

**Title:** Moving the University of Nebraska toward Integrated Planning and Advising:  
A Case Study for Transforming Institutional Culture

Amy Goodburn, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor & Dean of Undergraduate Education

Bill Watts, Director of University Advising and Career Services

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has transformed its institutional culture over the past seven years to improve advising and enrollment management for student success, including a personalized degree planner tool being implemented in October of 2018, a new plan based registration tool in spring 2019, with progression tracking to follow and subsequent full implementation on two additional campuses. This essay focuses on how the university's culture was transformed to enable the conditions for such a system to be developed and the positive impact on student success thus far. Adriana Kezar notes that transforming culture in higher education requires changes in three areas: structures, processes, and attitudes (2013). Today, we will describe how implementing a new advising system became—and continues to be-- a catalyst for change in these three areas. Of course, we didn't know when we started that this is where we would be seven years later. In hindsight, though, we believe sharing some of our journey might give you some ideas—or perhaps just hope—if you are interested in undertaking a similar culture change.

To give you some background, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a large public land grant research institution with 26,000 students, 21,000 of whom are undergraduates. In 2011, our Chancellor identified increasing graduation rates & time to degree as key university priorities and commissioned a consultant to conduct an external review of existing processes and practices. The

review identified academic advising as a key barrier to achieving success, noting that our institution's academic advising did not "intentionally connect" students to the university, and advisors did not have up-to-date data to support students. These findings were not surprising. In 2011, UNL's Advising System was not a system at all. For instance, each academic college used its own system to record students' advising records. Some used paper files. Others had developed their own electronic systems. But none of the systems "talked" to one another, so an advisor in the College of Arts and Sciences could not view advising records for a student in the College of Business, even if that student was pursuing degree programs in both colleges.

Beyond this lack of access to students' records, the absence of a coordinated advising system also meant that there was no common professional development across colleges for academic advising and there was no data available to assess the impact of advising across the institution. There was no mechanism for collecting data on how many students were (or were not) being advised within each college or for understanding patterns in student use of advising services nor was there a means for assessing advisor workloads within the colleges. Lastly, there was no system that enabled students to easily access advising services.

From the external review and extensive follow-up conversations via task force committees with faculty and staff, UNL's office of Academic Affairs identified four key strategic areas to improve student retention and time to degree:

- Improve campus coordination and delivery of advising and support services
- Create targeted, required advising programs with particular student populations
- Develop early warning systems to identify & support academically at-risk students
- Track participation with and impact of academic support services

From this list of priorities, the first goal was to identify an electronic system that could support coordination and transparency in advising records, provide data to advising leaders, and increase student access via online scheduling across the academic colleges. The Chancellor agreed to support the purchase of an advising technology which would be used across the campus. Bill, then director of advising in the College of A&S and Amy, formerly the associate dean in the same college who had recently been named to a new position as Associate Vice Chancellor, worked with a team of advising leaders to review and choose a common vendor system.

During the summer of 2011, this team of faculty, staff, and academic leaders (including the Chancellor) reviewed various options for advising systems—such as developing a “home grown” system, purchasing a commercial product, or purchasing a system from another institution. After reviewing three commercial products and one developed by a peer institution, the committee selected one and signed the contract in September 2011. A core group worked intensely from September through December to set up the system and train advisors on how to use it and in January 2012, UNL opened the new system—named MyPLAN--accessible by all UNL academic advisors (over 400 total).

At the time, we didn't realize how adopting this system would lead to the very different culture for advising that we have today. To put it bluntly, this decision turned things a bit upside down when it came to our Advising Culture. Once the vendor solution was chosen, our initial challenge was twofold: 1) promote input around decision making when every college had a different structure and type of advising leader and 2) build structures responsible for decision making. In the remainder of this essay, we will describe how we built processes, networks, and initiatives that have led to the transformation of our campus advising culture.

