An Advising Initiative for Online Students on Academic Probation

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Online courses are increasingly popular with students, and postsecondary institutions are increasing the availability of online courses and degrees. Continued improvements in the academic experience, including academic advising, for students attending online degree programs will be expected as more students take these courses. This article provides an example of how institutions can improve academic advising for online students. An advising initiative designed for residential students on academic probation was adapted for use with online students on academic probation. Discussion of the advising approach used with both populations is included. Outcomes included improved academic standing for both student populations.

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Online education continues to grow in popularity, as evidenced by student enrollments and facilitated by institutional actions. Among students, this popularity is realized in online course enrollments. In the Falls of 2015 and 2016, respectively, 30% and 32% of postsecondary students took an online course (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Postsecondary institutions have facilitated this enrollment growth with increased online offerings. This increase was not the result of happenstance. In a 2013 survey, 69.1% of chief academic officers reported that online offerings were deemed central to long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The growth in online education also coincides with a decrease in the number of students taking courses on campus (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

In navigating the migration of students to online education, institutional stakeholders should pay attention to the availability of nonclassroom support for online students. Although the academic quality of online courses remains paramount, online students have noted also the importance of support outside the classroom. According to the 2015 Online Learners National Comparison Group for the Ruffalo Noel Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners ($N = 118{,}322$), engaging with the faculty and the quality of instruction were reported as among the highest concerns for students pursuing degrees online. However, 4 of the top 10 survey items that students identified as *important* related to situations outside the classroom: "tuition paid is a worthwhile investment," "registration for online courses is convenient," "program requirements are clear and reasonable," and "this institution responds quickly when I request information." In a similar acknowledgment of the importance of support outside the classroom, researchers reported the need to improve academic advising for online students. Recommendations from these studies included assigning online students to advisors who also act as case managers, personalizing advisor-to-advisee interactions, and delivering prompt information about curriculum requirements (Axelson, 2007; Gravel, 2012; Raphael, 2006).

Considering all of these factors—the growth in online education, the student survey results, and the recommendations from the studies cited herein—institutional leaders should improve academic advising for online students. However, a clear path to this goal may not be evident at institutions with limited experience working with online students. One method that institutions new to online offerings can use is to adapt initiatives designed for residential students; we discuss an example of this approach. To address a gap in academic advising support for online students, an advising initiative created for residential students on academic probation was redesigned for use with online students on academic probation. For the purpose of this article, the term *residential students* refers to undergraduates who attend a campus where most students take courses in a face-to-face setting; it is not limited to students who live in

Table 1. Residential and online student demographics

Demographic Category	Characteristic	Residential Students	Online Students
Age (average years)		22	32
Gender (%)	Male	43	39
	Female	57	61
Race (%)	White	74	59
	Black or African American	4	22
	Other	22	19
Academic load (%)	Full-time	84	27
	Part-time	16	73
Live in campus housing (%)		38	0

Note. Full-time = 12 or more hours per semester; Part-time = fewer than 12 hours per semester.

college-provided housing. The term *online students* refers to those who exclusively take online courses and receive advising through e-mail and phone from a centralized advising center.

Setting

The setting for the study was a private, liberal arts, nonprofit, master's degree–granting college in the Midwest. The college comprises students attending courses in three distinct venues: approximately 1,000 students who attend a residential campus, 10,000 students who attend evening and online courses through a system of nationwide locations, and 3,000 students who attend courses solely online.

The institution provides courses for earned credit through a variety of delivery methods (face to face, online, and a hybrid delivery combination), term lengths (8- or 16-week sessions), class lengths (once per week for 4 hours, three times per week for 55 minutes per meeting, or asynchronous online), and geographic locations. The residential and online student demographics at the enrollment institution differ. Residential students tend to be traditional-aged undergraduates, and online students tend to be of nontraditional age. Table 1 presents the demographic information for the two student groups.

The variety of educational offerings and delivery methods at the institution prompted a general question: Can student support initiatives deemed beneficial for students in one setting be redesigned and successfully implemented with students in another setting? This query was investigated when the administrators redesigned an advising initiative for residential students on academic probation for use with an online student population on academic probation.

Student Persistence Models and Advising Approaches

The foundations for the advising initiatives discussed herein include three student persistence models and two advising approaches. The student persistence models referenced are a model of nontraditional student attrition (Metzner & Bean, 1987), a model of dropout from distance education courses (Kember, 1989), and a model of college student persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997). These models include academics as student persistence factors.

Proactive and appreciative advising approaches were used to develop the advising initiatives. Proactive advising is based on intrusive counseling, which relies on counselor-initiated contacts (Glennen, 1975). Varney (2012) explained that proactive advising can be employed through a communication plan with students, and the advising initiatives in this study were designed with a communication plan. The content of the proactive communications for the residential and online initiatives was built on appreciative advising stages. The appreciative advising framework was developed in the early 2000s on the basis of positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, choice theory, reality therapy, social constructivist theory, scaffolding, and zone of proximal development approaches (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The practice of appreciative advising relies on a student-advisor cocreated student development path designed according to the student's strengths and is fostered through regular advisor and student contact (Bloom et al., 2008).

The relationship of proactive and appreciative advising to developmental advising warrants explanation. Winston, Miller, Ender, and Grites (1984) codified the tenets of developmental advising in *Developmental Academic Advising*.

The developmental approach requires a close student-advisor relationship that focuses on achieving both the academic and the personal goals of the student. Grites (2013) later recognized a common thread through proactive, appreciative, and developmental advising: All three approaches use a developmental approach to help students reach their goals.

Literature Review

The advising initiatives outlined in this article relied on several aspects of advising at the college under study: using proactive and appreciative advising approaches, advising online students, and improving the academic performance of students on academic probation. Therefore, we reviewed studies related to these areas.

