

# Advising Community of Support

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UW SYSTEM INNOVATION FUND PROJECT: FINAL REPORT

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DISTANCE LEARNING CENTER AT UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE |

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The advising Community of Support (CoS) is a space for online undergraduate students to interact with their peers and their academic advisor. In addition to offering a space to increase student to student, and student to advisor interaction, we also provided SmarterMeasures™, a learning readiness indicator. This is a learning assessment which indicates if there are certain areas a student may struggle with and provides resources to help overcome those obstacles.

We were able to launch the Advising Community of Support with the help of the UW System Innovation Fund Project, and have seen some successes and some areas with room for improvement. Our overall assessment shows we will continue with this project for at least a full year and assess its success at that time.

We were able to stay within budget and used a small remaining portion for professional development as it pertains to dealing with challenging situations and students. As the project lead working with a diverse team and managing different approaches for handling various roadblocks associated with this project, this was a beneficial seminar. See Appendix A for further budget details.

## **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the CoS is to create and curate a space for online undergraduate students to interact with their peers and their academic advisor outside of the online course room. The CoS is housed in BrightSpace by Desire2Learn, which is the same software that is currently used to host courses and looks similar to the course shells used for degree classes. This pilot has enabled advisors to further support learners through enhanced student to student, student to advisor, and student-context engagement. Group advising, peer mentoring, and advising during virtual office hours has been used with the design of the project.

The primary goals of this project are:

1. To increase student engagement and retention

Overall this is a long term assessment, and it is too soon to determine if this project has increased student engagement and retention. We hope to see positive trending after a full year of implementation.

2. To identify student issues and concerns as early as possible

Overall we can see that this has helped identify student issues and concerns as several of the posts written by students were about course selection issues in which their peers were able to assist.

3. To help students feel that they are part of the larger peer and university community

Overall this is a long term assessment, and while we can see that there is still an increased need of connectivity per our assessments (Appendix B), we can see that there has been some impact.

The project group that developed the CoS was Cameo Updike, Business Administration advisor, Kalyn Williams, Criminal Justice advisor along with course developer Julie Hewitt and myself as the project lead. Additional staff members involved include, Melissa Gavin, Tania Pitzer, and Lisa Naderman on assessments and Dan Avenarius and Dawn Drake as administrators of the Distance Learning Center.

## **ORGANIZATION AND APPROACH**

The team used quantitative tools to determine the effectiveness of the project. Several tools for data collection were used to determine engagement by the students in the CoS, including: pre-/post-assessment to determine the student's perceived sense of community, usage data from the CoS, and the SmarterMeasures™ Assessment tool.

***Pre-/Post-Assessment.*** The pre-/post-assessment was a survey tool sent to two populations of students, a control group and CoS participants, to determine the student's perceived sense of community. The same survey, following similar distribution methods, was sent for both the pre- and post-assessment. Analysis of the results should indicate a change in the student's perceived sense of community. The data was sent using Qualtrics. The data did contain identifying information for the assessment team to determine if there was a change in individual student data. The data was also analyzed for the group as a whole. Note: The data will be reported with no identifying information.

***Usage Data.*** Desire2Learn (D2L) provides many opportunities to see where students are engaging in the CoS. Student data on discussion posts created and read were collected. Also, data about the content that was viewed and the number of student log-ins were collected. This data will be interpreted to determine engagement levels.

***SmarterMeasures™ Assessment.*** SmarterMeasures™ Assessments are available to students to determine student-readiness to participate in an online classroom. Data from SmarterMeasures™ was used to determine what resources students need to be successful in the online classroom.

The only qualitative assessment used was informal documentation on the advisors' perceptions on the interactions within the CoS. All advisors were asked to document their experiences and any other information that was beneficial.

Qualitative assessments, such as a focus group, were considered if data clarification was needed. At this point, the assessment team did not determine the need to compose a focus group.

Since all data collected for this project could be used for research and presentations outside of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, the assessment team sought IRB approval for all data collection methods. Please see Appendix C for IRB approval.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

**Findings.** A total of 379 undergraduate business and criminal justice students were enrolled in two sections of community of support (CoS). According to data collected from Desire2Learn (D2L), 182 of the 379 (48%) students logged into the community from October 2, 2015, to present. Historically, this student population has approximately 50% of its population active (enrolling in courses) each semester. When comparing the historical data to our present data, data is consistent. While 50% may seem small, the majority of our student population is returning, nontraditional students who enroll in courses when life factors allow them.

The CoS allowed for student-to-student and student-to-advisor discussions. Students created 39 discussion threads. Students also responded to 16 discussion threads. In total, 118 discussion posts were created by students and advisors. Students who read discussion posts averaged 20 posts each. Of the total population, nearly 20% read posts.

