

Episode 1: Barriers Specific to Online Graduate Students

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to *Get Online* from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. *Get Online* has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty. In this three episode series we Get Online with Academic Advising, specifically faculty advisors who work with online graduate students.

Later in this episode we are going to chat with Holli Fergus, the director of academic advising at American Public University System. Holli is going to share how we can overcome barriers that online graduate students encounter. Also coming up, we'll take a closer look at some of the misconceptions about academic advising. But first, let's take some questions from students in this segment that we call Just Ask George.

Amanda Gnad:

Hi! I'm Amanda Gnad and I work with Kathryn on the Great Plains IDEA team. I asked some of our online graduate students what questions they have about faculty advisors and I've got a couple here that we are going to work on today.

To answer our student questions, we've invited George Steele, who works with Virginia Gordon, the founder of the exploratory advising center at the Ohio State University. George was Executive Director of the Ohio Learning Network, an organization that coordinated distance learning in Ohio. George has been a 30-year member of NACADA, and has presented at EduCause and WCET. Today, he is here to help us out.

Welcome, George.

George Steele:

Happy to be here.

Amanda Gnad:

Let's tackle some student questions. Our first question today is from Emily at Iowa State. Emily emailed to ask about her relationship with her academic advisor. Emily said,

"My co-worker is also getting a master's degree, although her major is different than mine and she's at a different university, we are both taking online courses. I've noticed that my co-worker's relationship with her academic advisor is different than my relationship with my academic advisor. For example, her advisor schedules group chats and invites everyone he advises to attend and ask questions of him and each other. My advisor only has one or two video conferences with me per year. Which one is right?"

George Steele:

Good question Emily. Every student-advisor relationship is unique and really, there is no right or wrong. However, it's important for you and your advisor to get on the same page, set up the parameters for your relationship and respect them. You might ask your advisor about preferred communication methods, frequency of meetings, and what kinds of topics you might talk about together.

Advisors can provide a FAQ to address common student questions, and they may have an advising syllabus and can share that too! I've heard some faculty refer to this document as a contract – a better word would be guidelines. It's especially important to remember that students and faculty are people – you will both have other obligations and may not be available 24/7! Give one another some grace.

Amanda Gnad:

Awesome, thanks for that information. The next question today is from John at Michigan State University. John emailed to ask about all of the helpers at his university – he's feeling confused about who does what. John said,

*“When I was admitted to my program I received a lot of emails from **a lot** of different people. One email was from the graduate school, another email was from a faculty member, and even another email was from a coordinator (I'm not even sure what that means!). Everyone introduced themselves and told me what they do for the university, and they all seem really nice, but I'm still not really sure about what they can do for me. How do I know which person to go to with questions?”*

George Steele:

It can be confusing John! Just like many organizations, higher education divides the work. Each one of those early contacts you mention represents an individual associated with an office at your university that is responsible for a specific set of tasks. If you have a financial aid issue, you will contact the financial aid office. Sometimes this gets complicated because some issues overlap and sometimes offices work very closely together – for example the financial aid office and the bursar's office (where you pay your tuition bill). Let's consider your faculty advisors:

Your faculty advisor is your main point of contact for issues pertaining to your academic program and mentoring. Your faculty advisor is whom you would work with regarding academic requirements of your program, details about the academic discipline, and issues pertaining to a thesis or dissertation. Your faculty advisor might even be a source for general career information.

There are other specialists who can assist with course registration and how to access resources and services. When in doubt, it is always a good idea to start with your faculty advisor.

Amanda Gnad:

Thanks, George – see you next week! Back to you, Kathryn.

Kathryn Harth:

Thank you, Amanda and George, for that great information. In this podcast we not only have experts providing advice to students and faculty advisors, we also have resources and tools. Every episode, we give away resources tailored to you, our audience. Stay tuned until the end of our show for a free and fantastic resource that will benefit students, faculty, and everyone in between.

Kathryn Harth:

We call this next segment *Get on the Same Page*. My colleague, Dr. Amanda Burris, is going to pose the exact same question to a faculty advisor and then to a student. We're going to hear how each individual answers the question, and then Amanda will help us analyze these differing views and provide suggestions to help get faculty advisors and students on the same page. Let's hear from Amanda.

Amanda Burris:

Today we are going to get on the same page about the roles of a faculty advisor. We asked an advisor and a student: What do you think is the role of an academic advisor?

For our faculty advisor response, we talked to Blaine from Oklahoma State University. Blaine, what do you think?