Proactive and Appreciative Advising

Studies that examined proactive (intrusive) advising, or related methods, have revealed positive outcomes for students who presented with academic risk factors, such as low grade point averages (GPAs) or academic probation status (Abelman & Molina, 2002; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Molina & Abelman, 2000). In addition, Bettinger and Baker (2011) tracked the academic progress of 13,555 students at eight higher education institutions and reviewed the effectiveness of outreach provided to 8,049 of those students. In their study, an institutional representative contacted students to discuss barriers to success. The authors found this approach (called "coaching" in their article) to be effective for 6-, 12-, 18-, and 24-month retention at a more than 99% confidence interval and degree completion at a more than 90% confidence interval. In contrast to these findings, Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, and Jerrolds (2012) reported no significant changes in retention or students' academic progress when an advising approach related to proactive advising (advisors made outreach but students were not required to attend advising sessions) was used with a general student population.

Appreciative advising resources include methodologies, reports on advisor and student perceptions of the approach, and recommendations for use in orientation courses and advising sessions. Hutson and Clark (2007), as cited in Bloom et al. (2008), reported that an appreciative advising approach increased the GPAs and persistence levels of students returning from academic dismissal. However, the sample size for this report was small ($N = 12$), and the threshold for the statistical significance of the change in GPAs was not provided. Hutson (2010) later reported that the use of an appreciative advising approach in a first-year experience course with more participants ($N = 679$) than in the 2007 Hutson and Clark study positively affected participant GPA, retention, and responses to precourse and postcourse academic self-efficacy surveys. Pulcini (2016) suggested that using appreciative advising could promote degree completion by women of Appalachia, but the article did not include student outcome data. Other reports on student and advisor feedback on appreciative advising sessions indicated that participants valued the approach. For example, Truschel (2008) administered a student survey and reported that students on academic warning responded positively to appreciative advising sessions. In addition, Howell (2010) conducted a qualitative study of advisors' perceptions of appreciative advising and concluded that the strategy allowed advisors to be more effective.

Advising Online Students

Authors have provided guidance for advising online students, including practical advice. For example, Redfern (2008) discussed the use of e-mailed questions to online students to move students through appreciative advising stages. In addition, Waldner, McDaniel, and Widener (2011) provided tips on the technology needed to advise online students and discussed the limitations of advising from a distance.

Along with practical suggestions from authors on ways to advise online students, students have identified the need for improved academic advising. For example, in a survey of 1,154 undergraduates taking online classes, Axelson (2007) determined that advising needed to be improved and made available online. In a similar study, Raphael (2006) surveyed 272 undergraduate and graduate students seeking online degrees. Two of the top five areas needing attention, as reported by students, fell within the purview of academic advising. In addition, according to findings from a mixed-methods study of online student preferences, Gravel (2012) argued that colleges and universities should make academic advising for online students developmental in nature.

Academic Performance of Students on Academic Probation

Reports on interventions, recommendations for advising students on academic probation, and summaries of the characteristics and perceptions of students placed on academic probation are featured in the literature. For example, Lindsay (2000) provided a summary of academic intervention methods used at 11 colleges and universities. The researcher reported that successful programs for students at risk academically were, among other traits, mandatory and institutionalized.

Researchers also reviewed programs intended to increase the retention of students on academic probation. Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, and Atwood (2007) used empowerment models to improve the academic standing of students placed on academic probation. The authors reported that focusing on four areas—personal responsibility, positive affirmations, goal setting and life planning, and self-management—resulted in a higher percentage of students eligible to return from academic probation and increased academic achievement ($p = .036$). Preuss and Switalski (2008) reported that more students on academic probation who met with academic advisors three or more times improved their GPA when compared to students who met only once or not at all with an advisor (p. 6). In addition, Cruise (2002) provided a summary of the steps to take when advising a student on academic probation. Additional studies reported on the characteristics, experiences, and perceptions of this student population (Arcand & LeBlanc, 2011, 2012).

The advising initiatives for students on academic probation that we explored were related to the research reviewed and presented herein. We measured outcomes by investigating the impact on students' academic standings and GPAs.

Advising Initiative for Residential Students on Academic Probation

Prior to the Spring of 2014, no prescribed support was available for students placed on academic probation at the institution we investigated. Students attending the residential campus who were placed on academic probation received letters with information about their probationary status and notices that they would be suspended if they did not raise their GPAs. Initial analysis in the Fall of 2013 revealed that a high percentage of students warned (>48%) were suspended the term after the probation notifications.

In the Spring of 2014, the residential students placed on academic probation were required to participate in advising appointments that focused on their academic success. The students who enrolled after they were placed on academic probation had access to the advising, which was designed to reduce the number of students who were subsequently suspended from the institution for failing to improve their GPAs.

The college advisors who facilitated the sessions attended appreciative advising training. They used the six stages of appreciative advising—disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don't settle—to structure the student meetings (as per Bloom et al., 2008), as presented in Table 2. In addition, materials developed by the University of South Carolina Student Success Office, including an *About Me* form, were adapted for use in these advising sessions.

Each student placed on academic probation was required to meet with an advisor during the first 2 weeks of the semester. In that meeting, the student completed an overview of his or her academic probation status, an advising agreement, an *About Me* survey, an academic history exercise, and prompts to identify goals for academic success and a student success plan. Each student was then instructed to meet with the advisor at least two more times during the semester. The content of the second and third meetings was dependent on student-identified obstacles. These meetings could cover a number of topics, such as determining the reason that the student is in college, developing concrete academic goals, identifying academic strengths and areas needing improvement, creating a plan for meeting with professors, and learning about financial aid needs and options. In addition, a majority of students completed a time-management exercise and a learning-styles inventory.

