through community support structures (Newman, 2012; White & Bembenuddy, 2013). Essentially, the post-paradigm theory of help seeking is used to situate the help seeker as an active agent in the learning process.

3. Relevant literature

3.1. Academic advising and help seeking

In an effort to promote student success and retention, higher education institutions have attempted to provide guidance to students by employing academic advisors to provide assistance (Schwebel et al., 2012). Advising can be defined as a process that falls along a continuum from *prescriptive* advising, involving course selection assistance, to *developmental* advising on the other extreme (Kuhn, Gordon, & Webber, 2006). Prescriptive academic advising encompasses routine academic advising conversations that are less personal and focus on course selection and institutional policies and procedures. In contrast, developmental advising encompasses more personal advising, mirroring the more in-depth conversations that may occur during counseling sessions. This type of advising is focused on personal issues, such as life decisions or career choice, to a much greater extent than prescriptive advising. Despite the type of advising, “academic advising is conceived as the collaborative process in which advisors help students to develop and realize their educational, career, and personal goals” (Kuhn et al., 2006, p. 24). As students meet with academic advisors, their help seeking tendencies are influenced by expectations, advisor availability, personal and academic background, and motivational orientation (Alexitch, 2006). Together, these influences mold the help seeking characteristics of students and influence their preferred advising styles.

As students consider meeting with an academic advisor, preconceived ideas about the advising process coupled with their own backgrounds influence the help seeking process (Alexitch, 2006; White & Bembenuddy, 2013). Commonly, students are hesitant that the process may not afford personal relationships and arranging an appointment may be difficult and timely without leading to any viable solutions for assistance. Specifically, culture, gender, and age affect help seeking and may lead to detouring students when help is needed (Alexitch, 2006; Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001). Additionally, students’ motivational orientations constitute a significant role in advising preferences (Alexitch, 1997; White & Bembenuddy, 2013). Alexitch (1997) found that highly motivated students met more frequently with advisors, and for longer periods of time, than those who were less motivated. The “educational orientation [of students] predicted help-seeking behavioral tendencies and perceived threat from help-seeking,” indicating that students who were the most in need of help were the least likely to seek help (Alexitch, 2002, p. 15). As a result, there is a need for higher education institutions to provide help to students through convenient and welcoming methods.

3.2. Academic advising and Facebook

In an effort to encourage help seeking behaviors, and reduce cost, time, and improve feasibility of delivery, higher education institutions have increased the quantity and quality of communication through electronic delivery (Junco, 2010; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Montag et al., 2012). “If advisors want to engage students, to build meaningful relationships with them, then they must come to understand the methods of communication that students naturally find engaging” (Lipschultz & Musser, 2007, p. 1). Higher education institutions are realizing that traditional forms of advising are no longer the only methods institutions can employ for service delivery to retain students (Junco, 2010; Montag et al., 2012). The benefit of electronic delivery for advising is that the process permits distance advising, has less time constraints, and is not as constrained by staff availability (Multari, 2004). However, the means through which electronic advising delivery occurs has received little attention in recent research studies.

Electronic social network sites, such as Facebook, are one venue for providing electronic delivery of academic advising services to students in higher education settings. Through electronic social networks, advisors have the capability to inform and educate students and form relationships with and among them (Esposito, 2007; Junco, 2010; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Traxler, 2007). Traxler (2007) found that students responded more quickly to Facebook messages than the email because students check Facebook more frequently than they check their email. Advising through electronic social network sites, such as Facebook, can also provide the advisor with information about the advisee (Esposito, 2007; Traxler, 2007). “One new student posted a status update saying she was feeling overwhelmed by college, so I [an academic advisor] wrote on her wall to ask how things were going. We continued the conversation face-to-face, but Facebook had given me access to information about her feelings, an easy way to connect” (Traxler, 2007, p. 7). The student was able to further her academic relationship with the advisor as a result of the electronic social network for advising.

Electronic social network sites commonly have a visible user profiles in which members of the site can “type oneself into being” and upload files, pictures, videos, and additional demographic and interest information to a profile (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Sunden, 2003, p.3; Traxler, 2007). In addition to creating profiles, users are able to perform functions such as messaging and instant messaging, are able to post notes or comments to the wall or profile page of others, and are able to view their own walls, similar to a physical bulletin board (Selwyn, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Users of the sites can create groups or post information and announcements to various groups to improve communication and correspondence with others, thus exposing multiple communication avenues for advising through electronic social networks (Lou, 2010).

3.3. Facebook in higher education

Facebook use among faculty as well as students is common in higher education institutions (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). In fact, 39% of adults ages thirty and beyond who use the Internet visit a social network site on a typical day. Related studies suggest that some faculty members find value in social network sites, while other studies claim that faculty may perceive social network sites to be more social than educational (Roblyer et al., 2010; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013). Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) studied the personal professional tensions among faculty members using social networks for communication with students. Results found both “synergies and tensions between online social networks and faculty identity” (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013, p. 43), meaning that faculty often struggle with the boundaries between social network use for personal versus professional reasons. From the student perspective, social networks, such as Facebook, have academic value (Roblyer et al., 2010). In recent years, the academic importance of social network sites has been studied through the

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