The Many Facets of Faculty Involvement in the Implementation Process

A Case Study of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College

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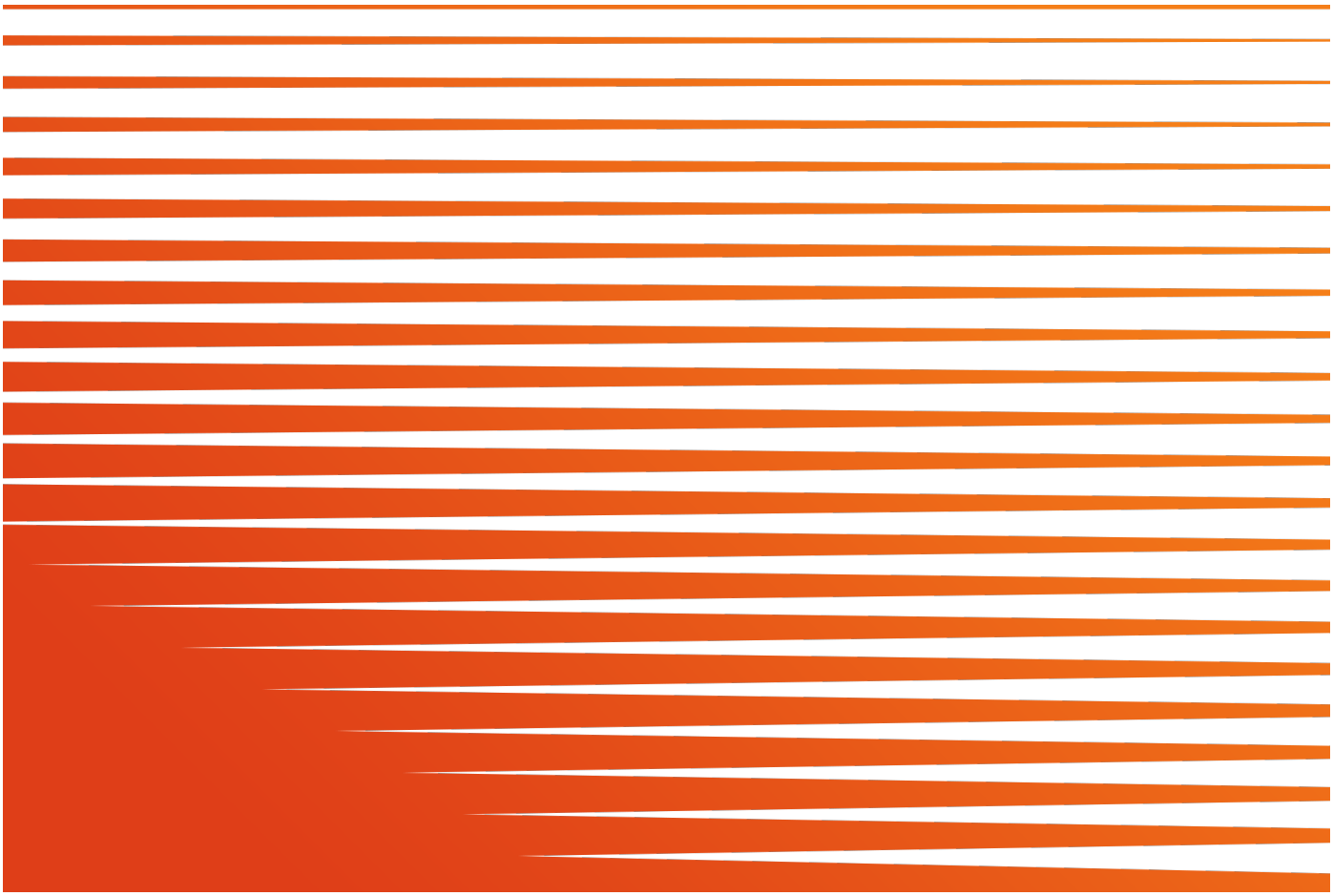