Various elements of content were viewed by students. On average, students reviewed 4 of 22 content sections for approximately 5 minutes. The time spent in the content section of the course varied significantly by student with some spending only seconds and others spending up to 35 minutes. Content areas read included but are not limited to: SmarterMeasures™, Credit Evaluation, Textbooks, Program Specific Resources, and Student/Advisor Roles and Responsibilities. Content was not designed to be a primary activity tool but rather a reference tool.

Students had access to SmarterMeasures™, a learning readiness tool which provides additional resources. Of the 379 students in CoS, only 2 students completed the SmarterMeasure Assessment. Three students have logged into the SmarterMeasure Assessment. Eight students did view the SmarterMeasure Assessment Content area. (Note: The assessment tool does require 30 minutes of the student's time.) No students used the additional resources which were provided at the completion of the assessment.

The pre- and post-assessment, which explored community both in and out of the classroom, showed that students are lacking a connection to faculty, staff, and other students out of the classroom environment. The CoS was designed to give students that sense of community in another forum outside of the classroom. At this point, the post-assessment data did not change significantly.

Both advisors reported that students interacted with the CoS. Advisors did note that students interacted with both the advisor and fellow students; however, interaction between students was limited. Advisors also noted more posting during the first weeks of the CoS.

**Analysis.** Although we had an aggressive timeline with adequate milestones in place, we did not meet our expectations of implementation. Elements impacting the timeline were often outside of our control. We plan to continue for a full year to evaluate the success of the CoS. In addition, we look to expand the CoS to other programs, including graduate level.

We plan to adapt our strategies to increase the use by doing a better job of marketing the communities to our students. Since this is new, the communities were heavily advertised. However, in upcoming months advertising will slow. We need to find ways to reconnect with the students not participating.

We also need to refine the content to what students want or need to ensure the communities continue to be used. Data of content areas will be reviewed to determine which areas need to be added, removed, or updated.

A plan to reevaluate the placement of SmarterMeasures™ to increase completions of the assessment is also going to be undertaken. Students within the community are currently active students while the tool is designed to be for students returning to school. The CoS may not be the best place to prepare students using this tool.

In addition, the committee will review collection of the community data using an assessment. The community will review timelines and processes for collecting data to show or not show a sense of community outside of the classroom.

Finally when reviewing the individual sections of the CoS, it was noticed that one degree program had more activity than the other program. The team will work to identify ways to increase activity in other program's CoS by involving the academic department.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall the CoS thus far has been a success. We are in the process of expanding the CoS to the remainder of our undergraduate students and there are future plans to include the graduate students. This will allow us to advertise aggressively as there will no longer be a control group that is excluded from the CoS.

SmarterMeasures™ have not been as successful as we had hoped. We plan to address this by trying different venues for the student to complete the learning readiness assessment. Options we are considering include implementing in the Introduction to Online Learning course for new students and the Ready to Learn course for prospective students.

We also recommend additional assessments to review student engagement with the Distance Learning Center. Our initial assessments had very low participation and we are looking into additional avenues to increase our response rate.

## APPENDIX A: BUDGET

### Proposed Budget

Name	Project Role	Payment
SmarterMeasure	Readiness tool	\$10,000
Amy Foley	Project lead, SmarterMeasure™ implementation point person, Advisor oversight, Reporting	\$3,500
Julie Hewitt	Instructional Design, Assessment	\$1,500
Kalyn Williams	Advisor, Implementation of Communication Plan, Reporting	\$2,500
Cameo Updike	Advisor, Implementation of Communication Plan, Reporting	\$2,500
		\$20,000

### Actual Budget

Name	Project Role	Payment
SmarterMeasure	Readiness tool (purchase by number of assessments)	\$9,350
Fred Pryor	Professional Development/Training	\$534
Amy Foley	Project lead, SmarterMeasure™ implementation point person, Advisor oversight, Reporting	\$3,500
Julie Hewitt	Instructional Design, Assessment	\$1,500
Kalyn Williams	Advisor, Implementation of Communication Plan, Reporting	\$2,500
Cameo Updike	Advisor, Implementation of Communication Plan, Reporting	\$2,500
		\$19,844

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Comfort

1. I feel comfortable in the online learning environment provided by my program.
2. I feel UW-Platteville Distance Education instructors and staff have created a safe online environment, where I can freely express myself.
3. I feel comfortable asking other students in online courses for help.
4. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions and feelings in online courses.
5. I feel comfortable introducing myself in online courses.
7. If needed, I will ask for help from my advisor.

### Community

1. I know some of my faculty members and my classmates well.
2. I feel a connection to other students in my online courses.
3. I easily make acquaintances in my online courses.
4. My peers know me well in my online courses.
5. I feel that classmates in my online courses depend on me.
6. I feel that I can trust the other students in my online courses.
7. I know my advisor well.
8. I can effectively communicate in online courses.

