

The Advisor's Toolbox

Using an Electronic Listserv as an Advising Tool

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Advisors can utilize electronic mail to better serve their advisees' information needs. Advisors can use E-mail to not only select the information that is most relevant to students, but also to provide that information immediately, conveniently, and efficiently. The author, a departmental advisor at a large midwestern university, created a listserv exclusively for her advisees. A recent survey indicated that the students are accessing their E-mail regularly, finding the information posted to the listserv useful to them, and often relying on the listserv as a primary information source.

Since the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1992, the Internet has nearly doubled in size every year, far exceeding the growth rates of other communication technologies such as the telephone, radio, television, and video cassette recorder (Clemente, 1998). In 1994, about 3 million people were using the Internet; by mid-1999, close to 200 million people were using it. By 2005, an estimated 1 billion people will be on-line (Primedia Reference, Inc., 2000).

The Internet will undoubtedly play a dominant, if not central, role in education in the 21st century. With free Internet access at most universities, students today can locate almost any type of information with a minimum amount of effort. Some have even argued that the Internet will prove to be the single most important contribution to mass education since the invention of moveable type in the 15th century (West & Daigle, 1997). Regardless of the final outcome, the communication revolution can be seen as an opportunity to turn the teaching profession into a stronger and more dynamic force (Kook, 1997). Advisors are in a position to utilize this powerful new tool to help students meet academic and development needs.

Advisors can utilize the Internet, via Web sites or E-mail, to create a customized source of relevant information for a specific audience. Resource efficiency is one significant advantage of using Internet technology as a communication tool. Institutions of higher education continue to feel increased pressure to provide better services to students with fewer resources (Kramer & McCauley, 1995). Utilizing E-mail to reach hundreds of students at once is a resource-efficient, effective, and timely solution

for the problem of providing more service for less funding. More information can be shared with more advisees in a much smaller time frame. Plus, related documents can be electronically transmitted, thereby saving costs and benefiting the environment.

Immediacy and convenience are other important advantages to on-line communication. Information, especially of the time-sensitive variety, is most useful when students can access it quickly and easily (West & Daigle, 1997). Kramer and McCauley (1995) suggested that the difference between the haves and the have-nots can be defined as the gap between those who have quick access to accurate information and those who do not.

Third, many professors require students to access documents on the Web or use E-mail as part of class assignments. Helping students to become familiar and comfortable with this technology can assist them with academics as well as with advising-related concerns.

Fourth, the Internet serves the growing population of nontraditional students. Modern universities are enrolling a growing number of commuter students who may live a considerable distance from campus (West & Daigle, 1997) and do not have the luxury of frequent, in-person visits with an advisor.

Finally, the Internet is immediate and interactive. Individuals can respond electronically to the sender any time of the day or night.

The delicate balance between using technology and providing personal service is necessary to maintain. However, personalization does not always have to mean "in person." In fact, some students feel more comfortable asking sensitive questions via E-mail than they do in person (Kramer & McCauley, 1995). Electronic communication can create an increased awareness of news and opportunities as well as build a sense of community between advisors and advisees. Virtual communities can be as meaningful and important as physical communities to students (West & Daigle, 1997).

Advising-topic Web sites offer effective means to guide students toward a comprehensive, yet specialized, source of necessary information that is available 24 hours a day. However, the Web can be thought of as a type of "pull" technology: Students must remember the site address and to visit the

site when they have questions.

E-mail can be an alternative or supplement to a Web site. If an individual uses the Internet, one can confidently assume that he or she uses E-mail. In fact, 83% of Internet users communicate via E-mail, and 89% of those users access E-mail at least once per week (Clemente, 1998). Therefore, E-mail can be conceptualized as a form of "push" technology: Information comes directly to the students. This ease of access is especially important when time-sensitive information, such as campus events or scholarship application deadlines, is disseminated. Because most students already routinely check their E-mail, an electronic listserv can be a more immediate and effective communication tool than a Web site.

The purpose of the present study was to measure the effectiveness of an E-mail listserv for student use. Research questions included the following: How often do students access their E-mail? Do students access E-mail or Web sites more often? What kinds of information delivered via E-mail are most useful to students? Do students obtain the same information from other sources on campus, or is the listserv their only source of the information? If they obtain the information from nonlistserv sources, where do they obtain it? The answers to these questions can help advisors maximize the usefulness of a student listserv.

Method

An electronic listserv was created for approximately 400 undergraduate psychology majors at a major, public, midwestern university. The listserv was designed so that relevant information could be disseminated for advisees; topics included volunteer, internship, and job opportunities; scholarship opportunities; enrollment information; and career services events. It was created as a supplement to the existing psychology department Web site, which includes information such as psychology course descriptions and syllabi; faculty research projects; graduate school preparation information; and links to career information.

When students declare their majors in psychology or when psychology majors transfer from other institutions, the purpose of the listserv is explained, and with permission, each student is subscribed to the listserv, using his or her free university E-mail address or an alternate address that the student chooses to provide. When students graduate, leave school, or change majors, their E-mail addresses are removed from the listserv.

In April 2000, all graduating seniors in psychology ($N = 150$) were surveyed to assess their use

and satisfaction with the listserv. The listserv items were included as part of a larger survey to assess students' satisfaction with the curricula, programs, and services offered in the department. At that time, the listserv had been in place for just over 1 year.

Electronic Invitations

Departmental assessment activities in previous years consisted of paper-and-pencil surveys delivered via U.S. Mail. However, this method historically resulted in surveys sent to numerous incorrect addresses and a very low response rate. In an effort to improve response rates and reduce costs, invitations to participate in the survey were delivered exclusively via E-mail.

