

From a Distance: An Advising Team Model

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The Context

There is increasing evidence in the literature on student success, that academic advising is a critical component in retention of students ([Portland State University Student Advising Action Council](#), 2001). The [Center for Distance Learning](#) (CDL) at [Empire State College](#), State University of New York (SUNY), is known for its leadership in mentoring of students, adult pedagogy and online learning. The majority of students are working adults (average age 35 years) with some prior college experience. A mentor/advisor is assigned when the student enrolls, and serves as the student's primary contact with the college throughout his/her experience until graduation. Given that students enrolled in the CDL are not required to come to a physical campus at any time, regular advising takes place via telephone and email. It is traditionally an individualized activity conducted between each designated advisor and his/her assigned student.

The Challenge

One challenge facing the CDL is that enrollment in online courses is growing at nearly 20% per year. Hiring qualified faculty and staff to keep pace with the growth is an ongoing issue. In the meantime, the additional students put pressures on the current advising model in terms of the time it takes to conduct individual mentoring with each student. Increased student enrollment also challenges the advising model in terms of information delivery and technological support. However, the one-to-one mentoring model is a core value of the college and highly prized by students and advisors. Therefore, the challenge is to protect the individualized nature of working with students, and also to provide increased efficiency in working with large numbers of students. As a result of recognizing these challenges, we reflected that one (advisor) was a member of an advising system, one-to-one (student, advisor) was a partnership in that advising system, and that many (other advisors, student affairs/services, academic review, student support) needed to be brought into the advising system.

The Research

[Weick](#) (1976) conceived of educational organizations as loosely coupled systems, noting that in schools there is a "fluid participation," where activities, events, departments are "modestly connected" but that such a loose assemblage or soft structure is the reality. In later work, [Orton and Weick](#) (1990) contrast the organization as a theoretical "tight" behavioral system - "tight" meaning rational, tidy, and efficient - to that of the practical reality of the organization in which the system

actually is, and needs to be “loose.” While being “loose,” however, the departments and people are “coupled,” in that they are responsive to events, but each retains its own identity and a logical separateness. Considering organizations as loosely coupled systems adds an appreciation of the various inputs and linkages that gives “both distinctiveness and responsiveness” to an organizational system (Orton & Weick, 1990, p.205). In an examination of approaches to educational reform, Goldspink (2007) maintains that viewing the educational system as loosely coupled moves us away from a focus on structure, towards a focus on the relationships between organizations and people that influence learning. Moving away from a focus on structure does not mean that structure is unimportant, but it now places us where we can move to a consideration of structure as a framework rather than a confining box.

Pardee (2004) considered the organizational structures of advising as a framework and advocated for a structure that is a “good fit” for students, faculty and the rest of the institution. Like the previous authors, the need to assess and adapt organizational models over time was accepted, within an acknowledgement that the fundamental practice continued to be recognizable through time and change (Goldspink, 2007; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976).

Portland State University (PSU) (2001) assessed their current structure to search for a model of academic advising that would fit their institutional needs. The framework that came out in the report of PSU (2001) was that any model for academic advising continued to be “collaborative” and a “partnership” between students and advisers. This reinforced the concept of individuality in pieces of the system, but that this individuality was part of a greater whole. It was when we considered the individual as part of a greater whole concept that the notion of a team approach to advising was indicated (Kemp, 2006).

The Solution

The notion of a loosely coupled, flexible framework incorporating collaboration and partnership arose out of the research on organization theory, educational models and advising frameworks. We considered that adding in more inputs and linkages to the distance mentoring model would add “both distinctiveness and responsiveness” to the system of mentoring in the Center (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 205). To enhance collaboration, we conceptualized the advising model to include more inputs and linkages from people and other departments in the Center. Through a loosely coupled strategy, we proposed to maintain the advising partnership between student and advising, but expand it from a one-to-one scenario to a many-to-many context. By incorporating others as inputs to the partnership, the new advising system would overcome the less than ideal situation of advising always being a separate event or a series of separate events conducted in isolation.

