



SI 501: CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY AND PROJECT  
MANAGEMENT

Newnan **LSA** Academic Advising center

**Group 19:**

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## Executive Summary

The Newnan LSA Academic Advising Center helps LSA students think about their education in broad terms, and to take the initiative in shaping that education. Through individual conversations, publications, online resources, and programs, the advisors foster the growth of students, helping them develop their academic and professional goals to make informed decisions. There are between 35 and 40 advisors working at the advising center at any given time. However, the advising center is currently experiencing a shortage of five advisors. Due to the large number of advisees and amount of information that passes through the advising center, there are complications that can arise in communications both internally and externally. There is a certain amount of redundancy and inconsistency existing in the emails advisors send out, which is compounded by information duplication in communications sent out from other campus sources. This results in low student readership and response, and fosters concern as to whether students are receiving and reading essential information.

Our project is focused on improving the effectiveness of communications between the advising center and its students. Our aim is to help streamline communications with students to reduce redundancy and inconsistency, while alleviating time constraints on advisors. We conducted an initial client meeting and five interviews with select advisors and IT staff to investigate the situation. We constructed several work flow models and an affinity diagram, which helped us to evaluate the data we had gathered and enabled us to clearly see important processes and breakdowns. Our final report enumerates our findings and recommendations, a few of which are broken down and summarized below:

**Finding 1:** Mass e-mails are largely ineffective. Individualized e-mails produce a high response rate, but can be time consuming to write.

**Recommendation:** The advising center needs to monitor, filter, and limit the forwarding of mass e-mails with redundant information that other departments/units send through. Creating a greater array of e-mail templates that advisors can access and use to create individualized e-mails, as well as informing advisors as to how to most effectively utilize the in-house query tool, can make sending out e-mails to advisees easier and less time consuming.

**Finding 2:** The online advising newsletter, Advise Me Weekly (AMW), is accessed by very few students, with only 400-500 hits per week. Another tool, MyGuide, was received positively during its initial deployment prior to orientation.

**Recommendation:** There is potential for MyGuide to become a customizable student portal, where students can set up a profile, specify academic and/or extracurricular interests, select their preferred means of communication, and more. Because there is potential for so much to be done via MyGuide, contact between advisors and advisees should be maintained by a weekly e-mail sent out by the advisor on a topic of his or her choosing.

**Finding 3:** The advising center lacks top-down workflow structure. Advisors work autonomously, which occasionally results in a disconnect between what advisors send to their students and information being sent by the Center. It also means that advisors lack awareness as to what tools and strategies their colleagues are using to communicate with their advisees.

**Recommendation:** There should be more explicit expectations set for information that all advisors should send to students, leaving decisions on the format and style up to advisors.

Weekly/bi-weekly staff meetings should address strategies regarding "communication with students," whereby tools and strategies used by advisors may be shared with all. The advising center should also conduct meetings involving both advising and IT staff to move forward with initiatives and keep everyone on the same page, and to ensure technological developments are being undertaken with input from advisors.

## **Background**

### **Overview of Client Organization**

The Newnan LSA Academic Advising Center at the University of Michigan plays a pivotal role in the guidance of students enrolled in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. Advising center staff assist students in their selection of concentrations and courses, and ensure they complete all degree requirements in a timely manner. They provide assistance with academic planning to guide students through the curriculum from orientation to graduation. However, far more important is the advising center's mission to foster the overall intellectual, personal, and professional growth of the students it serves. Advisors encourage students to both hone existing interests (academic, extracurricular, and professional) and develop new ones.

Advisors serve a population of thousands of undergraduate students in over one hundred degree programs. It is their goal to cultivate a better-informed student body, helping students to both identify and achieve academic and professional goals. The advising staff demonstrates a deep dedication to students' growth, success, and welfare. Advisors strive to keep students informed through face-to-face interactions, e-mail, and the weekly newsletter AMW. More specifically, electronic channels of communication between advisors and their students include mass e-mails sent from the advising center at large, individualized e-mails (personalized e-mails sent by individual advisors), and information forwarded from other entities (including academic departments).

