Students’ Perceptions of Using a Course Management System to Supplement Traditional Advising

Kelsey L. Hall¹, Rebecca G. Lawver, Kenna McMurray and John L. Hawley
Utah State University
Logan, UT

Abstract
Few universities have adapted their course management systems to serve as an advising tool. The purpose of this qualitative study was to use focus group interviews to explore undergraduate students’ experiences and perceptions of using Canvas, a course management system, to supplement face-to-face advising in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences at Utah State University. Forty students representing all college academic departments participated in eight focus groups. Most participants indicated they were unaware of Canvas’s advising features, thinking the tool was primarily used to send announcements and respond to students’ e-mails. Participants enjoyed receiving announcements about club activities, internships, and important deadlines for their academic program. The majority of participants requested that the college’s student services center provide more explanation on how to use Canvas as an advising tool, including details about the existing resources and how to access them. Participants also requested more resources, including scheduling advisor meetings online, a discussion board, and a student forum. These findings offer information for how academic advisors or faculty advisors could use their university’s or college’s existing course management system to interact with students and help them make more informed advising decisions.

Introduction
More students are working and enrolling in online courses, which means they are spending less time on campus (Herron, 2010). Students are using their laptops and handheld devices to access information online rather than making appointments with individuals face-to-face. Universities need to keep up with changing student needs and societal expectations for higher education, and advisors must decide what equipment is needed and determine its effectiveness (Herron, 2010; Reed Osika and Redman, 2007). Course management systems (CMS) like Moodle, WebCT, and Blackboard could get students to interact with faculty advisors or professional academic advisors more efficiently and effectively in higher education (Feghali et al., 2011; Reed Osika and Redman, 2007; Schaumleffel, 2009). Minimal literature exists on how colleges of agriculture use a CMS to enhance undergraduates’ academic advising services but not replace face-to-face advising.

Utah State University uses Canvas, a CMS, to supplement face-to-face advising among a team of six professional academic advisors and students in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences. Each advisor within the Student Services Center at the agriculture college manages pages within Canvas relating to the academic majors they advise and use peer advisors to post information. The Canvas advising page includes important registration dates, contact and biographical information for the advisor and peer advisor, advising syllabus, helpful links, and academic announcements relevant for the college, department, and academic major. At the beginning of each semester, students receive one email that invites them to accept an invitation to join their academic major’s advising page.

Benefits of Using Course Management Systems for Online Advising
Several benefits exist for having students use a CMS for academic advising: serving as a visual reminder, taking responsibility for learning, and conveniently accessing advising resources (Feghali et al., 2011; Schaumleffel, 2009; Sloan et al., 2005; Whisemore, 2012). Course management systems could serve as a visual reminder because students would have access to academic advising information every time they access class information because the advising page is hosted through the CMS (Schaumleffel, 2009). Furthermore, Schaumleffel (2009) explained an online advising tool could help students more easily access

¹ASTE Department, 2300 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-2300; Email: kelsey.hall@usu.edu
Students’ Perceptions

the resources for making more informed academic and professional career decisions. Online advising systems with ample information available placed more of “the responsibility on the student” (Feghali et al., 2011, p. 83). Students could easily access the online advising tools no matter where the students are or what time it is (Sloan et al., 2005; Whissemore, 2012). Whissemore (2012) explained it was challenging to accommodate all students during normal business hours from Monday through Friday. Online advising allowed for more frequent, convenient communication between students and faculty because student questions could be answered in a timelier fashion (Sloan et al., 2005).

Concerns with Using Course Management Systems for Online Advising

Herron (2010) recommended advisors select standard templates for online advising technology that students were accustomed to seeing. Students could become confused if the appearance of the online advising technology is not the same as other applications related to the university, such as Web pages and application portals (Herron, 2010). Other concerns included the (1) content not being up-to-date, (2) faculty and administration not being on the same page about graduation requirements—creating careful awareness of what was put in writing—and (3) expectation that students had to figure out the answers on their own so making appointments face-to-face created better time management.