A team advising approach enables flexibility in pieces of the system to adjust and modify without affecting the whole system (Weick, 1976). Such flexibility preserves the culture of individualization, without causing all advisement (mentoring) to be done in the same way. A team approach to advising offers more situations where various points of view may be shared. An additional advantage is that a single advisor is no longer trying to manage by him/herself the multitude of variability presented by a diverse student body. All students gain the benefit of the expertise of many in a team advising system. Another function of a team advising approach is that when there is a break in one part of the system, it does not adversely affect the operation of another part. As an example, in a team environment, there is always another team member to respond to the student in the event that the primary advisor may not be available. Thus, the organization serves and retains the student as it overrides a breakdown in process.

The benefits include:

1. A model that builds on advising as a shared responsibility

2. One student plus one advisor supported by an advising team of expertise
3. Reduction of time lags
4. Ownership by team in advising/reassigning students
5. Improved academic collaboration and collegiality
6. Increased flow of information relating to curriculum needs of students.

The Reality

In the distance learning environment, the way to bring people together as an advising team, internally and externally, is through online community spaces. The goal of each of these spaces is for students to form a community within the institution, where the institutional members are also part of that community. These online student community spaces are enabled with the technology that delivers the benefits of social networking. Students connect with one another via one to one and many to many communications. Additionally, students benefit from increased access to information and the ability to collaborate together to add academic resources (Reynard, 2008). The online student community space overcomes the challenges of social networking as it is a secure, private area accessed only by students of the organization. Thus, in the Center for Distance Learning online community spaces we ensure that students will receive advising from a team of professionals and faculty throughout their college life stages.

The first online space we designed accommodated the enrollment inquiry, admissions, orientation, and enrollment stages. The second online space was designed for degree planning through to graduation. The aim in the first advising community space ([Figure 1.](#)) was for students to get to know their cohort, interact with alums, meet their mentors, get and share information, exchange stories, and calm their college fears!

Figure 1.

