

## Episode 2: Creating a Sense of Community for 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 Jamie Heck, the director of academic affairs at the University of Cincinnati's College of Nursing, about creating a sense of community. Also coming up, we'll take a closer look at some of the misconceptions about academic advising and learn about other types of advising. But first, let's take some questions from students in this segment that we call Just Ask George.

### Amanda Gnad:

Alright, let's answer some student questions. Our first question today is from Ethan at South Dakota State University. Ethan emailed to ask about graduate advising versus his undergraduate experience. Ethan said,

*"When I was in undergrad I was a great student. I got all A's and B's. I wasn't the best test taker but I was pretty organized and turned work in on time so it evened out. But that was 20 years ago. I haven't had to take a test in a really long time. Let alone write a paper – I don't even know the last time I used APA or MLA. College looks a lot different than when I was there, plus I'm getting my master's degree online so it's going to be completely different. I'm a little overwhelmed by the idea of doing this all again. Will my academic advisor help me navigate and answer all of my questions?"*

### George Steele:

Good question, Ethan. I can understand your apprehension – your life looks a lot different now than it did 20 years ago! You might have kids, you've probably got a job, maybe a partner and who knows what else! The good news is that you can recalibrate your previous academic skills into the world of online education. You'll modify some of your old skills while developing new ones too. Your faculty advisor can help you. I would encourage you to tell your advisor if you are experiencing challenges. He or she can make referrals to services at your institution – and there are **a lot** of services available for you. From academic services like the writing center, which can help with paper writing or the tutoring center to help you prepare for tests. There are personal and social services too, which can assist with things like anxiety, stress management or other personal concerns. Your faculty advisor is a good place to start with finding out how the institution can help.

**Amanda Gnad:**

Thanks George! The next question today is from Amber at The University of Nebraska. Amber emailed to ask about scholarships and financial aid. Amber said,

*“It seems like scholarships for graduate students are hard to come by and funding my education is one of my top concerns. I can use all of the help I can get. Will my academic advisor be able to help me find scholarships? What about financial aid? Will my academic advisor be able to help me with the FAFSA and other financial questions I have?”*

**George Steele:**

Thanks Amber, we know that money is a top concern for many students. While your academic advisor is not a financial aid expert, they can connect you to the appropriate people. Your university has an office dedicated to helping students with funding their education. The financial assistance office at your institution likely has financial aid advisors who can help answer questions about financial aid, loans, grants and scholarships. Your advisor might have a FAQ document with common student questions, check that document for resources related to financial aid and scholarships!

**Amanda Gnad:**

Thanks, George – see ye 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 communication between a faculty advisor and student.

First we talked to Marcella, a faculty advisor from Texas Tech University. Marcella, who do you think is responsible for initiating communication in the advisor/advisee relationship?

**Marcella from TTU:**

I reach out to students when there is something I need them to do, but for the most part I assume they will come to me when they need my assistance.

**Amanda Burris:**

Thanks, Marcella. Next, we talked to Darcy, a student from Kansas State University. Darcy, who do you think is responsible for initiating communication in the advisor/advisee relationship?

**Darcy from KSU:**

My advisor is the one who knows what I am supposed to do, so I figure they will reach out to me to tell me if there is something I should be doing.

**Amanda Burris:**

It definitely seems like we have two differing thoughts on who should initiate contact. The faculty advisor is leaving it up to the student to initiate communication, and yet the student assumes the faculty advisor will let them know when things need to be happening. So who's right? Well, that's the thing -- nobody is right and nobody is wrong. One suggestion for meeting in the middle is for the faculty advisor to provide a list of deadlines at the start of each semester. That could even be a webpage the university already creates that lists deadlines. Then it's the student's job to stay on top of those deadlines throughout the semester and contact their advisor as needed.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Next up on the podcast we'll be talking with Jamie Heck. Jamie is the Director of Academic Affairs for the College of Nursing at the University of Cincinnati. In addition, Jamie serves as the Chair of NACADA's Advising Community called Advising Graduate and Professional Students.

Welcome, Jamie!

**Jamie Heck:**

Hello. Happy to be here.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Thanks for joining me to talk about how academic advisors can create a sense of community for online graduate students. But before we jump into today's topic, let's talk about you for a minute. How did you get **into** academic advising? What about this field or this topic hooked you?

**Jamie Heck:**

I have worked in the college of nursing at the University of Cincinnati for about 10 and a half years. During this time my primary responsibility was to support our graduate students from the time of application through graduation. With the majority of our student population enrolled in an online program in August 2018, I transitioned to the role of Director of Academic Affairs and in this role, I partnered with faculty and staff members on areas such as course scheduling, faculty assignments, clinical and administrative reporting.