Blaine from OSU:

I think it is my responsibility to guide students through their program, give them tools to help themselves, and assist them with meeting their goals.

Amanda Burris:

Now let's hear from our student. This is Julie from South Dakota State University. Julie, what do you think is the role of an academic advisor?

Julie from SDSU:

I want my advisor to be the sole point of contact for all information, but in reality I feel like they are more responsible for making sure I get enrolled in the right classes at the right time.

Amanda Burris:

We can see from these responses that faculty and students often have differing ideas about the role of an academic advisor. Because of this, it is important to make sure at the start of a student's program that the advisor and student discuss expectations and norms. By discussing these expectations neither person is left feeling like the other one isn't doing their part, and the relationship can be more beneficial for everyone.

Kathryn Harth:

Next up on the podcast we will be talking with Holli Fergus, the Director of Academic Advising at the American Public University System. Holli is also the Interim Chair of NACADA's advising community on Distance Advising for Online Education.

Welcome, Holli!

Holli Fergus:

Hello, it's nice to be here.

Kathryn Harth:

Thank you for joining me to talk about some of the barriers that online graduate students often encounter, specifically those trouble spots they might run into when working with their academic advisor. But before we talk about barriers, I want to know more about you! How did you get **into** academic advising? What about this field or this topic hooked you?

Holli Fergus:

Growing up, this wasn't a path I planned for myself, but when I was completing my undergraduate degree, I fell in love with campus life, student affairs, and working with my peers. This led me after college to apply for an academic advisor position and I've remained working in Academic Advising for the past 12, almost 13 years. I've worked as an Academic Advisor, as well as a training manager for the Academic Advising Department before moving to my current role.

Kathryn Harth:

As we at Great Plains IDEA were preparing for this podcast we talked with a lot of students about academic advisors. Some of the previous segments in this podcast have already shined a light on how varying interpretations may be about the role of academic advisors. So let's start with some basics... What can an academic advisor help with?

Holli Fergus:

Academic advisors can help with a range of things, I view academic advising as a hub. As an institution, if we don't have the answer, we will either be able to direct students to who might have the answer or we will be able to reach out to resources to get the answer to help students. We really are the one-stop-shop. You can come here even if you're not sure where to go and we'll direct you where you need to figure out the information that you're seeking and that answer may change from institution to institution because everybody does it a little differently, but academic advising isn't just about telling students what classes to take or what order to take them in, it's about putting them in touch with resources, it's connecting students with tutoring services, other departments resources that may be even outside of their academic journey because the conversations don't just stop at academics, they bleed into life as well.

Kathryn Harth:

Yes, definitely, and we know our campuses all provide such amazing resources so it makes sense that an academic advisor would help to connect that way. So in this podcast, we talk specifically about online students, and most faculty understand that students who are learning online have additional challenges but about the additional challenges of advising an online student. Talk to us a little bit about the differences between on-campus and online advising.

Holli Fergus:

Yeah, I definitely think that there are barriers and differences between the two. Being online may create a communication barrier because you don't see the students face-to-face, so figuring out how to get in touch with someone that you may have never met in an office can be difficult. Does that student prefer a phone call, an email, a text message, or what other medium of communication your institution may be using? And then figuring out which is best for that level of communication or that student is also going to be a little tricky.

Academic advisors have a skill set that they can change their preference based on the communication so they can say, "okay we just had this long phone conversation about this policy but I'm going to follow up with an email about it because there are so many important details that I want to make sure you have it all in front of you." I think that there's also a challenge when you are an online academic advisor, forming that relationship with students you really have to get creative. It's so easy when you're face-to-face with someone to talk about the weather or the building across campus or the construction that you ran into that may have delayed you on your way here this morning, you know, getting into the office, but when you're online you don't have a lot of those same initial familiarities that we are typically used to in face-to-face

interactions. You have to talk about maybe what did they do for the weekend or is their permanent address in a place that you recently visited or would like to visit and take notes and talk about those things and really work to find something in common to build a foundation of a relationship for now. The personal touch, I mean, that goes a long way.

Kathryn Harth:

It does, that's perfect advice. So we sometimes hear the word "academic advisor" and we sometimes hear the word "faculty advisor" and I heard the words "major professor." So these words seem interchangeable, but are there differences that we need to be aware of?