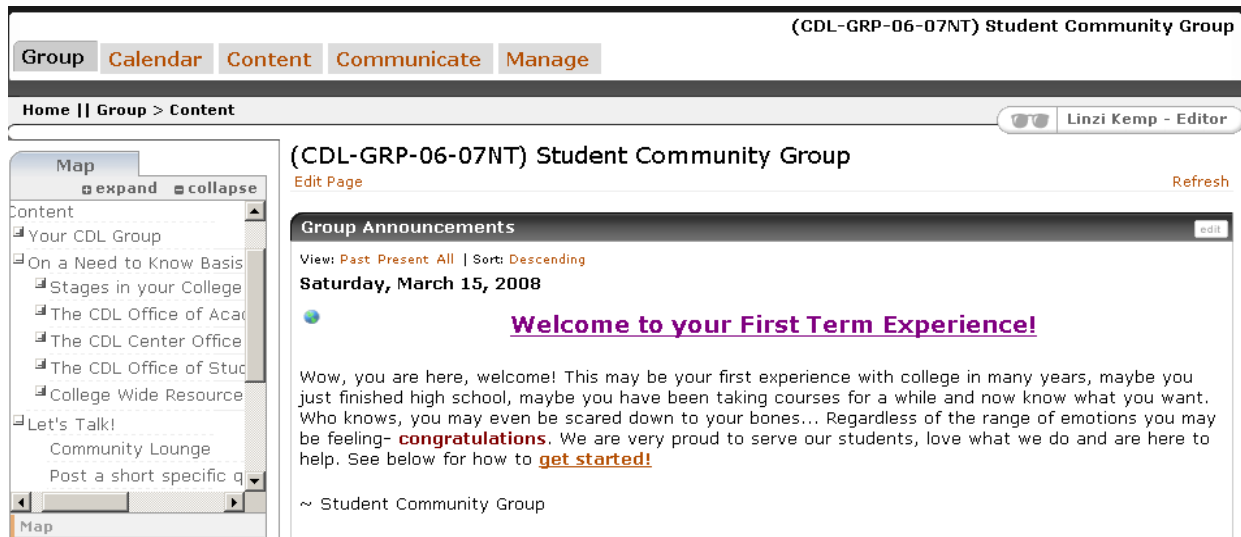
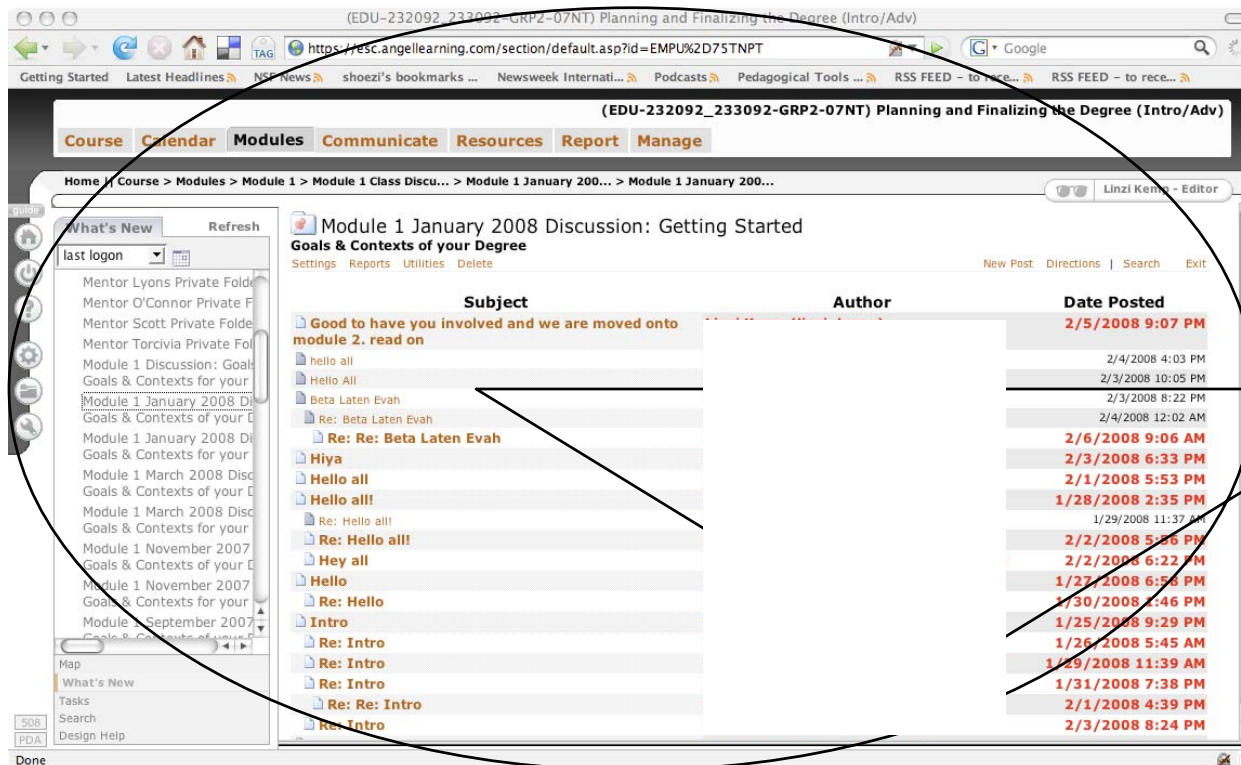


Figure 2



At Empire State College, all students design their own individualized degree plans in a process called educational planning for which they receive credit. CDL students engage in this activity through an online course called Planning and Finalizing the Degree (P & F). The second online community space (figure 2) we designed was a group P & F, in which the goal was to connect students with others engaged in the learning experience of educational planning. In this space, students work with a team of mentors, obtain and share information, gain perspectives on a wealth of academic and career directions. In the first term of the pilot, this moved advising from one mentor with a number of students who never met or shared experiences to eight mentors advising 48 students. Once the students had completed the degree planning stage within this community space, they returned to their first community space to continue receiving support from the team of advisors, student affairs/services, academic review, and student support.

Our findings conformed to what we had originally recognized--that the fundamental practice of advising continued to be recognizable through time and space and change (Goldspink, 2007; Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976) . In this case advising continued, but the structure of the activity had changed to fit the needs of students, advisors, and the organization. In conclusion and in reality, as a loosely coupled organization, we now work in an advising team of shared responsibility to retain students through to graduation success.

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