As for my personal areas of interest, that would include exploration of the needs and experiences of graduate and professional students to better assist their academic, professional, and personal success and creation of a sense of community for graduate and professional students. I absolutely love the topic of inclusivity. I want students to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness that will possibly impact their overall student experience.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Wow! That's exactly what we're talking about today, so that makes you the perfect guest to be on this episode talking about inclusivity. So when we talk about building communities in higher education there are so many stakeholders to consider and because of the work in the field of academic advising that you do, which you've just shared with us, you're able to see all of the players that influence that community. For the purpose of our conversation today, and knowing that the audience of our podcasts is mostly students and faculty, let's break out some of those key stakeholders and talk about their influence one at a time.

So let's start with the big picture, the university-wide initiatives that can create a sense of community, specifically for our online graduate students. Talk to us a little bit about what universities can be doing to create a sense of community.

**Jamie Heck:**

Well, it is imperative that graduate online students are embedded in university culture when we are implementing initiatives, programming, and policies that support and directly impact the student experience. We have to ensure that all students are considered including our graduate online learners, they should be included in the conversation related to efforts that impact the student experience such as retention initiatives, academic support programming, and mental and financial health, and

wellness resources. We should strive to impact the overall student experience for all students including our online graduate students, admittedly their needs might vary from other student populations so we have to meet them where they are, providing purposeful, relevant, and timely resources. Creating avenues and opportunities for online graduate students to access these resources is an important part of planning, depending on the current university culture, this can be a considerable shift in philosophy.

With that said, academic endeavors of graduate students and online learners shouldn't be the focus of just one person or one department, it really should be a university-wide initiative. It is required that involvement of campus partners effectively plan and implement efforts that will support the overall student experience, including our graduate online learners. There should be a different representation from the varying departments and stakeholders including faculty administration advisors and they need to be a part of this conversation so that efforts are created in a cohesive and unified voice from a variety of perspectives.

**Kathryn Harth:**

So let's talk a little bit about- you mentioned advisors, so let's talk about advisors in their seat at the table, but before we do I want to be sure our listeners understand that when we say faculty advisors and academic advisors we are using these terms synonymously. In our first episode our guest expert Holli Fergus explained that there are actual people who have the title academic advisors and who only advise as their full-time role but that is not the case at all universities and sometimes the title academic advisor is also known as the major professor or the faculty advisor, so I just want to be sure our listeners know that when you hear one of us say academic advisor we could just as easily substitute the words faculty advisor.

Okay, so back to our stakeholders, as we talk about building this culture of inclusiveness and belonging let's bring it to the context of the department, and specifically, the faculty advisor. What is the role of the faculty advisor in all of this talk about connectedness?

**Jamie Heck:**

Yeah, there is definitely an expectation that students are accountable, responsible, and engaged learners. During their academic journey students need to take an active role in building this sense of connectedness with the institution and with their colleagues. They need to explore avenues to develop connections with their peers and support each other whether, it is through student organizations, online activities, or social media platforms. Faculty and administrators also need to provide a voice for their students, they have to be aware of how that impacts the overall graduate student experience. If you are trying to provide a voice for students you have to be a part of that conversation, if you are not currently involved in these conversations, whether it be within your own

department, your college, or the university level, then you need to identify how you can be. I always abide by the perspective that if you don't have a seat at the table then you need to bring your own chair. We need to serve as a voice and advocate for the students who we serve.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That is awesome. I feel like "if you don't have a seat at the table they need to bring their own chair," mic drop. Not a lot more needs to be said, advocating for yourself, that's critical.

So in higher education we sometimes talk about silos, I'm over here doing my thing, you're over there doing your thing and while our work may be related, or even have the same end goal, we may not realize it because we are in our silos. So relating that to faculty and advisors, faculty advisors, and students, it's very likely that as the semester goes along the faculty advisor is operating in their silo of teaching and researching and other duties as assigned while this student is operating in their silo of learning completing assignments and probably also balancing family and work.

So, Jamie, what role does communication play in creating connections and preventing silos? How can we be sure that we don't get stuck in our silos?

**Jamie Heck:**

Communication is vital and having a consistent and thorough communication plan will definitely help advisors think about how they can continue to build that sense of connectedness, and this goes back to understanding the needs of the students. What do they find valuable that can connect them to the university? This is essential to creating a long-standing relationship, even beyond graduation.

As advisors, we have to look at building that communication plan and we have to set an expectation of how we can obtain the information from them and how they as students can obtain the information from us. So one thing that my team did within our own college is work together with our stakeholders and we identified our stakeholders as our faculty members, our staff members, and our marketing team as well as having student representation. On a task force, we developed a communication plan that was thorough from the time of admission through graduation so that it was a consistent message throughout but we had that student voice as part of this task force because we did not want to assume what students needed to know. There is a need to gather the perspective of the student in developing that communication plan. As a result of that task force we develop the centralized web page that really serves as a portal for our communication and what that has allowed us to do is set an expectation with students of where to obtain information, but it also allows us a centralized location to update

information so that we're not consistently having to go to various platforms to update information when things change.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Sounds like a time saver as well as a great resource, putting everything in one general place where everybody knows where to go and to find it. So that makes a lot of sense, that's really smart.