### **Project Scope**

For this project we have focused on enhancing the effectiveness of communication between Newnan LSA advisors and their students. This involves streamlining communication processes to reduce redundancy and inconsistency and alleviate time constraints on advisors. Our group has investigated the various means of electronic communication utilized by advising center staff to determine which are most useful, which can be improved, and which are ineffective. We have also sought to identify and eliminate inconsistencies and duplication of effort within the advising center. Our goal is to help advising center staff identify, capitalize upon, and develop the best means to communicate with and inform students.

Students are bombarded with e-mail communications from a number of university entities, including the advising center. We endeavored to lessen the impression of information overload students inevitably receive so that they are better able to focus on the most important information their advisors send them. We aimed to reduce superfluous communications and package other information in a more inviting format so that students do not feel overwhelmed with information. This involves making individualized e-mails less time-consuming for advisors to write and altering the format of AMW to make it more effective. We also aimed to ensure that advisors are working closely with IT staff in the development of new communication tools. These improvements would benefit advising center staff, and most importantly, the students they serve. LSA students would be better informed regarding their academic options and advising center services, therefore placing them in the position to make better decisions regarding their scholarly and professional pursuits.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

At the project's onset, all team members participated in an initial meeting with our client contact. Through our meeting and communications with her, we formed an initial understanding of the organizational structure, project scope, and client's expectations of our final work. Over the following weeks, we collected large amounts of information from interviewing five members of the advising center staff. The interviewees spanned a broad range of positions (including directors, advisors, and IT staff) to allow for a coherent, all-around understanding of the communication processes and the center's capabilities. During the interviews, we asked interviewees about their roles in the organization, the process of their work (contents and forms), and the responses garnered from interaction with their students. We captured each interviewee's perspective on the communication process with students and identified a series of existing problems inherent in their communication with advisees, as well as communications internally. We also gathered information on past and current attempts to streamline and improve communication efficiency, and created several "dummy" e-mail accounts to allow volunteers at the advising center to forward the e-mails they receive/send so that we could observe, first-hand, the information that passes through the advising center via e-mail. The interviewees also provided us with any supplemental information we needed, such as related survey data or any new developments that occurred after our contextual interviews.

After each interview, our group held interpretation sessions to share and interpret interview notes. During these meetings we reviewed, discussed, and summarized (in the form of affinity notes) the key findings from the interview data revealed by the clients. We also generated work models to show the communication, coordination, and artifacts associated with each interviewee, typical and specific work sequences conducted by the interviewee, the cultural influences on the interviewee, how artifacts are created and used in communication, and the organization of the physical work environment, in preparation for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

With the key facts obtained from the interviews and interpretation sessions, we devoted our attention to the analysis of data. We analyzed and consolidated the individual models created during the interpretation sessions to have a coherent view of the whole communication process and discover broader patterns and insights.

Nine hours were then spent to build an affinity wall to uncover the insights that we used to generate recommendations. This was done by categorizing and grouping over 250 affinity notes gathered during interpretation sessions. We summarized each group of facts, then formed a hierarchical representation of all the interviewees' issues. This diagram allowed us to manage the interviewees' data and see all of the issues across the client population: we uncovered the tools they use (i.e., e-mails, query tool, AMW, MyGuide) and their effects, as well as noted existing internal and external breakdowns that affect communication (e.g., information overload, inconsistency in information sent to students, and the lack of top-down structure and interaction between advisors and IT staff in the center). After completing the affinity wall, each member walked through it to understand the data better and added sticky notes with preliminary design ideas to address the problems we discovered.

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

Through the multiple interviews and interpretation/brainstorming sessions outlined in the Methodology section, our group was able to discern a number of key findings relating to the Newnan LSA Academic Advising Center's internal and external communication processes, as well as some structural and administrative qualities of the center. From those findings, we were able to construct a set of recommendations that we believe will enhance individual advisors' contact with students while alleviating much of the information overload for those advisees. Another benefit of these recommendations is to reduce some of the workload that is handed to a short-staffed advising group with multiple responsibilities and obligations, both inside of the advising center and elsewhere in the university.

