Using Technology to Enhance the Academic Advising Experience: A Year In Review

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Introduction

Steele (2018) concluded that academic advising professionals need to help students build critical-thinking skills and reflective thinking in formulating their academic and career goals and provide leadership in the process of selecting vendor services, products, and technologies that promote learning (p. 67). A four-year historically black college and university in the southwest adopted *Ellucian Degree Works* during Spring 2017. *Degree Works* is a web-based degree planning tool designed to improve university completion rates. *Degree Works* provides a more accessible, convenient, and organized way for students to know where they are academically and how they can plan the rest of their college careers. *Degree Works* is not a substitution for consultation with an academic advisor, but instead is a robust, analytical tool that can assist advisors in providing more personalized and transparent advising experiences to students, increasing the quality of service to students. Adapting to technology is inevitable in higher education, and academic advising is a multi-dimensional field which can pose some unique challenges when assessed.
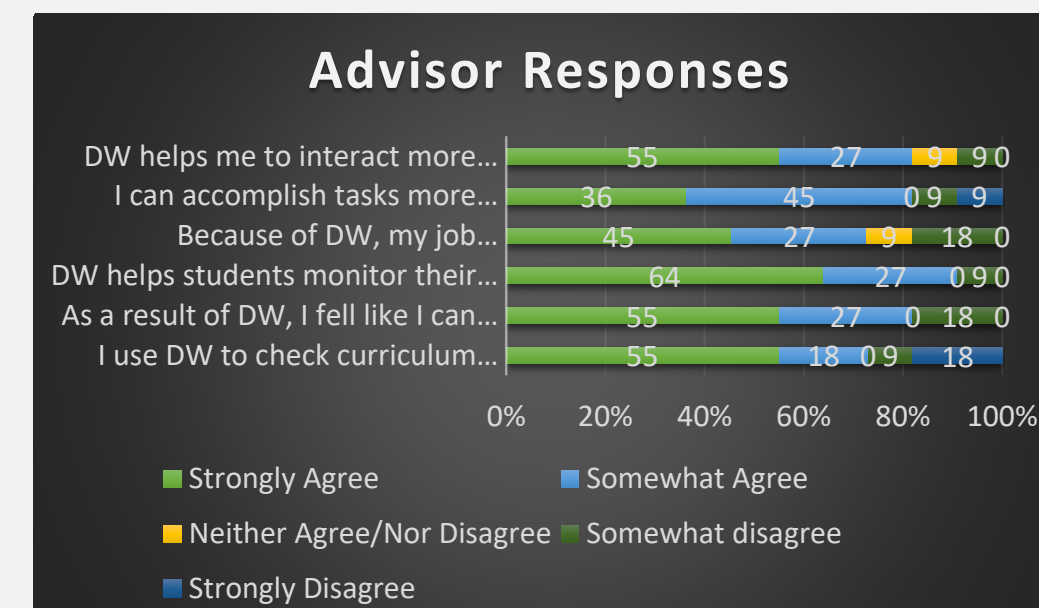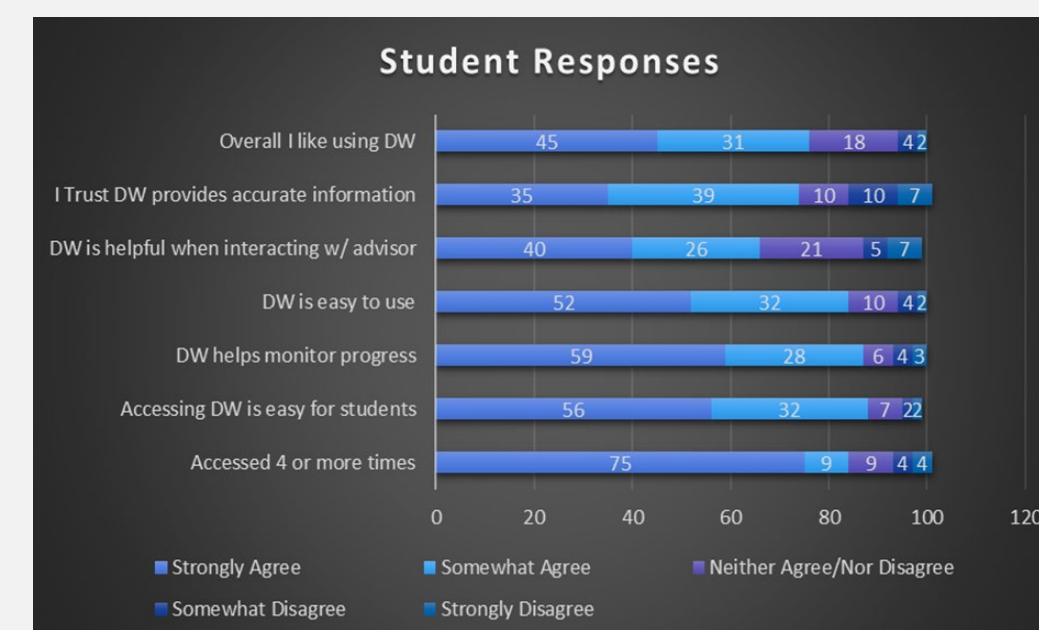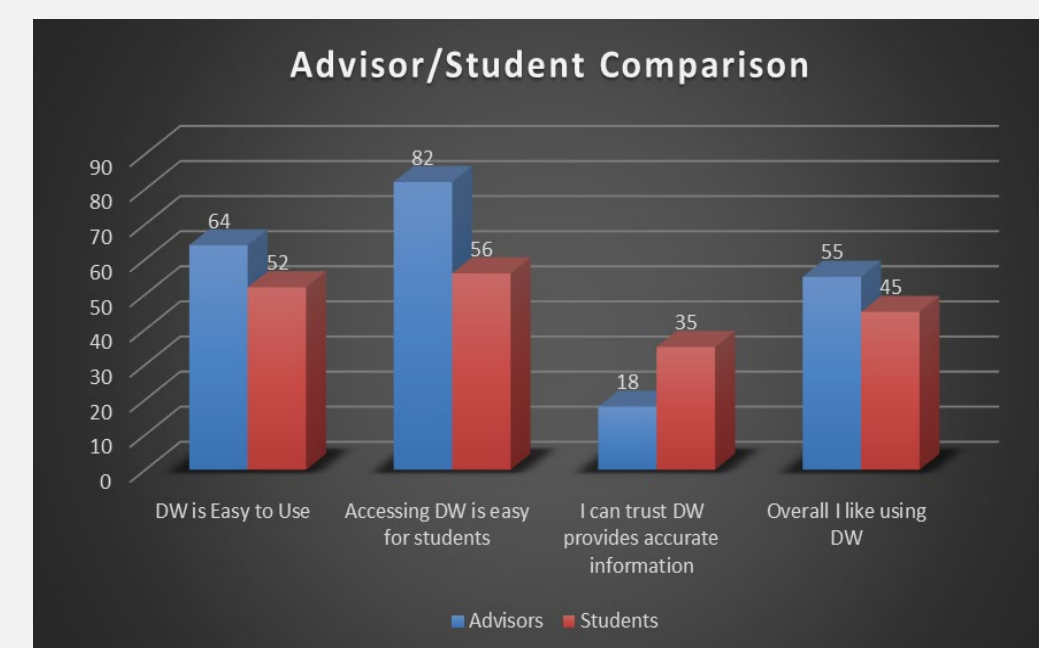
The purpose of this project was to demonstrate how the perception of a technology tool impacts advising practices, demonstrating the use of technology as a supplement, and the negative or positive impact on institutional practices. Identifying the challenges and perceptions of the end-users (i.e., advisors and students) can help improve processes and ultimately enhance student learning outcomes for the institution.