Use of Course Management Systems for Advising

Several researchers suggested how to communicate and the type of content advisors could use on a course management system to enhance academic advising. Schaumleffel (2009) recommended sharing content by sending e-mails to advisees, posting announcements, posting documents, and using the grade book to track advisees’ office visits. Announcements could include graduation application deadlines, office hour changes, professional development opportunities, and campus opportunities. Examples of documents were campus emergency planning information, code of student conduct, portfolio development resources, and class scheduling information (Schaumleffel, 2009). A course page could include the advisor’s contact information, photo, teaching or advising philosophy, external links to professional organizations, and meeting scheduler (Schaumleffel, 2009). Several universities have advisors use a course management system (Blackboard and WebCT) to communicate with students. Reed Osika and Redman (2007) suggested students communicate privately with advisors and read announcements and reminders sent from Blackboard. University administrators predicted an increased use of course management systems by students to access advisors’ calendars online and make appointments (Dahl, 2004).

Students’ Perceptions of Using Online Advisement Tools

Researchers compared the use of an online advising system versus a face-to-face advising system at the Olayan School of Business at American University of Beirut, Lebanon (Feghali et al., 2011). The study’s students suggested face-to-face student advising should not be replaced by online advising but should support, increase and simplify access to student information (Feghali et al., 2011). The students thought the curriculum was clearer with the online advisor because it provided exact information about requirements, courses taken, academic background and courses required outside the business school (Feghali et al., 2011).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students in an agriculture college with using a CMS, specifically Canvas, to supplement face-to-face advising. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are students’ attitudes toward using a CMS as an advising tool?
2. How have students used the CMS advising tool to interact with advisors?
3. What are students’ suggestions for improving a CMS as an advising tool?

Methods

Eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 40 undergraduate students to ensure that all academic departments were represented within the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences at Utah State University. Students recruited for this study were sophomores, juniors, and seniors enrolled in the college and had used Canvas as an advising tool for one academic year. Freshmen were excluded because they had not used the Canvas advising tool. Students received one recruitment email and one follow-up telephone call inviting them to participate in the study (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Each participant received an e-mail reminder of the date, time, and location of the focus group. The number of participants who showed up to each group varied, ranging from four to 10 participants. The Utah State University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol prior to data collection.

Four different moderators, each trained in focus group methodology prior to facilitation, used a moderator’s guide to facilitate discussion in each 1-hour session. The moderator’s guide ensured internal consistency and allowed the moderators to probe participants to elaborate on their ideas (Berg, 2009). The topics addressed were the frequency of advising information, relevancy of advising information to academic major, advantages of using Canvas as an advising tool, disadvantages of using Canvas as an advising tool, and recommendations for improving Canvas as an advising tool. The moderator’s guide was reviewed by a panel of researchers to ensure credibility. 
At the focus group session, participants completed a questionnaire asking demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, academic major, and academic rank. Participants received an explanation of the study’s purpose and the procedures to encourage discussion (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Participants received a meal at the beginning of each focus group, but no other incentive was offered. Two assistant moderators took notes and managed the logistics for each focus group.

The focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Berg, 2009; Krueger and Casey, 2009). The researchers analyzed the printed transcripts and their debriefing notes using Glaser’s constant comparative technique (Glaser, 1965). The constant comparative method codes each incident into a category, comparing each new incident with prior incidents. Similar incidents were combined into categories. This allowed the researchers to identify patterns and relationships within the collected data between and among the focus group participants.

The researchers followed recommendations from Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. Credibility of the results was established through persistent observation and peer debriefing. Transferability was achieved through using quotes from the participants to describe their attitudes and experiences with Canvas as an advising tool. Multiple researchers analyzed the transcripts to ensure validity of the themes for conformability. Dependability was established by audio recording each focus group session and keeping typed transcripts, which provided an audit trail.

Results and Discussion

Focus group participants were primarily from Utah, Caucasian, and ranged in age between 18 and 23. Their majors represented all the academic departments within the college: agricultural education, agricultural communications, agricultural systems technology, family and consumer science education, dietetics, landscape architecture, food science, nutrition, agribusiness, animal science, plant science, and biotechnology.

RQ 1: What are students’ attitudes toward using a CMS as an advising tool?