Once we signed the contract, we were asked to make a whole range of decisions. There were few common processes or infrastructures to rely upon as we sought to implement the new vendor system. Initially, developing a process for these decisions was like trying to herd feral cats. To ensure inclusive process with shared authority for decision making, we developed several groups which met (and continue to meet) regularly to discuss policies, processes, and develop initiatives. For instance, the Retention Advisory Group included representatives from the offices of the Registrar, Admissions, General Education, Information Technology, Advising, and Academic Affairs. This initial group engaged in much of the initial decision making about how the system would be set up, who would have roles within it, how the permissions and access would be constructed, the types of student information that would be fed to the screens, and so on. From September through January, this group met weekly to make these decisions until the system was rolled out. As we were faced with making decisions on an almost daily basis, we developed groups of advisors and administrative leaders to share in this decision making. The Advising Coordinating Board was created with directors from each of the college advising centers. A third group, now called the Academic Solutions Council, was formed with an associate dean from each academic college and directors from University Advising, Undergraduate Education, and academic services such as the Registrar, New Student Enrollment, and Scholarships and Financial Aid. Soon we realized that these councils were, in turn, creating additional networks and connections across the campus. Within the advising community there was great interest in supporting advisor development and an Academic Advising Association was formed from the ground up. The advising community became leaders in inviting others to the table so formal structures like the Advising Coordinating Board expanded membership to include members from the Offices of Learning

Communities, Scholarships and Financial Aid, the Registrar and University Honors. The Academic Advising Association (AAA) invited front line staff from all those units to the table as well. The AAA also created an annual conference for the campus for sharing best practices and bringing in national speakers on topics of high interest. Over the course of 5 years this annual conference has steadily grown in size and scope both from local campus attendance and as a destination for advisors and advising related service providers across the state and region.

Beyond forming networks and councils to solicit feedback, the implementation of the system forced us to confront serious differences and gaps in advising capacity, especially the serious divide between faculty and staff advisors with respect to job expectations and professional development. We also identified gaps in UNL's academic support services. One such gap was the absence of "general" academic support for students on topics such as motivation, time management, test taking, or learning styles. While UNL offered learning consultants in particular disciplines (Math, Writing, Chemistry, etc.), no "general" academic services existed for students. Indeed, when the advising community discussed the desire to implement the "Referral" feature in the advising system to better support students, it became clear that UNL had no designated staff to receive and act upon such referrals. To fill this gap, in August of 2013, UNL opened the office of First-Year Experience and Transition Programs (FYETP) staffed with a director and academic success coaches. This office provides individualized success coaching, workshops on academic topics, and specialized programming and peer mentoring for particular student populations (e.g. transfer, first-generation, international, etc.). From its inception, FYETP utilized the advising system, with staff recording notes from coaching sessions, offering online scheduling, and receiving instructor referrals. Success coaches also benefit from having access to students' overall advising and course

history in the system.

Once we had these networks and structures in place, the advisors began generating ideas for new initiatives. For instance, our Explore Center for undeclared students piloted a program called COMPASS which requires students beyond their first year to meet with an advisor to develop a major/career exploration plan. We experimented with a variety of outreach programs targeting students identified as at risk and those who failed to take advantage of priority registration. Recognizing we required little to nothing of students placed on academic probation, we used our new structures to envision, refine and implement a campus-wide Academic Recovery Program for all students on probation. Our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources used the new infrastructure to envision and develop processes related to graduation checking. All of the undergraduate academic colleges completed a review and clean-up of over 6,000 prerequisites in the undergraduate catalog. New vendor products for curriculum and catalog publication were evaluated and implemented. Agreement was reached by all colleges on shared definitions for minors and other degree programs. Networks and infrastructure originally built to support the advising system implementation became the vessel for both supporting new initiatives and ensuring campus-wide communication and consistency in their implementation.

Our campus is now working on a multi-year project to develop an integrated planning and advising system that will incorporate personalized four-year plans, flag students when they get off track, and assist departments in identifying course capacity needs. This project is broader than our advising system— it involves connecting our student information system, our degree audit system, and other customized modules to provide these comprehensive capacities. But this project couldn't have been envisioned or implemented if we hadn't developed a foundation of working

collaboratively across campus units. As we have added systems and programs, we continually identify more places to improve and opportunities for new efficiencies. Most recently, our campus has purchased a site license for Tableau and our Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics is building out reports for advisors and program directors to support student success.