We measured outcomes of the residential advising initiative by within-group and year-over-year comparisons. Students were grouped by completion status—they attended the three required meetings or attended fewer than three meetings—and their academic status the semester following the probation action—off probation, continued probation, suspended, or withdrew from courses. We used the within-group analyses to compare the academic statuses and the juxtaposed postterm GPAs of students on the basis of attendance at the advising sessions. We used the year-over-year comparison to investigate differences in the academic status of students placed on academic probation before and after

Table 2. Alignment of sessions to appreciative advising stages

Topic	Meeting	Appreciative Advising Stage	Detail of Alignment
Overview of probation status	1st	Disarm	This meeting opens the door for the advising. The advisor makes a self-introduction and lets the student know that this should not be an overwhelming experience.
About Me survey	1st	Discover	The advisor learns more from the student from the *About Me* survey, such as the student's background, study habits, support systems, and financial situation.
Academic history	1st	Discover	The advisor asks questions to get to know the student, including academic behaviors. This probing encourages the advisor to create a foundation for working with the student. The advisor can learn the motivations of the student to attend college and the student's concerns.
Goals for academic success	1st	Dream	The advisor works with the student to identify goals for the semester and helps the student make the connection between actions during the semester and academic goals.
Student success plan	1st	Design	The advisor shares resources and provides feedback as action plans are created according to the student's strengths and areas of improvement.
Progress check	2nd	Deliver	The advisor continues to motivate and encourage the student to keep working toward initial goals.
Progress check and planning for subsequent sessions	3rd	Don't settle	After gauging progress for the first portion of the semester, the advisor works with the student to set higher expectations and challenges the student to "raise the bar" (increase expectations).[a]

Source. Appreciative advising stages from Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008).
[a]Bloom et al. (2008, p. 98).

implementation of the advising initiative. Both groups (preimplementation and postimplementation) were composed of students who started a Fall or Spring semester as a residential student on academic probation or continued probation. We considered the outcome of Summer courses for students in a postimplementation Spring cohort, as students might take Summer courses to improve academic standing before the Fall semester. For the preimplementation group, we report the outcomes for residential students who enrolled with a probationary status the Fall or Spring semester after the probation action. For the postimplementation group, we report the outcomes for students who were required to attend advising sessions. The postimplementation group was not limited to the Fall or Spring semesters immediately following the probation action. The difference in the parameters for the pre- and postimplementation groups is a result of the requirement that postimplementation residential students attend advising sessions no matter how long they waited to reenroll after being placed on academic probation. The variables, statistical methods, and null hypotheses for each test are presented in Table 3.

Results for Residential Students

The number of advising sessions a residential student attended affected the student's academic

Table 3. Comparison groups, variables, statistical methods, and null hypotheses for the evaluation of the advising initiative for residential students

Group	Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Test	Null Hypothesis
Within	Academic status 1 term after being required to attend appreciative advising sessions	Attended 3 or more advising sessions; attended fewer than 3 advising sessions	Two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests	There is no difference in the proportion of students in each academic status for students who attended 3 sessions and for students who attended fewer than 3 sessions.
Within	Postterm GPA	Attended 3 or more advising sessions; attended fewer than 3 advising sessions	Two-sample *t* test	There is no difference in the postadvising GPAs of students who attended 3 sessions and the postadvising GPAs of students who attended fewer than 3 sessions.
Year-over-year	Academic status 1 term after being placed on academic probation (preimplementation group) or 1 term after being required to attend appreciative advising sessions (postimplementation group)	Preimplementation; postimplementation	Two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests	There is no difference in the proportion of students in each academic status before and after the implementation of the advising initiative.

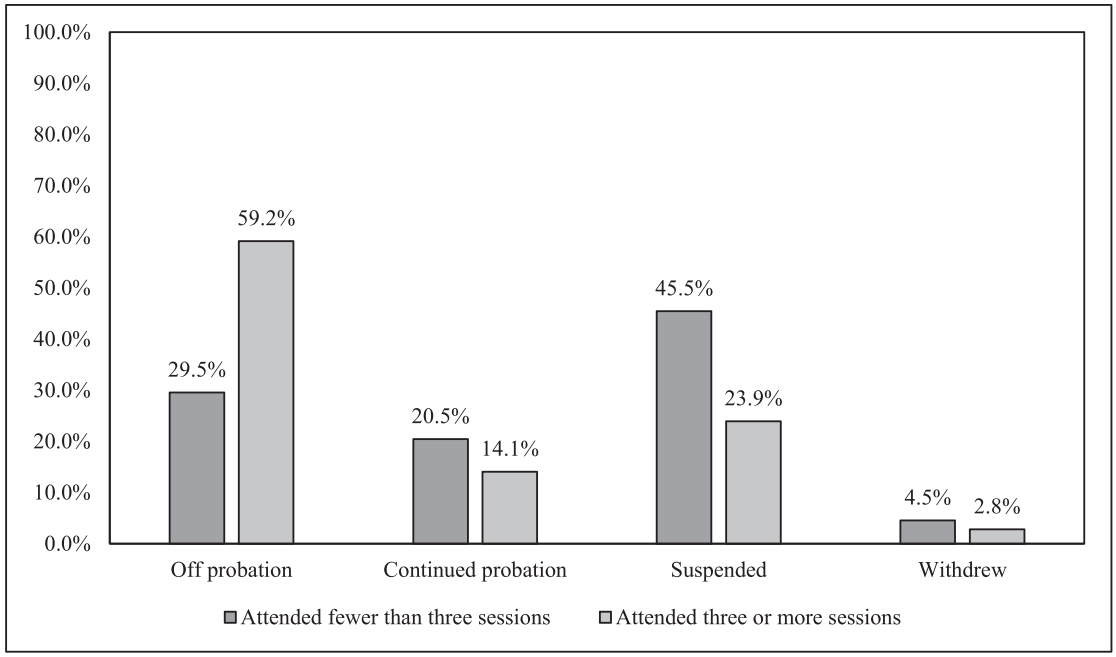
Note. GPA = grade point average.