Participants expressed differing opinions in regards to using Canvas as an advising tool. The majority of participants (n=26, 63.4%) had at least visited the Canvas advising page, although some (n=5, 12.2%) had never looked at the page. One participant said, “I honestly didn’t know that Canvas had an advising section.” Eleven participants (26.8%) acknowledged receiving announcements and emails about advising issues through Canvas but did not know about the services they could access from the Canvas advising page. Nine participants (22.0%) liked the idea of the Canvas advising page because it was convenient and could be more efficient in getting accurate information and staying on top of academic obligations. One participant said, “It's nice to have that always there where calling is sometimes hard because the advisors are sometimes busy, and e-mailing is hard because sometimes it just falls by the wayside.” Ten participants (24.4%) preferred face-to-face interaction with their academic advisors. One of these participants said, “I guess there are benefits of it; I just haven’t seen it yet. I like meeting with my advisor face-to-face better.” Two students (4.9%) thought that the advisor’s experience in the field added to the advice given and made it more personal. A participant said, “You try to do it online, but it doesn’t know the teachers like an advisor knows them. Advisors have experience with professors and classes, and they know how to pair me up with them.”

More than half of the participants (n=24, 58.5%) communicated with their advisors using the course management system’s e-mail service. One participant said, “I feel like it’s easier to get a hold of our advisors and peer advisors because they are more likely to respond on Canvas than they are on e-mail.” Eight participants (19.5%) agreed that checking announcements via e-mail seemed easier or more efficient than logging into the course management system to read the announcements. One participant said, “I have mine set up to send me e-mail notifications when I get announcements, and I definitely check my e-mail a lot more than I do my Canvas, so that is very convenient. I can see the announcements on my e-mail instead of logging in every day.” Two participants (4.9%) thought announcements were the only thing that the site was used for. While 19 participants (46.3%) checked the announcements sent to them, they rarely were directed back to the advising page in Canvas.

RQ 2: How have students used the CMS advising tool to interact with advisors?

More than half of the participants (n=24, 58.5%) said too many announcements were posted too often on Canvas. Participants suggested receiving one announcement a week, such as a weekly bulletin, with all their department’s or academic program’s information. Five participants (12.2%) recommended that announcements need to be concise and important but kept to a minimum. Eight participants (19.5%) also suggested having announcements categorized into different levels of importance. For example, registration dates and reminders about important meetings would be prioritized as highly important, while club activities such as “rooping events” that do not directly apply to a student would be categorized with a lower level of importance. Regarding the importance of customization a participant said, “I think if you had to refine it down to something, choose something specific with your major and something that’s within a realistic time frame to be notified of important things.”

Many participants (n=21, 51.2%) requested announcements relevant to their academic major, spe-
specifically enjoying information about club activities, internships, and important deadlines for their academic program. One participant said, “I use it to get internship opportunities because for my major I have to do an internship.” These 21 participants said they like the reminders about deadlines for when students can withdraw from classes, upcoming registration dates, tuition due dates, holiday reminders, class schedules, scholarship opportunities, and events. The students would also like to see recommendations for career fairs and information about prerequisites and their programs. Students wanted information about the appropriate dress for career fairs, reminders about bringing a resume, and information about the companies attending the fairs. One participant said, “I think when they have career fairs or people coming, a bio or stuff about the company would be helpful because sometimes it takes a lot of time to go research. If you are interested, you will do it, but if you had at least a summary of those things that are happening it would be a lot more efficient, I feel like.”

Four participants (9.8%) said Canvas advising could be beneficial if it gave information about careers related to their majors. One student felt the advisor had prepared him or her well for the university experience, but not for after-college. The student said, “I feel like that is something that’s missing, and I feel like that’s something that the Canvas advising tool could fill better than the advisors that we have.”

RQ 3: What are students’ suggestions for improving a CMS as an advising tool?

About half of the participants (n=19, 46.4%) requested that the college’s student services center provides more explanation on how to use Canvas as an advising tool. Very few participants who were aware of the tool knew how to properly use it to access advising information. A participant said, “I just don’t think that they really explained it to us when we first got it. It was just like oh you’re enrolled.” One participant (2.4%) would like more workshops to train students on how to use the online advising system and have events tailored to each student’s major.