Holli Fergus:

There may be, it's going to vary from institution to institution. So at my institution, we have a team of professional academic advisors we help with things like university policy and procedures we help, you know, navigating and understanding their online classroom or their eCampus, but we also have some faculty advisors who help with things that are industry-specific, so questions that our academic advisors may not be able to answer or address because they may not work directly in that field. So I think my advice would be to figure out what academic advising looks like at your institution and what those roles look like because you may have an academic advisor and a faculty advisor or you may have just one or the other serving in that role.

Kathryn Harth:

So if a student were wondering what it looks like on their campus who should they ask?

Holli Fergus:

Their academic advisor would be the perfect place to start.

Kathryn Harth:

That's great advice. So Holli, you've talked about how the faculty can help break down these barriers by connecting students to resources that are on campus and also connecting to the student on a personal level, but it can't all be on the faculty advisor to make this relationship work. So what can, or should, students do to be more proactive and help themselves get past these barriers?

Holli Fergus:

I would just encourage students to reach out so it's really easy to get in the routine of completing your classes and moving along and you may not have an immediate need for speaking with your academic advisor, but there may be things that you can

communicate about so that if there are roadblocks that may be coming that you're unable to foresee, the academic advisor may be able to talk to you about that, work through things with you. So I think my advice is just not waiting for something to come up it's about also being proactive and reaching out to your academic advisor, and I think from the student perspective it's okay to also say "I prefer phone conversations" or "I prefer email communication because I can respond really quickly" or "my job demands don't allow me to have phone conversations so the best way to reach me is via text." So I think students communicating those preferences to their academic advisor in an online setting can also be helpful. I think that's great.

Kathryn Harth:

You know, I'm reminded of a time that I heard a student say, "I don't even know what questions to ask" and their academic adviser said "just say that, that's helpful to me to know that you are starting from the ground floor and you're not even sure how to start with this" and then I know how to approach you. Once you share that with me, so even just being open and honest in that way I think it's also really helpful.

So as we've mentioned, our listeners are made up of students and faculty groups and you've provided some great recommendations to both groups on how they can create a stronger academic advising relationship. As we are nearing the end of our interview today I'd like to ask you if each of those groups, the student group, and the faculty advisor group, take just one thing away from this interview what would you want that to be?

Holli Fergus:

I think if I had to narrow it down to one thing, I'm going to say communication because it's the most important piece on both parts, both the advisor part and the student part, keeping those open lines of communication, reaching out, asking questions, establishing expectations and touchpoints, and building that relationship so that it can carry them from the start of their academic journey through the end of their academic career is super helpful.

Kathryn Harth:

That is a great note to end on. Thanks for helping us understand how online students and faculty advisors can work together to overcome common barriers.

Holli Fergus:

It's been my pleasure.

Kathryn Harth:

That was Holly Fergus with American Public University System talking with us about barriers that online graduate students encounter.

While this episode of Get Online is all about academic advising, we know there are other types of advising in the world. One of those is financial advising, which can also be referred to as financial planning.

To hear more about this we talked to Jamie Bosse [pronounced Bossy] who is a financial advisor at Aspyre Wealth Partners. Jamie...

Jamie Bosse:

Hello, I'm Jamie Bosse, a financial planner with Aspyre Wealth Partners. A financial advisor is a professional who helps you organize your financial life, clarify your goals and make decisions to have a better financial future. We serve as a resource to guide you through life's transition like buying a house, getting married, sending kids to college, and preparing for retirement. We can help you balance those competing priorities while anticipating and navigating any potential roadblocks you may face along the way.

Rachel Ohmes:

This is Rachel Ohmes with Great Plains IDEA and if you're hearing my voice that means you've made it to the end of our podcast. At the end of every episode we have a giveaway and today's freebie is a great tool for faculty academic programs and students.

We designed a Roles and Responsibilities Checklist that you can use to determine and track responsibilities and milestones that are important to your degree program, you can even edit this document to reflect how advising works at your University. You can find and download the roles and responsibilities checklist by visiting www.gpidea.org/podcast. That's www.gpidea.org/podcast.

Kathryn Harth:

That's it for this week's show. Special thanks to our guests Just Ask George Steele, our student and faculty voices, and our guest expert, Holli Fergus.

Also, a big thanks to the Great Plains IDEA team – Chelsea Barbercheck, Amanda Burris, Amanda Gnad, Rachel Ohmes, and Stephanie Stewart.

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In our next episode we'll talk with Jamie Heck from the University of Cincinnati about creating a sense of community using online academic advising.

I'm your host Kathryn Harth and until next time, Get Online.