Table 4. Within-group comparison of academic status for residential students on academic probation who were required to attend appreciative advising sessions, Spring 2014–Spring 2016

	Summary			
Status	**Students**	**Total Cohort**	**Rate (%)**	**Significance (*p*)**
Off probation				
Attended fewer than 3 sessions	13	44	29.5	.001
Attended 3 or more sessions	42	71	59.2	
Continued probation				
Attended fewer than 3 sessions	9	44	20.5	.386
Attended 3 or more sessions	10	71	14.1	
Suspended				
Attended fewer than 3 sessions	20	44	45.5	.018
Attended 3 or more sessions	17	71	23.9	
Withdrew from courses				
Attended fewer than 3 sessions	2	44	4.5	.641
Attended 3 or more sessions	2	71	2.8	

Note. Two-tailed, two-proportion tests used for significance.

Figure 1. Academic status of residential students on academic probation who were required to attend appreciative advising sessions Spring 2014–Spring 2016



status and GPA. More students who attended three or more sessions (59.2%) were removed from probation compared to students who attended fewer than three sessions (29.5%). This difference was significant ($p = .001$). Fewer students (23.9%) who attended three or more sessions were suspended compared to those students who attended fewer than three sessions (45.5%). This difference was also significant ($p = .018$). We found other differences in the academic statuses of the two groups, but these were not significant. Table 4 shows the results of the two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests for the within-group analyses, and Figure 1 presents the comparisons of academic statuses.

A two-tailed, two-sample *t* test was conducted to compare the postterm GPAs of students who attended three or more sessions to those who attended fewer than three sessions. A significant difference was found between the postterm GPAs of students who attended three or more sessions ($M = 1.875$, $SD = 0.427$) and the postterm GPAs of students who attended fewer than three sessions ($M = 1.489$, $SD = 0.661$); $t(63) = -3.42$, $p = .001$.

Differences also emerged in the year-over-year analysis of academic status. The proportion of students removed from probation significantly increased from 20.5% to 47.8% after the advising initiative was implemented ($p = .001$). Table 5 features the results of the two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests for the year-over-year analysis of academic status, and Figure 2 shows the academic statuses for students before (Fall 2012–Fall 2013) and after (Spring 2014–Spring 2016) the advising initiative was implemented.

Advising Initiative for Online Students on Academic Probation

Despite the implementation of the residential advising initiative described herein, a standard outreach plan for online students on academic probation did not exist at the institution. Initial analysis revealed that a high percentage of online students were suspended one term after being placed on academic probation (>45%). College administrators decided to adapt the residential initiative for use with online students.

Academic advisors for online students (online advisors) created a proactive outreach plan on the basis of the residential advising initiative. These advisors were chosen to create the online version because they had the best understanding of online students' needs and preferences at the institution. To complete this plan, the advisors considered

Table 5. Year-over-year comparison of academic status before (Fall 2012–Fall 2013) and after (Spring 2014–Spring 2016) implementation of an appreciative advising initiative for residential students on academic probation

	Summary			
Status	**Students**	**Total Cohort**	**Rate (%)**	**Significance (*p*)**
Off probation				
Fall 2012–Fall 2013	8	39	20.5	.001
Spring 2014–Spring 2016	55	115	47.8	
Continued probation				
Fall 2012–Fall 2013	7	39	17.9	.840
Spring 2014–Spring 2016	19	115	16.5	
Suspended				
Fall 2012–Fall 2013	19	39	48.7	.069
Spring 2014–Spring 2016	37	115	32.2	
Withdrew from courses				
Fall 2012–Fall 2013	5	39	12.8	.096
Spring 2014–Spring 2016	4	115	3.5	

Note. Two-tailed, two-proportion tests used for significance.

differences between the residential and online academic environments: the length of terms (16 weeks for residential and 8 weeks for online terms), the maximum concurrent hours allowed per student per term (18 hours for residential and 6 for online students), the delivery method (face to face for residential and asynchronous for online students), availability of academic support such as tutoring, and the geographical proximity of students to their advisors. The result of the adaptation

Figure 2. Year-over-year comparison of academic status before (Fall 2012–Fall 2013) and after (Spring 2014–Spring 2016) implementation of appreciative advising initiative for residential students on academic probation

