Meeting Students Where They Are: Implementing Canvas for Successful Student Outreach

Matthew S. Helmandollar
Southwest Virginia Community College, seth.helmandollar@sw.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

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MATTHEW SETH HELMANDOLLAR

ABSTRACT

As a success coach, it can be challenging in identifying and referring students to the resources that can aid, and that can assist with each student's success during their first year. It is vital to use modern technological resources that are available at no additional cost to institutions, and which students are currently using, to aid in consistency within the field of academic advising and coaching as it pertains to a student's first year. It engages students to reach out to faculty mentors to provide a "holistic" approach to the student's success on the campus and meets students where they are via their learning management system. Included is information and feedback obtained through the National Academic Advising Association's summer institute faculty regarding the usage of technological resources to provide a successful student experience. An overview of the creation and implementation of Canvas to perform the institutions' advising objectives to create consistency in advising and coaching across campuses, especially in a time in which technology is a requirement as a result of the 2020 SARS-CoV-19 viral pandemic that ceased main campus and offsite campus operations for the remainder of the academic year with potential impacts to the proceeding academic year going forward.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Students in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) require equitable and equal treatment among their peers regardless of their past higher education experience, lack thereof, and their demographics. While I work with all populations of students regardless of these factors, my specialization is in coaching non-traditional students. The common narratives among students in this population are, "I am too old to return to school" or "It is too late for me to consider going back to school because I have other responsibilities." I became a non-traditional success coach in October 2018 after prior experience in areas of recruitment, retention, and student activities on Southwest Virginia Community College's campus. This was a classification of students whom I identified and empathized with through my own experiences as a coach and non-traditional student. The term "non-traditional" was also a term I detested as it began to serve as a potentially negative label in discussions. A dictionary will describe the prefix "non" as an English formative word meaning "not" as well as negating and acknowledging the opposite or lack of its root word. Tradition can be defined as something customary over a period of time. To help me further define and understand the challenges of non-traditional students, I began to view the proposed challenges of service provision through the viewpoint of Dr. William Glasser.

Glasser was a psychiatrist who broke from the traditions of psychotherapy with the often perceived abrupt and confrontational "Reality Theory" or "Choice Theory." Within this extensive theory, Glasser refers to "paralysis of analysis," which simply stated, means that if one does nothing to change a circumstance, the circumstance itself will not change as a result (Sala, 2009, p. 23). I acknowledged that a focus needed to shift in the status quo of success coaching provision to a modern and adaptive form of success coach service provision. The introduction of

the learning management system, Canvas in 2019, brought with it an introduction to the possibility of the provision of such success coaching services for me to provide to students.

Although I was moving forward with updating my coaching practices, unfortunately, with the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, the state community colleges were required to transition to online service provision. Fortunately, this did not affect the success coaching service provision to students as there was already an online presence on each students' Canvas dashboard by each student services coach at Southwest Virginia Community College to pilot with their group of students. This includes students otherwise labeled as "traditional." In this paper, I will discuss the effectiveness of Canvas as a primary tool for student outreach and EAB Navigate as a supplemental tool.

A Non-Traditional Approach to Reach Non-Traditional Students

I began to notice discrepancies in the ability to provide equitable and equal success coaching to a student sitting directly across from me in an office, and to a student who needed assistance strictly through alternative, formats such as phone calls, emails, and video conferencing. Simple tasks such as obtaining a signature required much more effort on behalf of the virtual student, and the student's willingness or ability to communicate challenges did so as well.

One of the primary challenges for students is transportation. Though it is a wonderful scenic tour in the seasons of transition such as spring and fall, Southwest Virginia's rugged terrain and mountainous roadways can easily make a simple twenty-five-mile drive to main campus an hour-long excursion depending on location and road conditions. These students may lack an ability to drive and public transportation to campus requires a student to be at a bus stop

in the early morning hours such as 5:00 am, and these students are not retrieved from campus until 4:30 pm that afternoon. Many of the students in this population work a job that falls within the daily operational schedule of the campus or they work nightshifts that inhibit their daytime activity; therefore, students see a virtual medium for higher education as an only option.

Throughout pursuit of my own higher education as a non-traditional student, I acknowledged the hardships that a student of this status can face. The term "non-traditional" refers to an individual who did not transition directly into higher education upon graduation from high school and/or an individual, by Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) standards, that is age twenty-one years or older. As I struggled to identify a pathway that met my needs as an individual, I found solace in an online learning environment. In the beginning, I was in a classroom full of students I did not know, and I found it very difficult to relate to the people sitting around me, despite only taking one year between high school and college. The hardships were met with additional struggles that accompanied a first-generation college student and the uncertainty of a program or career pathway.