So we've talked about the importance of building a connection from the student to the university and then building a connection from a student to their faculty advisor, what about the other students in the program? You referred to them earlier as their peers, how can the advisor help students build relationships with their peers or their fellow students?

**Jamie Heck:**

Well, we have to provide an opportunity for the students to engage with one another and this could be as easy as holding monthly zoom sessions that will allow them to network with one another. I would have a guideline or parameter around that zoom session and what I mean by that is so that the students understand why they're connecting with each other and how it's guided. So that would be helpful in the beginning, as soon as the students feel a sense of community with one another, it might not be required that you put any type of caveat or parameters around that zoom session.

Faculty can also create activities, especially in the first semester when students are trying to get acclimated, not only to potentially a new university but to their program, and these activities can help to build that sense of community early on in their program more than just an introduction, though it has to be an activity or a situation where students are actually building relationships with their online peers, and behind the scenes students need to have an understanding of what the advisors are doing and what type of support they can provide. So advisors need to make sure that they are always taking into consideration graduate online learners in their initiatives and that students are aware of what type of support they can obtain from their advisors.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Yeah, when things or people are out of sight we know that sometimes means, whether we mean to or not, they're out of mind. So always it's a good reminder of keeping them in the forefront so well. We have arrived at my last question and I probably should have asked it first because it very well might be the most critical question of all.

So we've talked about stakeholders and what they can do to help create this sense of community, we've covered the how and the who and the what, but we haven't really

talked about the why. Why is it important for online graduate students to feel a sense of community?

**Jamie Heck:**

Yes, absolutely, we want them to have a sense of community and this idea of belongingness and inclusion throughout their entire journey and beyond, it could directly impact their success both inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom, and that would be advantageous from a retention perspective.

But, more than that, we want to create that human connection, that does and that will fulfill that desire for their belonging. It will also increase their overall success and that will be beneficial to the faculty who lead those programs as well. In the end, the idea is that if a student has a positive experience during their academic journey at your institution they will be happy alumni and they'll promote your institution or your program to other persons who they might interact with and that will be beneficial for your institution or program in the long run as well. So it goes well beyond graduation.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Yes, I love that, it's the student journey, that full circle. A student well-advised is a more successful student, is happier in their personal life, becomes a happy graduate, and then they refer people back, and then you have more students. So it makes total sense. So that's perfect, and that's a great note to end on. Thank you so much for helping us understand how important a sense of community is for online graduate students.

**Jamie heck:**

Absolutely, it's been my pleasure.

**Kathryn Harth:**

That was Jamie Heck from the University of Cincinnati talking with us about building community and a sense of belonging among online students. If you'd like to learn more about the centralized webpage that Jamie and her team created to serve as a communication portal, visit our website to find the link.

While this episode of Get Online is all about academic advising, we know that there are other types of advising in the world. One of those that often goes hand-in-hand with academic advising is career advising. To hear more about this we talked to a graduate career advisor at Tulane University.

**Briana Mohen (check spelling):**

Hello, my name is Briana Mohen and I'm a career advisor in the office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. As a career advisor who works



with graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, I support people in the process of learning about what careers exist where they can apply their skills, interests, and values. I also help people with application materials and preparation for interviews and negotiations.

**Kathryn Harth:**

Thanks Briana. In our next episode we will look more closely at how academic advisors can help with career advising.

**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 that helps online faculty staff and students connect with one another.

We've designed a virtual business card template using canva, a free and easy-to-use graphic design software that allows you to customize our templates to fit your needs. We've provided two templates one for faculty and staff, and one for students. The front of both designs has a spot for basic contact information such as your job title or academic major as well as a space to include your own picture. The back of the card has a space for how university staff and faculty can assist students, while the student version lists research interests. We've filled ours out for you but the great thing about these templates is that you can craft them to suit your needs, even if that means changing what we have included on our example. You can exchange these cards electronically or you can even send them to one another by a postal mail, it's completely up to you.

You can find the virtual business card template links on our website [www.gpidea.org/podcasts](http://www.gpidea.org/podcasts) that's [www.gpidea.org/podcasts](http://www.gpidea.org/podcasts).

**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, Jamie Heck.

Also, creating this podcast is a team effort and I want to thank the gals at Great Plains IDEA – Chelsea Barbercheck, Amanda Burris, Amanda Gnad, Rachel Ohmes, and Stephanie Stewart.

I'd also like to thank Charlie Nutt, executive director at NACADA, that's the National Academic Advising Association, for his help with finding experts and narrowing down topics for this series. And a shout out to K-State's Pamela Erickson and Kelly Briggs.

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To learn more about Great Plains IDEA and to access the resources shared during this and other episodes, go to [gpidea.org/podcasts](http://gpidea.org/podcasts). That's [gpidea.org/podcasts](http://gpidea.org/podcasts).

In our next episode we'll talk about career advising with Kimberly Smith from Virginia Tech.

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