All spring-, summer-, and fall-graduation candidates were contacted via E-mail with an invitation to complete the Web-based survey. Graduating seniors were selected because they were most likely to have utilized the listserv since its inception. Invitations were sent to the E-mail address that the student had provided to the advisor or to the student's free university E-mail account. Up to two reminder messages were sent to nonrespondents. In addition, psychology faculty reminded students in senior-level classes to check their E-mail accounts for an invitation to complete the survey. After 30 days, 62 (41%) responses were collected.

Participants

Sixty-two undergraduate seniors in psychology responded to the electronic invitations and completed the Web-based survey. The mean age of the respondents was 23 years. Ages ranged from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 43 years. Seventy-four percent of the respondents were female. Eighty-two percent of the respondents identified themselves as Anglo/White, 6.5% as Native American, 3.2% as Black, 1.6% as Hispanic, and 6.5% reported their ethnic identity as "other." Ninety percent of the respondents indicated that they planned to graduate in either the spring, summer, or fall semester of 2000. The remaining respondents indicated an "other" graduation date.

Results

The data collected indicate that students are accessing their E-mail accounts on a regular basis. Approximately 94% reported that they access E-mail at least once per week. Of those regular E-mail users, 19% access it several times a day, and 36% check it once a day. While 85% of respondents reported that they had accessed the department Web site, 15% said that they had not. These data

suggest that E-mail, rather than a Web site, may be a more effective means of communicating with students.

Usefulness of Specific Information

A majority of the students surveyed indicated that they found each of the major categories of information either definitely or somewhat useful. This finding suggests that the listserv information was relevant to students (Table 1). According to survey results, the most useful type of information related to enrollments, which consists of instructions for setting advising appointments and completing the registration process; calendars of enrollment dates and deadlines; additions or changes to the printed Schedule of Classes; and other strategies intended to help students effectively complete the class registration process.

The second most useful information category cited by respondents was that of job/internship/volunteer opportunities. Community agencies, local employers, and campus departments often seek students to fill either paid or volunteer positions. When such information arrives in the advising office, a summary of the position and contact information is posted on the listserv. Seventy-nine per-

cent of respondents reported this category as either definitely or somewhat useful.

Approximately 77% of the survey respondents found the listserv topic on career services events either definitely or somewhat useful. This category includes announcements regarding job fairs, recruiter schedules, and special events such as guest speakers and resume workshops.

Seventy-four percent of respondents found the scholarship category either definitely or somewhat useful. This category includes reminders and updates about specific scholarship opportunities and application deadlines.

Information Replication

Many of the items posted to the listserv were also posted on nonelectronic bulletin boards on campus, in the campus newspaper, or announced to students in classes. The survey sought to determine whether the listserv was merely replicating information that students obtained elsewhere on campus or if students relied on the listserv as an exclusive source of information. Nearly one half of the students who responded to the survey indicated that the listserv was their only source of the posted information most of the time or nearly all of the time (see

Table 1 Usefulness of specific types of information offered by a listserv

Type of Information	Category of Usefulness					
	Definitely	Somewhat	Neutral	Not Very	Definitely Not	No Response
Enrollment Information	69.4	21.0	1.6	3.2	0	4.8
Job, Internship, or Volunteer Opportunities	46.8	32.3	12.9	3.2	0	4.8
Career Services Events	29.0	48.4	17.7	0	0	4.9
Scholarship Information	33.9	40.3	11.3	4.8	4.8	4.9

Table 2 Sources of student information

Survey Questions	Yes, nearly all the time	Yes, most of the time	Sometimes	No, not very often	Rarely or never	No Response
Was the listserv your only source of the information?	16.1	32.3	35.5	9.7	0	6.5
Did you obtain some of the same information from other sources as well as from the listserv?	4.8	32.3	45.2	9.7	1.6	6.5
Did you obtain most of the information from other sources as well as from the listserv?	3.2	9.7	46.8	29.0	4.8	6.5

Table 2). Approximately 37% indicated that they obtained some of the same information from other sources most of the time or nearly all of the time, and 13% indicated that they obtained the same information elsewhere either most of the time or nearly all of the time. These results suggest that the listserv is not replicating information available elsewhere for most students, but that students are depending on the listserv as a unique resource.

Other Information Sources

The survey asked which of the following sources were also utilized as information sources: academic advisor, nonelectronic campus bulletin boards, in-class announcements, word of mouth, or the campus newspaper. Respondents indicated that the campus newspaper and word of mouth were the most frequently utilized sources.

Summary and Conclusion

The Internet plays a powerful role on campus and will continue to do so in the 21st century. The Internet, particularly E-mail, can be an effective way to disseminate important information to students. Advisors can select and post messages regarding a variety of campus topics that are appropriate for their advisees. E-mail messages can be accessed more timely than information posted on a Web site. In addition, when information is presented through E-mail, the student does not need to expend the effort to note and remember to access the information because it comes directly to them.

After a department listserv had been in place at a large midwestern university for 1 year, student use and satisfaction with the listserv were assessed. Survey results indicate that most students regularly check their E-mail, and they find the information posted on the listserv to be useful to them. Students are often relying on the listserv as a primary source of information. Finally, students reported that they accessed E-mail more often than

the department Web site. These results should be interpreted cautiously because the design of this study may have excluded students who are not familiar with or comfortable using the Internet.

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Author's Note

The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Stephen Gillaspay and the Oklahoma State University Bureau of Social Research.

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