Throughout my continued educational experience there has been one phrase that has been uttered in each course: "Meet your client where they are." My clients were students, and I noted that there was a need to meet them where they were. Unfortunately, our campus lacks specified success coaching for students who are solely virtual in their learning, and these students are introduced as part of a mixed cohort of students who are on the main campus, students who are learning in a hybrid manner of seated and online courses, and students who are exclusively online. I noted that unconventional means of service provision called for unconventional means of success coaching provision.

CREATING A SUCCESS COACHING CANVAS EXPERIENCE

After attending the summer advising summit in 2019 in Lexington, Kentucky, of the National Academic Advising Association, I gained further insight into the importance of determining the effectiveness of services through assessment and ensuring each student was being served. After discovering the beneficial features of the learning management system, Canvas, I have viewed the system as a means of achieving both an equitable and equal method of achieving the intrusive advising aspect by being where their courses were and providing an ongoing presence in the first year of all students in the cohort regardless of their learning format. It also provided an easier methodology to meeting the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) grant's guidelines of providing a semester-long, orientation-like experience, providing partnership and collaboration with other campus services such as peer tutoring and career services, as well as career assessments to aid students in program selection. The mobile-friendly application provided students with smartphone devices access regardless of their location depending upon cellular connectivity and carrier plans.

I began by creating a student survey to determine student interest and student needs. Within this student needs survey, I asked questions pertaining to the students' preferred contact methods, the schedule of courses that fits the students' schedule, the desire to transfer, and so on. It contained approximately twenty questions that were subjective to student opinion. I created the survey with the idea that minimalism is key. I noted students were more likely to answer survey questions if those surveys were less than ten minutes. Additionally, Canvas contains quick access links for individuals in the creator's view giving me the opportunity to gain a broader insight into the lives of the individuals in the cohort.

I included RVHI grant obligations such as career assessments in an online friendly format and included the opportunity to discuss the results upon submission. The Canvas Pages feature was utilized to incorporate important documents and information, the Discussions feature was utilized to encourage peer-to-peer interactions as well as to provide a thread for general questions and concerns, the Announcements feature was utilized to inform students of important information and important campus events, the Modules feature was used to compile all the tasks together in an easy-to-read and organized format.

A soft launch of the Canvas shell titled "Your Personal Success Coach" was piloted in the late 2018-2019 academic year with low participation rates. Hypotheses surrounding the reasoning for this was the late implementation, as the RVHI initiative was not staffed until October 2018, as well as a lack of incentive for completion of the items listed within the shell. The 2019-2020 Canvas shell was made active in August of 2019 and will remain active until May 2020. Included in this re-launch is a token economy system within the Canvas shell. Thus, the most popular feature has been the inclusion of the third-part application "Badgr" to award badges for completion of each task included in the modules with over 160 badges awarded to students for completion of various tasks after the Fall 2019 semester, thus indicating an increase in participation rates in terms of awarded badges and Canvas analytics for the academic year provided by the Canvas learning management system.

Pages

Canvas contains a "Pages" feature that is available for the import of important documents such as the health care program of study requirements, links to the programs' applications, information on local county free tuition scholarship options, information on graduation such as

how and where to complete the application, and transfer and career services information such as articulation agreements with the Virginia Community College system and other four-year institutions in and out-of-state. Students cited the most beneficial feature of the Pages link on the Canvas application was the inclusion of a sample essay in both MLA and APA formatting, links to offsite resources to aid in formatting such essays with in-text citations, and other relevant information. The "Home" page was an overview of the description of the presence of the Canvas shell on the students' dashboard, as well as contact information for the student to be able to reach my office regarding needs, questions, or concerns.

Other features within the "Pages" link include a map of campus and the services that reside in each building. This was designed and put into place to aid students that were in hybrid courses to navigate campus, as well as online students who needed to navigate the physical campus to complete an assignment on the main campus such as an exam or a face-to-face meeting with a faculty or staff advisor. Forms were created via Google Forms to include questions such as what was the student's biggest achievement for the month? What obstacles did the student face in that month? What obstacles did the student overcome in the previous month? It also included feedback questions in which the student could provide feedback on how their personal success coach could aid them in overcoming these obstacles and moving forward in the next month. This allowed me to take an individualized approach to each student's needs as they were brought to my attention throughout the academic year.