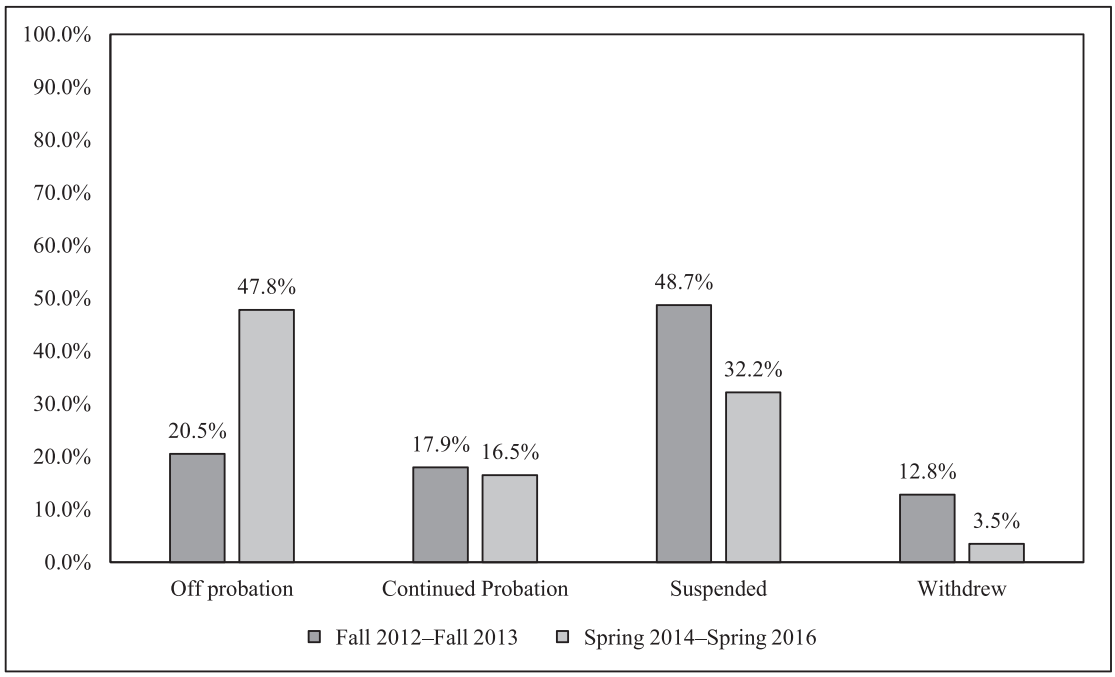


Table 6. Alignment of communications topics sent to online students to appreciative advising stages

Topic	Communication	Appreciative Advising Stage	Detail of Alignment
Overview of probation status	1st	Disarm	This communication opens the door for the advising. The advisor makes an introduction and lets the student know that this should not be an overwhelming experience.
Questions about student-identified problems	1st	Discover	The advisor asks questions to prompt thought on the student's own academic behaviors. The student starts to codify motivations for attending college and any concerns about the future.
Suggestions for course loads and course retakes	1st	Discover	The advisor learns more from the student and the student identifies potential areas of concern.
Goals for academic success	2nd	Dream	The advisor encourages the student to identify goals for the semester and reasons for pursuing a degree. The advisor can help the student make the connection between actions taken during the semester and academic goals.
Links to academic resources	2nd	Design	The advisor shares resources and provides feedback as action plans are created based on the student's strengths and areas of needed improvement.
Progress check	2nd	Deliver	The advisor continues to motivate the student to keep working toward the initial goals.
Progress check	3rd	Don't Settle	After gauging progress for the first portion of the semester, an advisor can work with the student to set higher expectations, and challenge the student to "raise the bar."[a]

Source. Appreciative advising stages from Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008).
Note. [a]Bloom et al. (2008, p. 98).

was a communication strategy comprising three scheduled, proactive outreach efforts via e-mail and phone calls. The length of online courses and the inability to ensure advisor availability when students were likely available (most online students were thought to be working adults, and the academic advisors held limited hours after 5:00 p.m.) resulted in different parameters for online student participation. Unlike the required meetings for residential students, the online initiative was composed of no-risk, no-reward communications; neither a response nor a lack of response had positive or negative consequences for students.

Appreciative advising was chosen as the scaffold for the online student communication plan because the approach had been used with residential students. The online advisors developed topics in the communication strategy that were aligned with the six appreciative advising stages (see Table 6). The first communication was sent by e-mail to students on academic probation the week before or the first week of the term. This e-mail included a short explanation of academic probation; questions prompting students to identify possible barriers to their academic success, such as test taking, paper writing, and time management; links to college resources for the topics listed herein; suggestions for a reduced course load; and a question asking students to consider the courses they may retake to improve their academic standing.

The second communication was a phone call before midterm exams. Advisors checked student activity in the learning management system and then called the students to discuss their progress.

Advisors sent e-mails to students whom they could not reach by phone. Information discussed included a GPA projection worksheet, a student success plan adapted from the form used with residential students, an offer of assistance in formulating an academic success plan, and a set of links to academic resources. The third communication was a phone call in the 6th or 7th week of the 8-week term. As with the midterm phone call, advisors checked students' progress in the learning management system and then called them to discuss progress and preparation for finals. Advisors sent e-mails to students they could not reach by phone.

We used different parameters to categorize online student participation than those used to classify residential student participation. Residential students were considered to have completed the advising sessions if they attended the three required meetings. Online students were not required to attend meetings; therefore, for this study, we could not use the same criteria as had been used for residential students to determine participation. Instead, we classified online students as either responders or nonresponders. The first e-mail was sent to all online students placed on probation at the end of the academic term, no matter their enrollment status for the following term (this e-mail was sent during the enrollment period for the following term). Responses to the midterm and late-term communications, which advisors extended to enrolled students, determined the students' response status. Nonenrolled students fell outside the scope of the intended communications, so they were not included in the evaluation of the advising initiative.

Like for the residential students, the advising initiative for online students was evaluated using within-group comparisons and a year-over-year comparison. Students were grouped by their response status—responded to at least one communication or did not respond to any communications—and by their academic status the term following the probation term—off probation, continued probation, suspended, or withdrew from courses. We used the within-group analyses to compare the academic status and the postterm GPAs of students by response status. We used the year-over-year comparison to investigate differences between student outcomes before and after implementation of the advising initiative. Both groups (preimplementation and postimplementation) were composed of students who started a term as an online student on academic probation. The variables, statistical methods, and null hypothesis for each test are presented in Table 7.

Results for Online Students

Response to the advising communications was an indicator of improved academic status for online students. Students who responded to at least one of the communications were placed on continued probation at a higher rate than students who did not respond: 30.7% compared with 19.7%, a significant difference ($p = .025$). We found other differences in the academic status of students who responded and students who did not respond, but none were significant. Table 8 features the results of the two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests for the within-group analyses, and Figure 3 presents the comparisons of the academic status categories for each group.