RQ: What do students and advisors believe would improve the effectiveness of Degree Works for advising experiences and practices?

Methods

Two 15-question surveys were created and sent via email to advisors (*n*=12). Advisors were asked to send a separate survey to their students. Each college at the university has a professional advisor who advises approximately 250 students. Students (*n*=161) who responded had a variety of majors and ranged from first-year students to seniors. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures.

Results

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The perceptions expressed in the survey supported the use of *Degree Works* positively, and overall, the majority of the respondents strongly liked the tool. However, the ability to trust the accuracy of the tool showed up negatively. The trust of accuracy, resulting from system glitches and curriculum changes, are challenges that have negatively impacted the *Degree Works* experience.

Strength	Weakness
"It allows for positive information that is understandable for the Advisors and student."	"This Degree database negatively effects students when information is inaccurate. Updates must be done in a timely manner in order to be effective"
"Degree works helps the students to independently track their academic progress,"	"Degree Works will not be effective if information is not entered timely and correctly."
"It is a helpful tool to predict a future GPA and making a decision on potentially switching majors"	
"It has helped me to keep my students on the right track of academic success." "A great tool for advisors and students to help plan future coursework"	"Degree Works does not have course options listed for students. Therefore, students transfer credits or other coursework that applies is not updated in Degree Works. As a result, academic advisors must conduct degree audits and notify the Registrar's Office of inaccuracies. Additionally, it would be helpful to have the "Planner" tab available for students and advisors."
"It helps tremendously" ""Degree Works is a good resource to assist the Academic Advisor and student to determine the student's degree progress towards completion"	"It needs to be updated accurately in regards to students credit hours" "sometimes the information is not 100% accurate such as their majors, classes they have taken in previous semesters etc…"

Discussions

Technology use in academic advising can be used to promote teaching and learning. However, adapting to new technology platforms to increase the services support for students can be overwhelming to the end-user (Underwood and Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, combining technology with advising practices helps students to focus beyond the short-term goals and focus on livelihood beyond college (Underwood and Underwood, 2015).

Based on our findings, we recommend:
- On-going training for advisors and students and staff
- Learning and support resources for students and staff
- Remain the expert
- Take inventory
- Communicate needs to managers and senior-level administrators
- Create buy-in: Encourage more departments and advisors to utilize tools
- Collaborate with other institutions that use *Degree Works*

References

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