Advising by E-Mail: Some Advisors' Perceptions

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E-mail has become an integral part of how advisors and students communicate. Advisors at multiple colleges and universities were surveyed to determine how advising by E-mail has affected their daily routines and how it has changed the way they interact with students. Although most advisors professed a positive attitude about advising students and performing administrative duties by E-mail, several concerns emerged regarding how and when E-mail is used.

Much has been written about how new technological advances are influencing higher education. From record keeping to distance learning, technologies have preempted or changed many of the tasks performed by faculty and staff. Although the delivery of advising services by E-mail has been discussed in a general way (Sotto, 2000; Wager, 2000), the personal reactions and responses by advisors to this way of responding to students and performing other advising duties have not been given the attention they deserve. As Ramos (2000, p. 2) pointed out, "Academic advisors are left out of the campus decision-making process regarding technological enhancements." He encouraged advisors to be proactive in planning and implementing new technologies that will affect advising practices. Ramos urged advisors to be part of this new E-business adventure that is encompassing higher education.

Although E-mail communication has become an integral part of the advising process, advisors have rarely questioned its value or how it has affected advising contacts with students, parents, administrators, and others. What do advisors think about E-mail advising and what are the issues that need to be identified with regard to this increasingly used mode of interacting with students? To go beyond speculation, we asked full-time advisors and administrators at multiple colleges and universities in the Midwest their perceptions of advising by E-mail. We asked how E-mail has affected their daily routines and how it might be personally changing the way they interact with students and colleagues. We summarized and present the results and some of the specific advisor comments.

Method

A brief survey was administered to four separate groups of full-time academic advisors and advising administrators within a 6-month period in 2001–2002. The response rates varied from 20 to 40%.

Group 1 consisted of professional advisors from a large research institution ($n = 26$). Group 2 was composed of professional advisors attending a NACADA regional meeting ($n = 20$). Group 3 included professional advisors from the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) (Big 10 advisors) ($n = 25$). Group 4 consisted of professional advisors from colleges and universities in Ohio ($n = 40$).

Seventy-five percent of the 111 respondents were from public colleges and universities; 13% were from private colleges and universities; and 12% were employed by 2-year technical and community colleges. Fifty percent of the respondents held positions as full-time advisors and 50% held titles that indicated they were advising administrators. Twenty-five percent of the respondents were male.

Because the four groups of advisors were surveyed at different times and places, we conducted a chi-square analysis to determine if an association existed between the groups and their responses. We found evidence that the response pattern to Question 3 (Has E-mail improved the way you advise students?) differs among groups. Group 4 respondents (advisors from Ohio universities) do not seem to view E-mail as a tool that can improve the way they advise students. Because of the low frequency of "No" responses expected from Groups 1, 2, and 3, the results of the chi-square analysis may not be valid; that is, advisors in all groups may overwhelmingly view E-mail as a tool that is improving the way students are advised. We found no evidence that the responses varied by group for any of the 10 remaining questions.

In addition to asking for specific information about the amount of time and the tasks performed by E-mail, we provided space for advisors to express their opinions and to elaborate upon their answers. Some of these responses are included to better illustrate advisor opinion about E-mail use.

Results

We calculated the responses to survey questions into percentages and provide the data in mini-tables for easy reference. All respondents answered all questions ($N = 111$).

1. Estimated time spent on E-mail in advising duties in *one day:*

1 Hour or Less	2–3 Hours	More Than 3 Hours
33%	44%	23%

2. Percentage of E-mail time spent *each day* for the tasks below:

	Up to ¼ Each Day
Responding to students	62
Administrative contacts	44
Other correspondence*	80

	Up to ½ Each Day
Responding to students	22
Administrative contacts	41
Other correspondence*	15

	Over ½ Each Day
Responding to students	14
Administrative contacts	15
Other correspondence*	5

* personal, prospective students, junk mail

3. Has E-mail improved the way you advise students?

Yes	No
80%	20%

To further illustrate the ways in which E-mail has affected advisors' interactions with students, we present all the comments related to Question 3:

- Makes some parts of advising easier/more efficient.
- Maintains a record of communication.
- E-mail improves advising only if students read it!
- Information conveyed faster.
- Some students are assuming less responsibility for their academic progress.
- Some students expect instant answers; they call or visit in person if answer is not immediate.
- More time consuming than by phone because it is back and forth.
- A bit impersonal; it is not a substitute for personal contact.
- It has always been available since I began working as an advisor so cannot compare.

4. Has E-mail improved the way you perform your administrative advising duties?

Yes	No
92%	8%

Advisor comments regarding E-mail effects on administrative duties, as asked in Question 4, are as follows:

- Transfer credits handled more easily.
- Not across the board.
- Fewer meetings.
- Yes, provided E-mail is recognized as "student contact."
- Can reply at own convenience.
- No phone tag.

5. Has E-mail improved the way you correspond with others? (Answers in percentages.)

	Yes	No
On-Campus	84	16
Off-Campus	85	15

We include advisor comments about how E-mail affects correspondence with others (Question 5):

- I prefer phone conversations, but E-mails facilitate doing business at one's convenience.
- No telephone tag.
- Quicker, but more impersonal.