A two-tailed, two-sample *t* test was conducted to compare the postterm GPAs of online students who responded with those who did not respond. No significant difference was found between the GPAs of responders ($M = 1.413$, $SD = 0.721$) and nonresponders ($M = 1.247$, $SD = 0.790$); $t(306) = -1.93$, $p = .054$.

Significant differences were found in the year-over-year comparison of academic statuses of online students. We found an increase in students removed from probation, from 16.6% in 2014–2015 to 23.9% in 2015–2016 ($p = .015$) and a decrease in suspensions, from 46.7% in 2014–2015 to 37.4% in 2015–2016 ($p = .011$). Table 9 features the results of the two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests for the year-over-year analysis of academic status, and Figure 4 shows the rates of academic statuses before (2014–2015) and after (2015–2016) the implementation of the advising initiative.

Discussion

The advising initiatives correlated to positive outcomes for residential and online students. Residential students who attended three or more advising sessions were removed from probation at a higher rate than those who attended fewer than three sessions. Online students who responded to the communication were placed on continued probation, a positive outcome, at a higher rate than those who did not respond. Continued probation enabled a student to avoid suspension and enroll in the following term. As a possible cause for the venue-dependent outcomes, online students were limited to 6 credit hours in each 8-week term. Six credit hours may not have provided enough leverage for students to raise their GPAs

Table 7. Comparison groups, variables, statistical methods, and null hypotheses for the evaluation of the outreach initiative for online students

Group	Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Test	Null Hypothesis
Within	Academic status 1 term after being placed on academic probation	Responded to advisor outreach; did not respond to advisor outreach	Two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests	There is no difference in the proportion of students in each academic status for students who responded to the outreach and for students who did not respond to the outreach.
Within	Postterm GPA	Responded to advisor outreach; did not respond to advisor outreach	Two-sample *t* test	There is no difference between the postterm GPAs of students who responded to the outreach and the postterm GPAs of students who did not respond to the outreach.
Year-over-year	Academic status 1 term after being placed on academic probation	Pre-implementation; post-implementation	Two-tailed, two-sample proportion tests	There is no difference in the proportion of students in each academic status before and after the implementation of the outreach initiative.

above the probation threshold but enabled them to increase their GPAs sufficiently to avoid suspension and remain on continued probation.

In another positive outcome, residential students who attended three or more sessions were suspended at a lower rate than those who attended fewer than three sessions. This result supports previous findings on the use of proactive outreach or related methods with students who exhibit academic risk factors (Abelman & Molina, 2002; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Molina & Abelman, 2000).

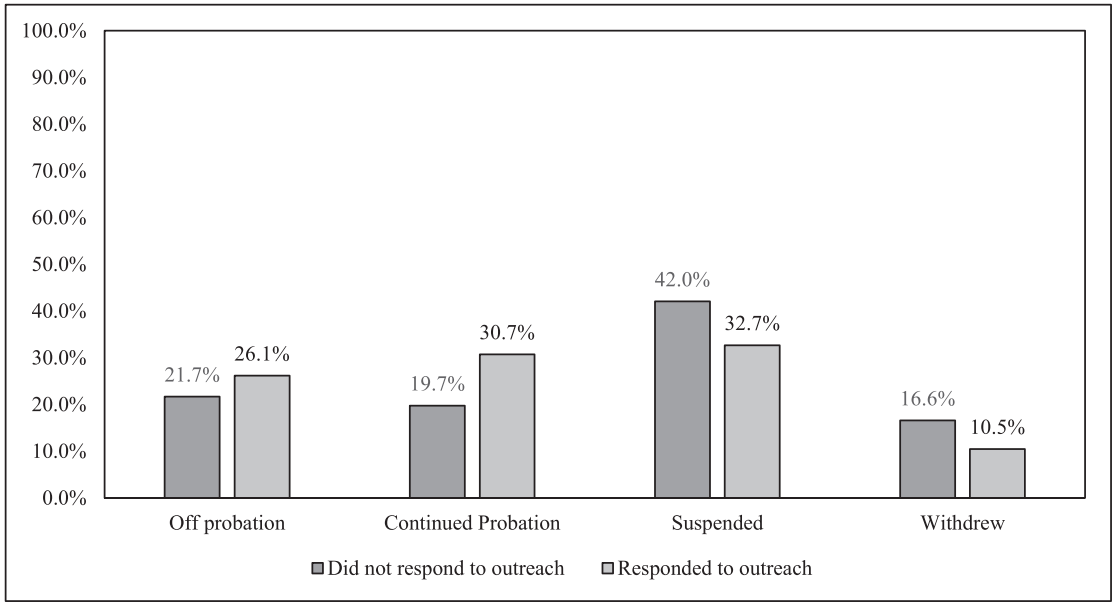
The year-over-year comparisons were positive for both groups—a greater percentage of online and residential students were removed from probation than in the previous year—even though not all students completed or responded to the

Table 8. Within-group analyses of academic status one term after being placed on academic probation for online students who received appreciative advising communications, Spring 2015–Winter 2016

	Summary			
Status	Students	Total Cohort	Rate (%)	Significance (*p*)
Off probation				
Did not respond to outreach	34	157	21.7	.354
Responded to outreach	40	153	26.1	
Continued probation				
Did not respond to outreach	31	157	19.7	.025
Responded to outreach	47	153	30.7	
Suspended				
Did not respond to outreach	66	157	42.0	.087
Responded to outreach	50	153	32.7	
Withdrew from courses				
Did not respond to outreach	26	157	16.6	.114
Responded to outreach	16	153	10.5	

Note. Two-tailed, two-proportion tests used for significance.