### **Key Findings: External Communication**

When investigating the external communication processes of the advising center, we found it prudent first to understand the processes by which advisors connect with their advisees. As was immediately clear, the primary form of contact for advisors with their group of students is via e-mail, both individualized and *en masse*—this is achieved through a number of tools to be discussed later. First, however, we needed to look at how advisors interact with e-mail on a daily/weekly basis.

As User 1 states, advisors spend approximately two to four hours each day reading, answering, and sending e-mails to students. This time consists of personal e-mails written in response to direct requests from students, forwarded e-mails containing information sent by various academic departments in the college, and more generalized e-mails used as a point of contact with students. The amount of time an advisor spends on e-mails varies depending on the particular advisor and his/her responsibilities within the advising center, but the general rule of thumb is one hour dedicated to e-mails for every four hours in the work day. Advisors who also have administrative, IT, or management responsibilities have a significantly lower quantity of advisees (approximately 150, compared to 600 for advisors without those additional tasks) and hence less e-mail in general. This variance in advisor duties and time constraints both increases autonomy for individual advisors, as well as creates a significant degree of variance with regard to work structure, which will be described in greater detail later.

A primary finding, echoed by all of the interviewees, states that mass e-mails are largely ineffective with regards to generating responses or interest from students. The belief is that many students treat these e-mails like spam, immediately deleting them because the e-mails don't seem to pertain to a student's personalized interests—oftentimes they don't.

To remedy the perception that mass e-mails are spam, the advising center's in-house IT development department has created the Academic Query Tool, a resource that allows advisors to feign the appearance of personalized e-mails in an otherwise mass communication with their students. With the tool, advisors can target their entire advisee base, all of their students in a particular academic year, at-risk students, or all of their advisees that are enrolled in a particular major, all while “customizing” the e-mail with form letter-like capabilities—including individual names in opening lines, for example. The use of this tool, while not standardized across the academic center, has produced generally positive responses from students and has allowed

advisors to keep a point of contact with their students, which is an invaluable resource for building the advisor-advisee relationship.

To wit, each interviewee we spoke with noted that often, after sending out one of these pseudo-mass e-mails, they will receive a response from students on an unrelated topic. A student simply seeing his/her advisor's name in their inbox helps them to remember questions or concerns that he/she wanted to bring to his/her advisor's attention. As the stated goal of the advising center is to “foster the personal, ethical and intellectual growth of students, helping them develop their academic and professional goals, make informed decisions, and act with increasing independence,” such personal interaction is invaluable. The ability for advisors to communicate directly with interested and engaged students is the most critical way that advisors have to foster this relationship and assist students.

The final method of external communication that the advising center uses is its weekly newsletter AMW. A resource that originally began as an attachment to an e-mail, AMW has transformed into a website that houses the week's announcements, events, and updates. Unfortunately, in its current incarnation, AMW is an under-utilized resource. According to one interviewee, only 400-500 students view the newsletter each week. In addition, the available search function on the AMW website is inconsistent and makes finding prior information on the site difficult for students searching for announcements.

### **Key Findings: MyGuide and IT Staff**

A relatively new resource that the advising center has implemented for orientation requirements is the web portal MyGuide. In its current form, MyGuide is being used for incoming students as a resource to satisfy various orientation tasks, including the math placement exam, for instance. Reception of the MyGuide tool during its original launch period was overwhelmingly successful and achieved a higher use rate than other attempts to get students to comply with similar requirements. With this high utilization rate, MyGuide has been able to collect a significant amount of student data—such as interests and majors—that has, as of yet, gone unused and unanalyzed.

MyGuide is currently undergoing a state-of-the-union process whereby its attributes and capabilities are being assessed for what the staff may desire from it in the future. The basic premise for the future of MyGuide involves various modules that can be added to assist students in finding information and solving problems. The first module, which User 5 confirms is currently in development, is the MyTime module, which will allow students to upload their class schedule and update a calendar with important dates for time management. Other modules have been discussed, but none are in development yet.