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Introduction

Advising undergraduate students on how to succeed in their academics, careers, and life is one of the most common practices in higher education.[1] Advising is also something that many institutions struggle to resource or coordinate sufficiently, potentially leaving students without needed support on their paths to successful program completion.[2] The barriers to a successful college experience are not borne equally across higher education. In fact, the institutions that serve the highest proportions of students from historically minoritized backgrounds (including low-income, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, and first-generation students), are often under-resourced,[3] making the implementation of effective and efficient advising especially challenging but even more vital. Supporting institutions in the design and implementation of their advising systems is integral to ensuring that institutional efforts meet students where they are, address their individual needs, leverage their strengths, and focus on student development and learning.[4]

To help address student needs, many institutions turn to technology to support the faculty, primary-role advisors, and students engaged in the advising process.[5] Technology can support various functions within the advising process, including caseload management, identifying students who may benefit from proactive outreach, or empowering students with more information about and control of their academic journey. Advising technologies allow institutions to collect more data on course progression, major selection, and other success metrics, as well as more efficiently disaggregate that data to interrogate and respond to differential outcomes experienced by minoritized groups. While the technological possibilities for helping advise students have grown dramatically over the past several decades,[6] the implementation of such systems often fail to live up to their promise.[7] The reasons for such disappointments are as numerous as there are institutions, often including some combination of insufficient planning and/or resources, challenges to internal communication, competing initiatives, technological challenges, and choosing the wrong technology solution for a specific need.

Despite these challenges, some institutions have found success in the implementation of advising technologies, easing the work of faculty and primary-role advisors and better

[1] Gates Bryant, Jeff Seaman, Nicholas Java, and Kathryn Martin, "Driving Toward a Degree: The Evolution of Academic Advising in Higher Education: Part 2: The Supplier Landscape," Tyton Partners, 2017.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kery Murakami, "Racial Equity in Funding for Higher Ed," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 29, 2019, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/29/racial-disparities-higher-education-funding-could-widen-during-economic-downturn.

[4] Achieving the Dream, Holistic Student Supports, https://www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports.

[5] George E. Steele, "Student Success: Academic Advising, Student Learning Data, and Technology," *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 184, 2018.

[6] Gates Bryant, Jeff Seaman, Nicholas Java, and Michael Chiaro, "Driving Toward a Degree: The Evolution of Academic Advising in Higher Education: Part 2: Supplier Landscape," Tyton Partners, 2017.

[7] Alexander Mayer, Hoori Santikian Kalamkarian, Benjamin Cohen, Lauren Pellegrino, Melissa Boynton, and Edith Yang, "Integrating Technology and Advising: Studying Enhancements to Colleges' iPASS Practices," MDRC, 2019.

supporting students in achieving their goals. While many factors can contribute to a successful implementation, the role that stakeholders play in that process has not been well understood. To help address this gap in the literature and provide additional resources to institutions, Ithaka S+R and EDUCAUSE are developing a series of case studies of successful advising technology implementations across the nation that will culminate in a final cross-case analysis report that highlights best practices and strategies in implementing advising technology across participating institutions.

In order to hear from a diverse collection of institutions, we sought to engage with institutions across the United States who had successfully implemented an advising technology, whether a "home grown" system or a vended product. Both Ithaka S+R and EDUCAUSE invited institutions they worked with in the past on advising-related projects and also made open calls for participants. This research brief highlights several of the diverse roles that faculty members play in the advising technology implementation process through the experience of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), a multi-campus technical college offering primarily certificates and two-year degree programs. More information on this larger initiative can be found on Ithaka S+R's website at: https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/academic-advising-technologies-in-the-era-of-covid-19-and-beyond/.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College