Figure 3. Academic status one term after being placed on academic probation for online students who received appreciative advising communications Spring 2015–Winter 2016



advising initiatives. Perhaps the initiatives increased overall awareness of academic probation requirements and outcomes, prompting some students to take action independent of the advising sessions. We also found a difference in the year-over-year analyses: Fewer online students were suspended than in the previous year. A similar outcome was not found for residential students.

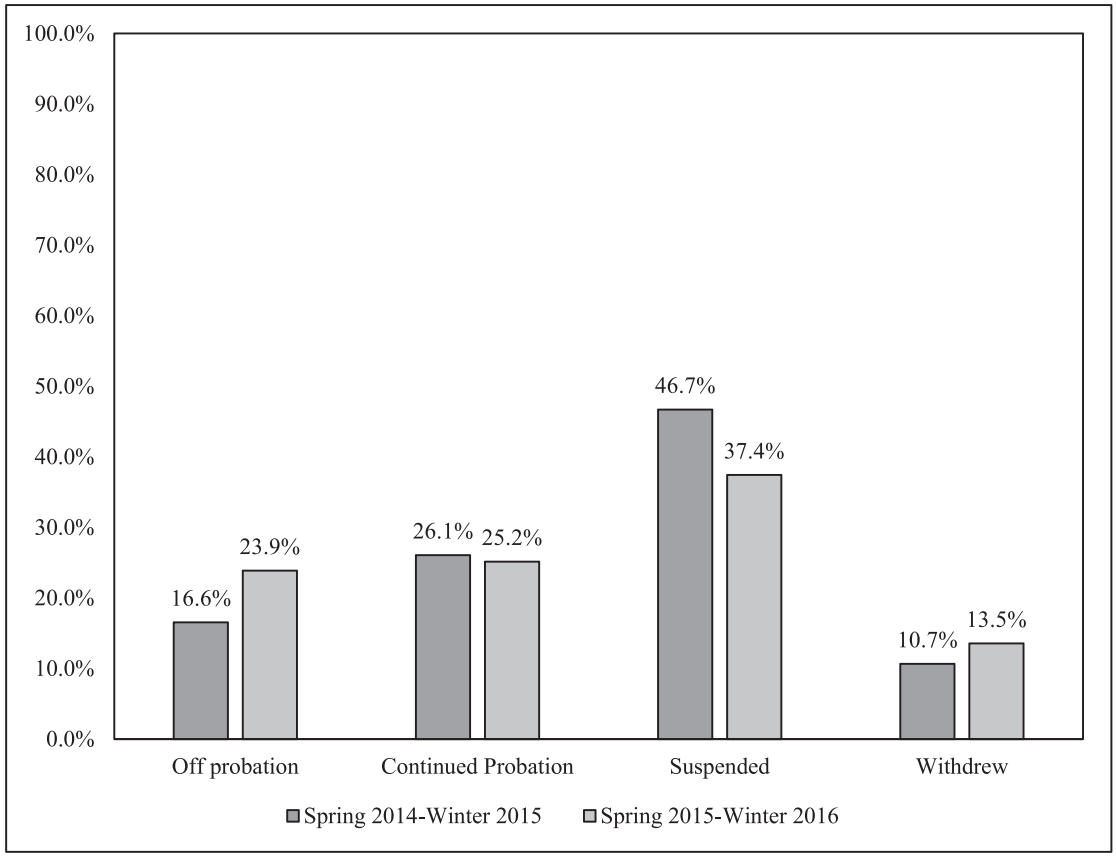
The number of meetings that residential students attended was an indicator of GPA improvement; the mean GPA of students who attended three sessions was 0.386 higher than those who did not ($p = .001$). This finding supports that from Preuss and Switalski (2008). However, we did not observe a similar difference in GPAs with online students. Online responders had higher GPAs than

Table 9. Year-over-year comparison of academic status one term after being placed on academic probation before (2014–2015) and after (2015–2016) implementation of an appreciative advising communication initiative for online students

	Summary			
Status	**Students**	**Total Cohort**	**Rate (%)**	**Significance (*p*)**
Off probation				
Spring 2014–Winter 2015	73	441	16.6	.015
Spring 2015–Winter 2016	74	310	23.9	
Continued probation				
Spring 2014–Winter 2015	115	441	26.1	.777
Spring 2015–Winter 2016	78	310	25.2	
Suspended				
Spring 2014–Winter 2015	206	441	46.7	.011
Spring 2015–Winter 2016	116	310	37.4	
Withdrew from courses				
Spring 2014–Winter 2015	47	441	10.7	.235
Spring 2015–Winter 2016	42	310	13.5	

Note. Two-tailed, two-proportion tests used for significance.

Figure 4. Year-over-year comparison of academic status one term after academic probation before (2014–2015) and after (2015–2016) implementation of an appreciative advising communication initiative for an online student population



nonresponders, but the difference did not meet the criteria for statistical significance. Similar to the venue-dependent outcomes for academic status, the 6-hour cap on the number of credit hours in the 8-week term may have limited the likelihood that online students could significantly raise their GPAs in a single term.

Implications for Practice

Advising initiatives for residential students can be adapted for use with online students. To accomplish this type of modification, institutional leaders must first identify gaps in the current system of online student support. Additional items to consider include the definition of program success, the core operating principle(s) of the residential advising initiative, differences between the residential and online academic environments, preferred communication methods for online students, venue-dependent expectations for outcomes, and the use of proactive advising through communication plans.

Planners should first identify gaps in support for online students, which can be accomplished by identifying students failing to persist. Complex statistical models on attrition and risk factors could be used to this end; however, as shown in this article, a simple analysis of the proportion of a student subpopulation that enrolls in the following term may prove sufficient for determining areas of need.