MyGuide and its modules were created in-house by the advising center's IT staff, as well as with the help of student developers, who are utilized frequently by the center, according to Users 4 and 5. The University as a whole is undergoing an “IT rationalization program,” which will bring all of the departments' IT development staffs into a centralized location, thus in theory freeing up more resources for development of web services like MyGuide modules. These IT resources, in addition to the use of student developers, affords the advising center ample capability to create new resources for students.



### **Key Finding: Responsibilities and Administrative Traits**

Advisors in the center, regardless of title or responsibilities, have a significant amount of autonomy in their daily work. There are very few, if any, mandates that have been assigned to advisors to complete on a daily basis. While each interviewee believes that this autonomy is crucial to their work and their ability to connect with students, there was also a common sentiment that the advising center lacks a top-down management structure. This materializes itself in a technology and resource gap between advisors and throughout the center. Though many of the advisors meet informally to discuss various duties, tasks, and strategies, there is very little formal training or discussion regarding best practices.

This lack of agreed-upon standards and tools for sending out information is seen as problematic by a number of the interviewees. As User 4 states, “I don’t want 30 different advisors with different ideas about what a student should or should not receive. At least with regard to events.” However, creating a uniform management structure to alleviate these inconsistencies would eliminate the autonomy that is so important to the advisors. It was universally believed that the structure of the advising center would not conform to stringent management requirements. In spite of that, all interviewees felt that slightly more structure—in the form of training, best practices, and communication—would be beneficial.

Another hindrance that the advising center is currently facing is a lack of advisors. The center generally employs approximately 40 advisors at any given time. Due to natural attrition, the center is currently short five advisors, increasing the workload for the remaining members of the center. Thus, the interviewees were adamant that finding more efficient—and effective—ways to deliver information is crucial going forward, especially in periods like this, when they have limited resources.

Finally, the physical atmosphere of the advising center is seen in different lights by varying interviewees. User 1 called the office layout “ideal,” indicating that the pod structure of the offices was such that advisors could quickly and easily conference with one another about various topics. However, the IT staff is located on a separate floor from the advisors and find the physical distance of the office to be a hindrance to communication and development. The IT staff understands that their capacity is to support the advisors in their endeavors to accomplish the center’s mission, but communication breakdowns make that a difficult goal to achieve.

### **Recommendations: MyGuide**

The crux of this project’s recommendations is derived from the capabilities of MyGuide and its potential as a complete student portal. The basic premise is to utilize student information—including graduation year, major, interests, etc.—in order to create a personalized profile and stream of information based on individual interests.

With the emergence of mobile technologies, RSS feeds, and websites like Facebook and Twitter, human interaction with information has become increasingly personalized. However, with the current structure of the advising center’s external communication, information retrieval and distribution is a one-way experience: from advisor to student. The development of MyGuide as a complete student portal/profile will enable a two-way interaction. The advisors will select what information is uploaded to MyGuide, and students will be able to customize their information

feed, reducing information overload for students and affording them a stream of events, new courses, and announcements regarding their given interests in a concise, organized presentation.

Creating a new resource like this requires dedication and commitment, but more importantly, its deployment to students will need to be handled in a particular fashion. The chances that established students will begin using this resource in their final years at the University are slim; however, the high success and use rate of MyGuide for orientation implies that new students would appreciate and utilize MyGuide if it were offered to them from orientation onward. With that in mind, we recommend that the deployment of MyGuide as this universal tool not be started until all or many of the modules are in place. The more complete this upgraded MyGuide is upon release, the higher the probability that students will continue to utilize it in the future.

In addition to the MyTime module that is currently underway, there are multiple other modules that would be helpful to students. For example, each department in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts should have its own tag and/or module, so that when a student selects a particular interest/major, all information that comes from that school will be available to him or her. This will lighten the workload on advisors being asked to forward information to their students, and help to standardize the information that is delivered. Rather than advisors having to select what information gets sent to their advisees, often resulting in inconsistent delivery of content, all of the announcements would be funneled to MyGuide—where anyone with interest in the selected topic will receive up-to-date information including, but not limited to, course offerings, events, visiting speakers, and committees and organizations.