In 2013, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), a public two-year college located in Green Bay, Wisconsin, successfully launched a new advising platform in ways that particularly exemplify how faculty members play pivotal and diverse roles as stakeholders in the implementation process. One of the most consistent elements in conversations with institutions across this project about their experiences implementing advising technologies has been the centrality of the faculty. Often more so than other constituencies, implementation teams are attuned to how to involve faculty members in the implementation process, due to the central role faculty play in institutional change, academic planning, and advising. It should be noted that some institutions leverage faculty more than others during this process, and this is often dependent upon the primacy of the role played by faculty within the overall advising structure. Furthermore, the reservations that faculty members may have, individually or collectively,[8] pertaining to the advising technology implementation process were challenges shared by all of the institutions involved so far in this project. As such, intentional engagement with the faculty is an important strategic consideration for technology vendors and often a formal part of their implementation and adoption planning. Given this pivotal role in the success of advising technology implementations, we examine some of the ways that the faculty and individual faculty members were central to the technology implementation at NWTC.

[8] John Tagg, "Why Does the Faculty Resist Change?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 44(1): 6-15, January 2012.

Implementing Advising Technology at NWTC

By the time NWTC implemented the Starfish system as its advising platform in 2013, the institution was already deeply involved in a process of reprioritizing student success through its involvement with Achieving the Dream (ATD),[9] a national network of community colleges that shares practices aimed at improving student outcomes. A cross-functional "Dream Core Team" of administrators, frontline student services staff, staff from various other departments, and instructors was working to take action based on what they learned from ATD when they decided to pursue an advising technology platform. Select members of the larger Dream Core Team, including members of the faculty, were selected for the advising technology selection and implementation team.

Having selected Starfish, the NWTC implementation team succeeded in achieving a speedy implementation, taking only three months instead of the usual nine months or more that similar implementations take. This aggressive timeline was only possible because of the strategic prioritization of specific features that would provide immediate value to the day-to-day work of improving student outcomes, namely data transparency and early alerts. Prior to Starfish, advising notes on students were kept in an underutilized student information system, and most advising interactions with primary-role advisors, though documented, were not visible to a diverse set of stakeholders, including faculty. Further, there was no easy way for instructors and primary-role advisors to communicate about students they were concerned about concern or how those concerns were resolved.

The implementation team also made the strategic decision to make these features available to all faculty members (and students) at the same time rather than taking the more common staged process of providing access to smaller, targeted groups of instructors and students. A smaller group of about 20 official pilot faculty members did receive special training on the system; however, all instructors were able to access the system from the start. Although providing this broad access carried more risk, as more questions and problems could arise simultaneously, making the system available to all users at once created momentum throughout the whole institution towards full adoption. This approach also prevented a disjointed experience for students: early alerts were available in all of their courses, rather than just a select few. The synchronized rollout provided a transparency that helped build trust among the faculty as all communication within and about the system was available to everyone and no one was excluded from the process.

This transparency around communication for all stakeholders was critical to the success of the "flags" feature of the system, where an instructor or a primary-role advisor indicates a concern about a student in order for another member of the institution to follow up. Initially, the Starfish system would alert a primary-role advisor that an instructor had logged a concern about a student, but often those concerns were about something occurring in the classroom. This process left students out of the direct chain of communication and did not provide the instructors—who raised the flags initially—with information about how the primary-role

[9] See Achieving the Dream, https://www.achievingthedream.org/about-us-0.

advisors responded. Finding that the needle on student success outcomes had not moved after a semester of this process, the chain of communication was changed so that the flags simultaneously served as a means of direct communication between the student and instructor and a record accessible to others invested in the student's success. In other words, faculty took ownership of closing their flags and raised referrals as necessary for students. Instructors are now able to see how the student is doing in other courses and primary-role advisors are notified if a certain number of flags are raised in a single semester.