### Facilitation

1. My advisor promotes communication between instructors and students in my program.
2. My advisor is responsive to my questions.
3. My advisor encourages communication with my instructors and peers in my program through the use of technology (e.g., chat rooms, online rooms, Skype, and group discussion forums).
4. I receive frequent communications from my advisor.
5. My advisor participates in online discussions with me.

### Interaction and Collaboration Outside of Class

1. I work with other students in my program.
2. I can relate to students in my program through shared experiences.
3. I share information with other students in my program.
4. I discuss my ideas with other students in my program.
5. I collaborate with other students in my program.
6. I feel I have enough time and opportunity to connect and engage with my online course peers

Would you be willing to participate in a future discussion about this assessment? (Optional)

Name (fill in the blank)

Email (fill in the blank)



## APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVALS



### UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PLATTEVILLE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

9/16/2015

Amy Foley  
Department of Distance Learning Center  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

RE: IRB Protocol #2015-16-14

Project Title: Advising Community of Support

Approval Date: 9/15/2015

Expiration Date: 9/14/2016

Your project has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville IRB via an Expedited Review. This approval is subject to the following conditions, otherwise approval may be suspended:

1. No participants may be involved in the study prior to the IRB approval date listed above or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated or serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB.
3. All modifications to procedures, participant selection, and instruments used (surveys, consent forms, etc) must be reported to the IRB chair prior to their use.
4. If the project will continue beyond the expiration date, then the researcher must file for a continuation with the IRB at least 14 days prior to the expiration date. If the IRB approval for this project expires before approval for continuation is given, then a new protocol must be filled out and submitted. Federal guidelines allow for no exceptions to this rule. Any data collected after the expiration date cannot be used in the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB chair at the address below. Include your protocol # on all correspondence.

Sincerely,

Dr. Barb Barnet  
Institutional Review Board Chair  
Professor, Mathematics Department  
Gardner 451  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville  
(608) 342-1942  
barnetb@uwplatt.edu



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
**PLATTEVILLE**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

10/6/2015

Amy Foley  
Dept. of Distance Learning Center  
UW-Platteville

RE: IRB Protocol #2015-16-14

Project Title: Advising Community of Support

Original Approval Date: 9/15/2015

Original Expiration Date: 9/14/2015

A modification to your project has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-Platteville IRB. This modification includes:

Adding the Smarter Measures tool

This modification **does not** affect the original expiration date of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB chair at the address below. Include your protocol # on all correspondence.

Sincerely,

Dr. Barb Barnet  
Institutional Review Board Chair  
Professor, Mathematics Department  
Gardner 451  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville  
(608) 342-1942  
barnetb@uwplatt.edu

## APPENDIX D: COMMUNICATION TIMELINE

Action Items	Dates	Project Team	Notes
Introduction email	10/1/2015	Advisors	Email is sent to students to introduce them to the CoS
Admission packet letter	10/1/2015	Advisors	Information letter is put in all new admit packets to explain the CoS
Postcards	10/5/2015	Advisors	Postcards were mailed to introduce students to CoS
Office Hours	11/7/2015	Advisors	Virtual Office hours were held outside of regular business hours
SmarterMeasure Implementation	11/30/2015	Advisors	SmarterMeasures <sup>TM</sup> was added to the course shells and students were notified via email
Office Hours	12/3/2015	Advisors	Virtual Office hours were held outside of regular business hours
SmarterMeasure Reminder	12/9/2015	Advisors	A reminder is sent about SmarterMeasures <sup>TM</sup> being added to the courses
Postcards	2/22/2016	Advisors	Postcards will be mailed as a reminder about the CoS to all students
Other	Ongoing	Advisors	CoS was advertised in a variety of non-specific communications the advisors were sending to current and new students

## APPENDIX E: POST CARDS







## UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PLATTEVILLE ONLINE

1 UNIVERSITY PLAZA | PLATTEVILLE WI 53818-3099

**Check out the new Community of Support  
in Desire2Learn.**

Engage with me and your peers in a variety of ways:

- Ask and answer questions
- Get to know one another and me
- Connect with campus

See you there!



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SWING THROUGH SPRING WITH THE COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
**PLATTEVILLE**  
ONLINE



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
**PLATTEVILLE**  
ONLINE

1 UNIVERSITY PLAZA | PLATTEVILLE WI 53818-3099

Check out what is happening  
in the **COS!**

Log in to see news items on scholarship  
opportunities and other upcoming events.

We would also like to hear from you  
on how your spring term is going.  
Share your experiences with us  
and your fellow students!

**See you there!**