In speaking with our client contact at the advising center, concern was expressed regarding this model. Primarily, our client contact noted a loss of advisor-student interaction and serendipity as possible pitfalls. While we acknowledge that there will be less visibility for advisors in the daily work and activities of students stemming from a reduction in e-mails, we believe that the information previously contained in those e-mails will be better delivered and received in this customizable manner. In addition, we propose that an administrative mandate be given to advisors to continue to contact their entire advisee population at least once a week via e-mail to maintain a presence and interaction between students and advisors.

The other main concern with this structure is the loss of serendipity: the ability for students to discover new interests and courses via e-mail forwards from advisors and random encounters. To combat this, we propose a module/page on MyGuide featuring a rotating department of the month/week. This feature will be delivered to all students, regardless of their selected major or interest, and feature a different course offering or topic from a rotating palette of information and events outside of the student's declared interests.

Finally, several interviewees noted that their roles have changed in the eyes of the students. As User 1 notes, “Advisors became the human equivalent of a Google search.” In essence, students are using e-mail and personal contact with the advising staff to answer questions that could be answered quickly or with research by the students—an increase of which is unlikely to change in the future. Currently, advisors take shifts as the Quick Question advisor, an on-hand advisor capable of answering simple questions from walk-in students. We recommend that a module be built into MyGuide that can accomplish the Quick Question role digitally. If a chat function is established, advisors can continue their current Quick Question rotation, but instead of being

available in person, further increasing time constraints, advisors may remain at their desk and answer questions in this chat feature via the web while working on other tasks.

### **Recommendations: Administration**

As aforementioned, we propose a slightly more structured administrative model for the advising center, but only with regards to continued contact with students after the release of an upgraded MyGuide, to ensure that advisors are on the same page with regards to sending out certain types of information. Key to the success of the advising center is the individual advisor's autonomy and ability to interact with students on their own terms. With the implementation of the updated MyGuide, the administrative mandate would simply be to ensure that advisors consistently interact with their advisee base. This is something that members of the center feel would continue regardless; advisors act altruistically in their capacity and work to assist their advisees as much as possible.

Over the course of this project, the advising center also hired a communication coordinator. With the creation of this role, many of the intra-office communication issues—typically with regards to contact between the advising staff and the IT staff—will be addressed. When speaking with our client contact, she indicated that interaction between the IT staff and advising staff was already on the agenda for the communication coordinator to address. We do, however, recommend that the advising center and communication coordinator establish a set meeting time for the IT and advising staffs on a weekly or monthly basis simply to ensure that they are on the same page regarding new technologies and resources.

On an ongoing basis, we also recommend that the advising center survey both students and advisors to better collect data on what does and does not work (a survey question may be placed on MyGuide on a rotating basis, for example). The center currently does not perform much data collection in this manner, but with the development of a new communication coordinator position, these responsibilities may logically fall to them.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout our research and interaction with the Newnan LSA Academic Advising Center this term, we have come to see that the advising staff has maintained an incredibly high level of interaction with students and shown significant dedication to the center's mission. The challenges with regards to communicating internally and externally are present in any organization, large and small, and do not necessarily point to errors in the way things are handled, but often occur as a byproduct of having an abundance of information to disseminate and multiple vessels for dissemination.

There are several compounding variables that are uncontrollable by the advising center itself (such as information that is sent out by other departments/offices of the University). Taking this into account, we focused on developing recommendations that advising center staff can use to better coordinate themselves internally, so as to streamline and make their communications externally more efficient.

Our recommendations attempt to alleviate some of the time constraints on advisors while also delivering information to students in a manner that is more efficient and preferable for individual advisees. Though there is a significant start-up cost—primarily of University IT resources utilized to create the updated MyGuide—we believe that the potential payoff, both for the students in terms of the information they will receive, as well as the advisors in terms of greater availability of time, could be very significant.