Discussions

Canvas contains a "Discussions" feature. Initially, discussions began with one forum in which students could post any general questions or concerns they may have with the disclaimer

against releasing personal information in the process of doing so. However, concerns arose about possible FERPA violations. Discussion forums are set up to send notifications to the Canvas course administrator so that if an instance would occur, it could immediately be removed. Fortunately, this has not had to occur. I was personally taken by surprise at the initiative that the other students were taking within the Canvas shell. Other students who posted general questions received answers from their peers in the discussion forum, thus promoting peer-to-peer interaction. While unforeseen, it has proven effective in promoting communication skills and allowing students who know the answer to another student's question to provide feedback to that student in a response to the thread.

Announcements

The "Announcements" feature of the Canvas learning management system provided effective outreach to the students enrolled in it. I was able to communicate important information to students such as deadlines regarding registration, withdrawal dates, as well as other important information such as the availability of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This information appeared in the students' Canvas Inbox feature as well as their student email address to ensure the students were contacted. These messages remain visible to the students throughout the academic year until the course is concluded at the end of the students' first years. It allowed for notification of campus events to increase student engagement on the main campus and allowed for a medium of contact about such events and other important information after the unfortunate SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, which moved all students to an online format for the remainder of the semester.

After the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, there was little required to transition such services online. As a matter of fact, it gave the Canvas course more solidarity to the acknowledgment for the need for such services in that there was little effort to make the transition with students as the coaches' presences were already online on Canvas alongside the other courses. It also brought attention to the course on Canvas to students who were strictly face-to-face originally but had to make the transition to online upon closure of the main campus and its offsite locations.

Canvas Inbox

Students were able to communicate directly with their coaches through the Canvas "Inbox" feature located universally across all courses. Students utilized this feature to request appointments for upcoming registration, inquire about general information such as deadlines and other important dates to remember or to convey any concerns they may have regarding their courses. Coaches utilized this platform to send out encouraging messages to students to remind them of the ongoing presence of the students' Canvas application of their MySouthwest portal. These messages were sent through the "Inbox" feature to the inbox of the other student or coach; however, the messages also went to the student or coach via the student email for the students and the college-assigned email for the success coach. This served to ensure an additional level in the modality of outreach to students.

Badgr: Badge Awarding System

"Badgr" is a third-party application that can be integrated directly into the Canvas shell. Within it, students can receive badges created by the success coach for each assignment and/or module therein. This token economy provided students with an incentive to complete career assessments, participate in intrusive advising services, and provide self-encouragement. Badgr also allows the student to partake in their own educational experience to perhaps learn more about themselves as a result of such assessments and activities.

"Badgr" includes with it a leaderboard option for institutions wishing to award a student with the most badges without giving insight as to the leading student. The application assigns an alias to each student on the leaderboard. Students are not aware of who has completed each task to earn the reward. Tasks include but are not limited to completing the FAFSA for the upcoming academic year, completing career assessments and reflecting on the results, community engagement and community service, as well as connection with faculty mentors for their programs of study to ease transition after the students' first years of school. This not only made the experience enjoyable for students, but it also provided analytics for use in quarterly and annual RVHI reports.

Incorporation of EAB Navigate

EAB Navigate was implemented at Southwest Virginia Community College in the latest wave of release. This served as an extra connection to the students as it allowed for pulling of reports that coaches would otherwise be unable to access through the Canvas application (i.e., reports pertaining to students enrolled for the fall term but not the spring term). It allowed the

coach to place a personal tag on the student's Navigate profile and compile them into a list for reporting purposes and additional outreach through the text messaging feature, thus increasing the number of methods that students could be reached. It provided a medium for the coach to reach out in times of indicated cases with students that were tagged as part of the cohort of the coach, as each coach was notified of when a student was flagged by a faculty member for various reasons such as low participation, excessive absences, and if the student was in danger of failing the course.

REPORTING AND ANALYTICS

Per the requirements of the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative (RVHI) grant, coaches are required to complete quarterly reporting on students served by their program. Canvas provided these statistics with ease as it provided reporting on completion rates of each task placed into the Canvas shell such as completion rates for the career assessment, student engagement and participation, and overall effectiveness of student outreach garnered from reports on student usage and presence within the Canvas shell itself with one click of a button.