6. Does your academic unit have a policy regarding the use of E-mail?

Yes	No
31%	69%

7. What E-mail program are you using?

Eudora	MS Outlook	Other
37%	38%	24%

8. Does your academic unit provide training about the use of E-mail?

Yes	No
35%	65%

9. Percentage of time that best represents your workload (i.e., student advising as opposed to administrative duties).

80% advising/20% administration	38%
50% advising/50% administration	27%
20% advising/80% administration	19%
other	15%

10. Rate your level of technical expertise.

Below Average	Average	Above Average
8%	50%	42%

11. How many years of advising experience do you have?

1–5 years	6–10 years	over 10 years
43%	20%	36%

Other general comments and observations were provided. They are as follows:

- Feel a sense of being overwhelmed at times with amount of E-mail.
- If questions are too long, will ask students to make an appointment.
- A policy on E-mail management should be developed.
- Too much junk mail.
- Training would be helpful.
- Need to know legal implications of using E-mail in advising.
- Answering E-mail not usually considered contact time with students, therefore, not able to mark off on calendar.

Discussion

Advisors at various colleges and universities have many different perceptions and opinions about E-mail advising. Thirty-three percent of the respondents estimate they spend 1 hour or less on E-mail advising a day; 44% indicate they spend 2 to 3 hours per day with E-mail; and 23% spend more than 3 hours per day communicating by E-mail. Respondent position (advisor or administrator) influences the amount of time each spends advising students, working on administrative duties, and corresponding with colleagues on and off campus. However, based on the responses to Question 2, we found that the respondents spend a great deal of time each day using E-mail to respond to students, in administrative contacts, and for other correspondence.

Eighty percent of respondents feel that using E-mail has improved the way they advise students. They indicated that they can respond to a student's needs faster and more efficiently through E-mail than through traditional appointments or by phone. However, they fear some students, because of the convenience, contact them by E-mail expecting quick answers to problems that may be more complex than the students realize. They also suggest that some advisees use E-mail to contact advisors for information that is easily available to them elsewhere.

E-mail has obviously made many administrative duties and correspondence with colleagues on and off campus more timely and effective. Ninety-two percent reported that E-mail has improved the way they perform their administrative duties. However, some advisors feel overwhelmed when confronted with the overload of responses that E-mailed requests sometimes require. Some expressed the need for help in managing E-mail. Although some advisors expressed an explicit need for training in E-mail advising, over 65% of respondents indicated they have not received training in its use and management.

The majority of academic advisors (69%) indicated that their advising units do not have policies that specifically address the use of E-mail in advising. Where policies do exist, consistency between units, even on one campus, does not exist. Some advisors expressed the need to know about the legal implications of E-mail advising. Security issues also need to be considered when providing information through electronic media (Sotto, 2000). In addition to the variations in training and policies, even the type of E-mail programs used by advisors varied among respondents.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents noted that they spent 80% of their time advising students, while 19% indicated that they spent 80% of their time in administrative duties. "Administrative duty" time is difficult to differentiate from advising time because many advisors perform both tasks seemlessly. Fifty percent of the respondents worked directly with students, while the 50% had administrative titles.

Several respondents expressed concerns about student and advisor expectations of response time for E-mail. Advisors and administrators believe that students expect E-mail responses very quickly after sending the E-mail. In fact, some students will re-send an E-mail if they do not get a response immediately. In this day of instant answers, some advisors noted the pressure placed on them by students for this unrealistic type of quick response.

Overall, most advisors professed a positive atti-

tude about performing advising duties by E-mail. However, many commented that it should never replace face-to-face contact. Some advisors in the survey expressed frustration with the lack of recognition for time spent on E-mail in their daily advising. Administrators need to acknowledge and monitor the amount of advisors' time devoted to E-mail advising and allot time for it when assessing advising responsibilities.

This study has many limitations, including the small number of advisors involved. We could not determine if the perceptions of advisors who work directly with students differed from those of advising administrators. However, the level of technical expertise and the number of years in advising noted by the respondents indicates that experienced, competent participants took part in this study.

A question about the quality of advising by E-mail was not included in this survey. Some may question how developmental advising can be practiced in a vehicle that does not offer the privacy or the personal contact that some think is required of the developmental process. Advisors with exceptionally high advisee loads are caught in the quandary of wanting to deliver personalized attention on one hand while being in contact with as many students as possible on the other. Strategies for personalizing E-mail advising need to be emphasized in training programs.

When one advisor was asked how E-mail advising had changed her advising approach, she commented that she had never advised without it, so she could not answer the question. Her response points to interesting queries: How will future technologies influence future advisors' relationships with students? What will be the role of E-mail advising in the future?

From this survey, we can say that managing the use of E-mail, training for how to effectively advise by E-mail, and the need to develop policies to administer advising by E-mail need to be examined and made consistent. These issues of training and policy making are of concern to some advisors. Another study might compare the perspectives of full-time advisors and faculty advisors to determine if they have the same issues when advising students by E-mail. NACADA might consider formulating some specific guidelines and developing training modules that could be used as models for advisors who would like to improve their own use (and that of their campuses) of this critical form of advising.

Some E-mail Advising Suggestions

Based on the concerns of surveyed advisors about time commitments, implementation of developmental advising, and effective communication by E-mail, we offer the following suggestions for successful implementation of E-mail.

- Prototype common messages
- Block off time on the calendar for E-mail
- Use E-mail messages as a teaching moment
- Set expectations for yourself and students in replying
- Be accurate, consistent, succinct
- Learn to recognize if a simple message is masking a complex problem
- Make appointments immediately by E-mail with students whose queries require more in-depth answers
- Set a good example of writing skills in your messages

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