Leveraging Faculty for Successful Advising Technology Implementation

Cultivating faculty buy-in is an essential part of the advising technology implementation process, just as it is for the introduction of other kinds of technologies,[10] pedagogies,[11] and other initiatives.[12] The inclusion of one or more members of the faculty on the core implementation team is one of the most common ways we found that faculty members were included as stakeholders in the technology implementation process. This inclusion has both practical implications in terms of the specific decisions these faculty representatives contribute to throughout the implementation process, as well as important symbolic implications in terms of shared governance. Simply having faculty members involved in the process can diffuse criticisms of the process and decrease faculty resistance. For instance, one faculty member on the key Dream Core Team had a background in counseling and was able to both represent faculty interests and utilize their disciplinary expertise in reforming the advising process. A critical component of the implementation's success was this team member's ability to publicly represent the implementation to their colleagues in the faculty and explain its importance.

As the experience of NWTC demonstrates, there are multiple ways to build faculty buy-in for a new advising technology, from including faculty members in the core implementation team to ensuring that faculty are recognized for their work in the advising process. The specific avenues of involvement for faculty will depend on the institutional context and culture, as well as the specific implementation process being undertaken.

The early and continued engagement of faculty members in the implementation process and their continued involvement in the decision-making process helped reduce faculty resistance to Starfish at NWTC. In addition to any direct benefits that the committee received from the faculty members' involvement, the inclusion of some faculty members in the decision-making process signaled to the larger faculty constituency that their interests are being represented.

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[10] Matthew Aron, Janet Sedgley, Marianne Gianacopoulos, "Achieving Faculty Buy-In of New Technologies," September 2019, https://library.educause.edu/resources/2019/9/achieving-faculty-buy-in-of-new-technologies.

[11] Doug Lederman and Lindsay McKenzie, "Faculty Buy-in Builds, Bit by Bit: Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology," *InsideHIgherEd*, October 30, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/faculty-buy-builds-bit-bit-survey-faculty-attitudes-technology.

[12] Emma Rose, "How to Secure Faculty Buy-In for Your Initiatives," Education Dynamics, March 28, 2019, https://www.educationdynamics.com/secure-faculty-buy-in/.

This representation may have reduced the number of resistors among the faculty by satisfying the faculty commitment to shared governance.

Training a smaller group of faculty members while still providing system access to all instructors allowed the piloteers to become cheerleaders for the implementation, talking up the technology and the process with their colleagues. In addition to seeding the faculty with successful users through the pilot group, the implementation team later provided substantial training for the full faculty during and following the full adoption of the technology. In many cases, faculty were training their colleagues to use the tool. While these workshops enabled faculty to use the system as intended, such preparation can also advance faculty expertise with using the technology in the advising process, a key aspect of supporting faculty identity as experts in their endeavors.[13]

After setting the groundwork for a successful implementation, NWTC cemented that accomplishment by integrating use of the technology into the faculty performance management system. These metrics for engagement in the Starfish system are now used as part of the promotion process for faculty. One longtime administrator described this integration as a way to embed accountability in the advising technology implementation process. Beyond creating accountability, including Starfish usage data in professional evaluative activities offered the platform a level of legitimacy.

Conclusion

In the early days of advising technologies, NWTC sought to centralize student success data and make it more transparent to all those involved in the advising process. The success that the institution found in this endeavor was in no small part due to the effective engagement of the faculty in multiple aspects of the implementation process. By attending to faculty involvement and priorities, the implementation team was able to pre-empt potential resistance and focus faculty members on the mentoring relationships they can provide to students.

While NWTC's implementation of Starfish was unique, the experience can be instructive to others considering similar transformations of their advising processes and technology systems. The lessons learned about the role of stakeholders in the implementation process drawn from this case will be added to and synthesized with the experiences from other institutions to develop more generalizable insights to be shared in the final case study report to be published in fall 2021.

In the meantime, we will be publishing one additional mini-case study in the next several months. If you have additional questions about this case study or the overall project, please contact us at michael.fried@ithaka.org.

[13] Sara E. Brownell and Kimberly D. Tanner, "Barriers to Faculty Pedagogical Change: Lack of Training, Time, Incentives, and…Tensions with Professional Identity?" *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 2012.