We found that successfully implementing a new advising system was a catalyst for sponsoring change across structural, process, and attitudinal dimensions. Including multiple stake holders early in selection and implementation processes built connections and supported conversations which had not existed before. Such conversations included administrators, advising leaders, IT, and faculty reps involvement in evaluating possible vendors and then in decisions about implementation. Taking the risk to share decision making with a broad audience and then building consensus was risky but has paid off in ways we didn't imagine. We would encourage other campuses to push decision making down to the lowest possible level you think might be reasonable. Eight years ago, I don't think anyone would have thought to trust the advising leads in each college (all with different titles and at different professional staff levels) to make vendor decisions. We've gone so far with implementation decisions that we have regular sessions with advisors who can make suggestions and share their reactions to the efforts, accounting for their input, and supporting their leadership in ongoing engagement. Support and creativity remain high – to the point where advising leaders now advocate for changes they want/need. For example, the advisors' demand for coordinated training led to a new position of a Training and Professional Development Specialist for our campus.

Once we began implementing our vended tool for advising case management, we capitalized on the momentum by building the infrastructure and processes to support decision

making and implementation of additional tools, projects, and programs. Prior to the implementation of this system, UNL did not have a culture for requiring groups of students to use advising services. UNL's Registrar's Office did not allow advising registration holds, for instance, because there was no system to coordinate their use. The implementation of the common system enabled UNL's advising community to gain support for creating targeted, required advising programs for students (undeclared students beyond the first year, probation students, etc.) and to use success plan features in these programs. These new networks and structures provide an accountability venue, where new initiatives are presented, vetted and then evaluated after being piloted. All three steps increase buy-in, support, and awareness.

From this list of initiatives, you can guess we run the risk of initiative fatigue. While that is a real concern, our infrastructure helps provide the vehicles for rolling out our new initiatives in coordinated ways. It also provides the space for genuine conversations about initiative fatigue, decision making and setting priorities – e.g. the ways we've decided to phase in Plan, Enroll, Progress. As we move towards more fully integrated systems we've had to step back periodically and balance the desire to have everything in place tomorrow and the abilities of staff, faculty and students to manage multiple new systems/processes.

One thing we haven't talked about a great deal is a principle of transparency. With the case management tool, we've set an expectation that advisors and other users of the tool enter notes on all student interactions with the additional expectation that users will read and access one another's notes. The professional trust and openness this expectation and process engenders cannot be underestimated. Whether the initial advising community or the 20+ users groups who have come on board, all initially express concerns about other staff being able to see 'their' notes.

Changing mindsets around who these notes serve has mattered. We now see notes as primarily serving students. The availability of those notes to all users of the system means each staff member serving a student has a more complete picture of each student's experience, thus enabling us to meet students where they are and target our services to their needs.

Over the last seven years, attitudes about the role and importance of advising has changed on our campus. College and department leaders have begun to recognize the professionalization of advising, as evidenced by the development of career ladders for advising-related positions, the creation of a university award to recognize strong advising, and continuing shifts in moving from solely faculty advising to the hiring of professional advising staff. Even in the face of difficult budget situations, our campus and each of our colleges have prioritized support for advising lines as we've twice raised the floor for advising salaries. and we've seen two colleges move from all faculty advising models to all professional staff advising models. Advising leaders have been actively engaged with the University Registrar and efforts with our University System office to expand our vision of integrated planning and advising systems to our sister campuses. Eight or ten years ago few would have imagined advising leaders collaborating with registrars and system developers on cross campus solutions focused on supporting student success.

When we initially purchased a vendor solution in 2011, we hoped advisors would use the system to document their advising interactions with students. Little did we know our investment would lead to new and transformative collaborations across the entire campus that have led us to be more experimental and curious about how we might better support student success and focused on data for continuous improvement in all of our units. As one member of our core team stated, "I feel brave... I now have the data I need about our students to try new things." Looking

back we can see key lessons which each supported transformation in the three areas Kezar identifies: structures, processes, and attitudes (2013). Engaging multiple stakeholders early helped with attitude, institutionalizing their participation created the structures and processes for ongoing collaboration and experimentation. Similarly, pushing down and sharing, decision making built and sustained attitudes supportive of backing both the initial and ongoing initiatives. Building on momentum, we utilized new processes and structures which reinforced attitudes of collaboration and experimentation. While we've accomplished improvement in 4-year and 6-year graduation rates, cultural transformation is the accomplishment which will support ongoing improvements as our community engages in open and creative prototyping of additional solutions to make further gains in improving student success outcomes.