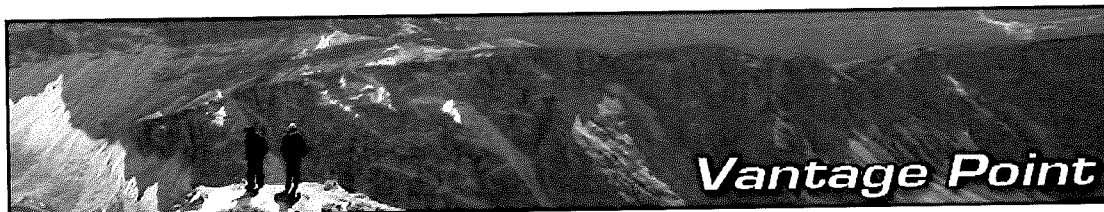




## Design a Sustainable Online Advising Option

*Darcie Anderson Mueller and Amy L. Meyer, Winona State University*



Many higher education organizations are experiencing dramatic demand and growth in online course offerings, enrollments, and services. According to Allen and Seaman (2010), the number of students who enroll in at least one online course has increased 250% from 1.6 million in 2002 to over 5.6 million in 2009. This growth is expected to continue with estimations of over 8 million students taking college courses online by December 2015 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). In addition to this demand for online courses and services, there is also significant data to support the connection between student support services, student satisfaction, and retention (Dahl, 2004; Tinto, 1999).



Although some advising can be provided via email or the phone, research supports the need for advising that goes beyond the dissemination of information. Nonverbal communication is an integral part of an advising appointment, as it helps both parties understand the meaning or intention of a conversation (Pentland, 2008). In other words, it is important to provide high quality online advising services that allow for comprehensive, face-to-face interactions with students, even when those students are off campus. With limited resources and demands on time, it is also critical to design an online advising option that is sustainable long-term.

Meeting the needs of students is important to the overall health of any university. According to Pullan (2011), the most important online student services sought by students are related to online, real-time academic advising. With many colleges facing budget constraints and other resource limitations, a quality online advising program can provide low-cost and user-friendly services for all constituents.

Winona State University is a mid-sized, public university in Minnesota, serving approximately 8,000 undergraduate students. In fall of 2015, the university offered innovation grants to explore strategies to improve student services and increase summer enrollment. Academic advisors Anderson Mueller and Meyer were awarded a grant to develop online advising services.

### **Phase One: Stakeholder Advising Group**

The online advising program was implemented in three phases. The first phase was the creation of a stakeholder advising group. Members were full-time, professional advisors recruited from both academic colleges and student support departments such as Diversity and Inclusion, Adult Continuing Education, and TRiO Student Support Services. This group was organized for three key reasons: to represent the diversity of advising needs throughout campus, to help identify best practices for online advising, and to test online advising tools and procedures.

The stakeholder group was brought together in a program kick-off to draw on the diverse knowledge of the members—how services are provided now, what works and what does not, and whether similar services were being offered. The team began by reviewing literature on best practices for online advising and discussing various technology platforms. The group considered alternative web conferencing tools and chose Adobe Connect as the most versatile and practical platform.

After the meeting, Anderson Mueller and Meyer developed two audience-specific websites, one student-focused and one faculty-specific. Both sites included step-by-step directions for use, as well as important links to advising and technology support services. Once the online advising protocols were clear and the support tools were created, it was time to test the new online advising option.

### **Phase Two: Launching the Program**

Phase two began by launching online advising in summer 2016. As part of this launch, Anderson Mueller and Meyer provided online advising training for interested advisors and recommendations for marketing this new service. This option was promoted via email to all students enrolled in at least one online summer course.

From May 9 through August 5, 2016, there were 142 academic advising appointments, 19 of these (7.47%) were completed online. A review of the participants showed a diversity of users (Table 1). The students who participated in online advising were emailed a satisfaction survey. The survey response rate was low (n=4) but those who responded said they chose online advising because they were off campus in the summer. In addition, all four respondents were satisfied with online advising and said they would use this option in the future.

After online advising was fully implemented, the stakeholder group met for a second time to discuss successes and challenges. One clear success was increasing services by offering a webcam and voice-enabled advising option at little or no cost. One identified challenge was self-described anxiety among advisors. Stakeholder members shared feelings of uncertainty when using Adobe Connect for the first time. They were concerned about the possibility of having to troubleshoot technology issues.

Table 1

*Online Advising Pilot Program Participants*

Gender	Ethnicity	Year	GPA	Visits
Female	White	Junior	3.18	1
Female	Asian	Freshman	1.64	1
Female	White	Sophomore	3.90	1
Female	White	Freshman	1.72	1
Female	Asian	Freshman	1.86	1
Female	N/A	Sophomore	2.85	1
Female	White	Freshman	1.87	1
Female	White	Freshman	1.00	1
Female	Hispanic	Sophomore	1.97	1
Female	White	Freshman	1.88	1
Female	Asian	Freshman	N/A	1
Male	N/A	Graduate Special	N/A	2
Male	White	Junior	2.20	2
Male	White	Freshman	0.33	1
Male	White	Freshman	0.53	1
Male	Black	Freshman	1.19	1
Male	White	Senior	2.35	1

**Phase Three: Ongoing Training**

Reflection from the stakeholder advising group led to phase three, ongoing training for all faculty and administrative advisors. Training sessions were offered throughout the year in a workshop format, in collaboration with the faculty development committee and other campus advising stakeholders. The workshops were 60–90 minutes each and were hosted in a classroom environment. All faculty and administrative advisors were asked to bring laptops, but sessions could also be held in a computer lab.

The first portion of each workshop included a review of online advising best practices, web resources, and the technology needed to be successful. The second portion was an interactive practice session. Participants were given an advising topic, assigned a partner, and instructed to take turns in both the advisor and advisee role. The opportunity for role playing allowed participants to become comfortable with

the technology from both the advisor and student perspective. These practice sessions were informal and allowed attendees to share advising strategies that translated well to the online environment. A member of the technology support staff also attended to address and resolve any technological questions or issues.

### Further Recommendations

Any organization interested in launching online advising should consider a number of variables before moving forward. First, what platform would work best based on technology options and student demographics? Adobe Connect was chosen for this project because it provides a user-friendly, web and voice-enabled experience. It requires no software installation by the student, is easily accessible with a single click, and was already licensed and supported by the university. Adobe Connect also allows for screen sharing, chat, and group advising sessions. New online advisors need to consider where they will facilitate any session. Advisors must ensure the space is quiet and provides confidentiality. This could be a private work area or even a home office. The advisor-advisee relationship should also be considered. What advising model or best practices will be incorporated into the online appointment? How will students be put at ease or encouraged to share relevant information? Based on the campus and student dynamic, this project integrated the Appreciative Advising approach into online advising best practices (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Creating and launching an online advising program can be a relatively low-cost option for growing student services. For the initiative at Winona State University, instructions and various resources will be updated and maintained on the website as needed, and Adobe Connect will remain a resource for facilitating student appointments. In addition, academic advisors have been trained on using Adobe Connect for online advising and will be invited to future training. Online advising will not replace in-person advising on this campus, but it has become a practical and useful option as our students' needs, online programs, and campus services continue to evolve.

### Darcie Anderson Mueller

Academic Advisor  
Warrior Success Center  
Winona State University  
[dmueller@winona.edu](mailto:dmueller@winona.edu)


### Amy L. Meyer

Academic Advisor and Career Counselor  
Warrior Success Center  
Winona State University  
[ameyer@winona.edu](mailto:ameyer@winona.edu)

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