Four participants (9.8%) requested a different way to use Canvas to notify students about advising issues. These participants suggested a forum where students could ask questions and write responses. One participant said, “Maybe you could have a forum where people who have been in those classes could say ‘Hey, you know this is what worked for me.’” Several students (n=19, 46.3%) requested a way to use Canvas to look at their four-year degree plans, see sample schedule outlines, check class availability, and ask questions about professors and classes.

Four participants (9.8%) desired to schedule advisor meetings through the course management system rather than having to call the student services center to make an appointment during office hours. A participant said, “The main thing I was thinking was just setting up appointments with your advisor; that would be very useful.” Another student said, more specifically, that it would be beneficial to “have some way to get the meeting with our advisor through it because I feel like I hate calling and then trying to be like ‘oh when can you do it?’ I wish there was just a more direct way of just saying these are the times I have available to do it and do it from there.”

Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

A drawback of qualitative research was that the findings could not be generalized past these students. Since the students volunteered to participate in a focus group, these students may be different from those students who chose to not participate. However, the findings offer interesting insight into how advisors can use their college’s or university’s course management system to supplement face-to-face advising.

Lee (2006) discovered that promotion of a CMS for academic advising should emphasize the popularity of the system. By encouraging the products and services through popularity appeals, more students would use the course management system for advising because their peers are doing so (Lee, 2006). The systems became more popular by enhancing content quality, developing a simple and easy-to-use system, and enhancing students’ computer self-efficacy. The researchers recommend that each student receive a personalized e-mail from their advisor directing them to the Canvas advising tool. This initial e-mail would first introduce students to the advising tool and ask them to join. The researchers suggest that advisors discuss and promote the use of a CMS during face-to-face advising meetings with students. The researchers also suggest having student testimonials shared in classes at the beginning of each semester after the initial e-mail was sent, either from peer advisors or from students who have used Canvas as an advising tool. The researchers also recommend that advisors discuss and demonstrate Canvas as an advising tool when meeting with students at university events, such as freshman orientation. Another way to meet with students was in introductory classes where the advisors could demonstrate how to use the advising system and answer student questions. Additionally, the researchers suggest that advertisements be posted in the Student Services Center’s waiting area and testimonials be posted on the college’s television system, which play videos and advertisements in college buildings that students take classes in. Peer advisors could also start discussions related to student concerns and questions.

While e-mail can be a quick, easy way to communicate with students, using techniques that point students back to the Canvas advising tool could be beneficial. This communication could include links in the e-mails or brief descriptions of updates with a link back to the Canvas site to see further detail.

The literature suggested that advisors using a course management system for online advising need...
to adapt to feedback provided by students (Reed Osika and Redman, 2007). Twenty-four participants requested that advisors find a way to send fewer announcements and to tailor announcements to be more specific to their major or information they are interested in. Students can customize their personal settings in Canvas to how often they want to receive information. Academic advisors should teach their students how to modify their personal preferences, so students do not feel overwhelmed by the number and frequency of announcements received. Feghali et al. (2011) said, “online advising is only as good as the freshness of its information” (p. 93). If students do not think the information they receive is relevant, they might lose interest in reading the notifications. The researchers suggest that the announcements focus on scholarships, internships, major-specific information, and professional development opportunities to help remind students of important deadlines. It is suggested advisors use a course management system’s discussion board to create a student forum and a frequently asked questions page (Dahl, 2004; Reed Osika and Redman, 2007). Lastly, the researchers recommended that the college’s student services center conduct an online survey at the end of spring semesters to gain feedback about the frequency of notifications, relevancy of content, and recommendations for improving the advising tool. As Dahl found in 2004, a survey helped students rate their level of satisfaction with the online advising resources used at their universities.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

First and foremost, before future research is conducted, the college’s academic advisors should make adjustments to the advising page in the course management system based on the findings and recommendations from this study. Additional research should use usability testing procedures with students to test the effectiveness, satisfaction, and efficiency of using the course management system as an advising tool. A useful next step would be to conduct a broader study that collects data from the college’s student population that has used Canvas as an advising tool. The findings would help the college’s academic advisors make decisions on how to communicate with students effectively and provide useful features that enhance face-to-face advising. The College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences was the first college at Utah State University to pilot the use of a course management system to supplement face-to-face advising. As more colleges at Utah State University adapt the course management system as an advising tool, a larger population of students could be studied.

**Literature Cited**