Before adapting a residential student advising initiative to address gaps in online student support, stakeholders must clearly assess and understand the success of the residential advising initiative. After determining the assessment metric(s), they

can decide on the threshold for identifying student success. For the advising initiative discussed herein, academic standing was used as the assessment metric, and the outcomes for residential students on academic probation were deemed a success. In some cases, this process may require assessment of preexisting initiatives that were developed during a number of years, not those designed and tested in a clinical environment. For example, administrators and advisors described in this article knew that the advising initiative for residential students did not control for all the variables that affect student success. However, the correlated outcomes provided sufficient evidence to prompt creation of a related advising initiative for online students.

When adapting programs, planners should consider the differences between residential and online academic environments, and their knowledge of the academic environment for online students proves crucial because advisors cannot design applicable outreach without fully understanding the context for it. For the advising initiative described in this article, the important factors for consideration included the length of the academic term, the number of concurrent credit hours allowed in a session, and the supplemental academic resources available (such as tutoring).

Once they select an initiative to adapt for online students, the designers need to identify the core operating principles of the residential initiative. They may not be able to retain all aspects of the outreach or keep them the same as for on-campus students. For example, as in the case presented, creation of advising sessions that required face-to-face meetings at the institution would have been pointless for the online students. However, elements of the resident approach were used, such as the proactive outreach efforts and the use of appreciative advising as the scaffold for communications.

To design a successful advising initiative for online students, advisors may need to use multiple outreach methods. Gravel (2012) noted that these communications can rely on both synchronous and asynchronous tools, such as phone calls, e-mails, instant messages, and video conferences. Whichever method is selected, the outreach should be about communicating with the student in his or her preferred medium to facilitate meaningful communication.

Institutional leaders should be prepared for venue-dependent outcomes. The impact of an online student advising initiative may be limited by the online academic environment. For example, the ability for the online students depicted in this article to raise their GPAs in a single term was limited by the number of concurrent credit hours they were allowed to attempt in that term. This constraint likely affected the number of students who raised their GPAs above the probation threshold. Hence, we suggest that similar venue-dependent factors be taken into account when assessing the suitability of residential student advising initiatives for online students.

After determining the gaps to fill and the success of the residential initiatives, planners may find that proactive advising enables advisors to strengthen connections with online students. As previously noted, communication plans act as vehicles for proactive advising (Varney, 2012). In addition, the use of proactive communication plans facilitates additional developmental advising opportunities, fulfilling the recommendation of Gravel (2012) to increase the availability of these types of interactions for online students.

Limitations and Additional Research

Student persistence and completion are multivariate considerations. The advising initiatives we discuss featured some limited variables, but they did not take place in a closed, controlled environment. They were not part of a clinical trial or experimental study of an advising approach; therefore, we could not control the many variables that students face during an academic term. In addition, because of the number of staff members involved (more than 10), the communication plan was administered with variations. Although we provided outlines for phone calls and example e-mails to the advisors, the organic nature of conversations with students means that not every communication was scripted. Advisor notes were reviewed and compared to contact records, where available, to verify students' responses to outreach. Also, this study was limited by the application of the advising outreach at a single college, and the results from one institution may not transfer to another institution.

The data used to group preimplementation online students and the GPA data for postimplementation online and residential students were the records available to staff immediately following the end of an academic term. In some cases, these data did not account for subsequent academic actions such as completion of incomplete courses, replaced grades, delayed academic decisions, the outcome of academic appeals, or backdated academic

decisions. As a result, the withdrawn cohort for the preimplementation online group includes four students who completed courses in the term reviewed but whose academic status was incomplete in the original data set or updated after the initial academic status decision. For the postimplementation residential students, postsession GPA data for one student were not available, and one student was dismissed and included in the suspended cohort.

We investigated short-term gains for students—the impact on academic status and GPA after one academic session. No longitudinal success factors were assessed; therefore, the methods used in this study may not influence long-term student success metrics. Although improved academic standing may affect long-term persistence and completion, the current setting did not allow for an in-depth investigation over time. Additional research is needed to confirm the benefit of these types of outreach and the impact they have on metrics such as retention and graduation rates. Additional research may reveal learning outcomes for these types of advising initiatives and whether meeting those outcomes results in improved academic standing for students.

Future studies might review the outcomes of required meetings with online students on academic probation. Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013) reported that each meeting with an academic advisor increased the likelihood of retention of first-generation students by 13%. The setting for our study did not enable the advisors to require meetings with online students on academic probation, but mandated meetings may have exerted a different influence than did the strategy used. In addition, different outreach methods (phone, e-mail, Skype) may lead to different outcomes. Online advisors used both e-mails and phone calls in this study. However, the efficacy of either method used independently was neither recorded nor measured.

Conclusion

Students and researchers have reported the need to improve academic advising for online students. However, at institutions with limited experience providing support to online students, advisors may not believe they possess the means to improve advising for this student population. This study shows that leaders at colleges and universities can adapt advising initiatives used with residential students to support a similar population taking classes online when venue-specific differences are taken into account. We identified length of the academic term, number of credit hours allowed in a session, and availability of supplemental academic resources (such as tutoring) as specific considerations for advisors to consider when looking to adapt an existing program to online students.

Specifically, we showed that an advising initiative for residential students on academic probation can be adapted for use with online students on academic probation. Advised students in both groups experienced improved academic standings. Residential students who attended three or more advising sessions were removed from probation at a higher rate and suspended at a lower rate than those who attended fewer than three sessions, 59.2% compared to 29.5% ($p = .001$) and 23.9% compared to 45.5% ($p = .018$). Online students who responded to an advising initiative based on this residential initiative were placed on continued probation (avoiding suspension) at a higher rate than those who did not respond, 30.7% compared with 19.7% ($p = .025$). We also saw improved GPAs, but these data showed significance only for residential students.

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