In the shell, there is a button that says "Review Course Analytics" in which coaches receive a breakdown of activity rates throughout the semester or academic year. Activity is arranged every week based on the course's set start date. As identified in figure one below, overall page views for the academic year reached over 5,600 at its initial pilot once the cohort was established in September 2019, and continues to garner an average of 806 page views per week as of May 2020 marking the ending of the spring 2020 term and the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. The Canvas course will not be concluded until mid-May 2020 to provide assistance as needed to students during the final exam period of the semester. The coach can

review the number of page views each student has made throughout the semester or academic year.
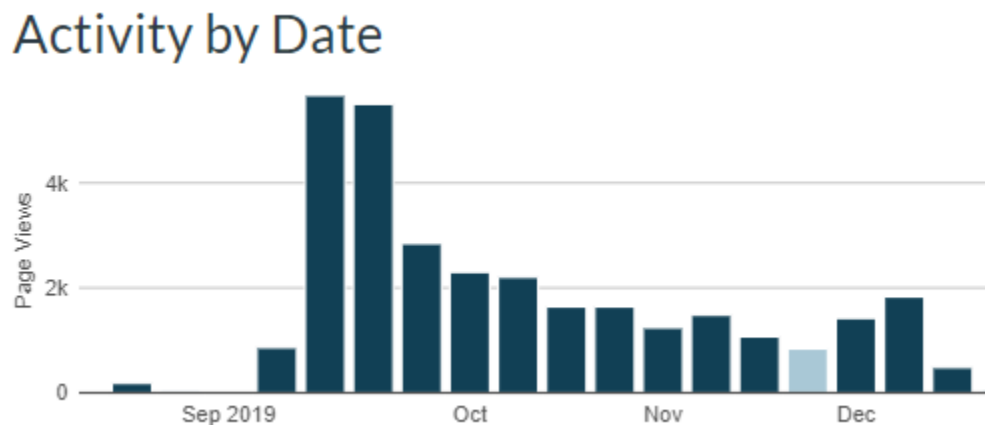

Figure 1: Fall 2019 analytics shared at 2019 Student Services Peer Group conference in Richmond, Virginia.

INITIAL PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS FROM FALL 2019

Overall, 25% of the individuals in the cohort responded, and over 80% of those respondents in the 2019-2020 cohort had parents that completed high school, with less than 20% coming from homes where one or both parents did not graduate. Of these, less than 40% reported higher education upon completion. Over half the students wished to enter the workforce directly after graduation with an equal number of respondents reporting employment currently. Students indicated the preferred contact method was to be emailed at 75% and receive text messages at 57%. There was consistency in reports of student email inbox reviews ranging from one to three times per week through one to two times per day. Many students had never utilized student services such as Workforce Development Services, Career Services, and peer tutoring.

Usage of these analytics includes determining overall completion rates of one-year programs of study, graduation rates for the conclusion of the fall term for students who are in one-year programs which began in Summer 2019, as well as for future data analysis when the course is concluded with this cohort in mid-May 2020. This will allow for outreach efforts to continue to students in two-year programs of study who have not enrolled for the following semester and to determine the completion rate of one-year programs of students that began in Fall 2019. Congratulatory letters are sent to each student listed on the graduation applicant list upon receipt after each semester.

OVERALL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted using Canvas as the primary medium and later Navigate as a secondary medium for outreach and success coaching, I was able to coach students in all methods of learning including seated instruction, hybrid instruction, and online instruction. This provides an effective means of outreach to students who otherwise would fail to reach out. Canvas creates an ease of reporting strategies for quarterly or annual reports depending on division and/or grant requirements. It is unaffected by the transition in course instruction, as it is already in an online learning management system alongside the students' other courses. It provides the student with an ability to interact with their coach by other means than through phone conversations or emails.

With effective collaborative usage between Canvas and EAB Navigate by the success coach, the use of the learning management system as a means of success coach service provision could be of benefit to all community colleges or universities regardless of location. Students with lack of transportation and students with lack of at-home internet services can use the

mobile-friendly application on their smartphones, tablets, and other devices capable of connecting to a cellular network as well as carrier plans which would allow for the student to download the application onto their phones and remain connected with their success coach at all times.

Further study is needed to determine the effectiveness of the provision of success coaching services through this medium. Once a 2020-2021 cohort can be established, an additional 200 students will be given the same opportunity to voice opinions and interact in the same ways as the cohorts in the past. Cross-comparison data will also be obtained over the next year among other coaching using the platform, as well as prior enrollment statistics to determine if there is a positive correlation between usage of this medium for success coaching and the past methods of providing such services before the learning management system, Canvas, was implemented.

Thus far, given the preferred method of contact for students and the collaborative efforts of using the Canvas and EAB Navigate applications appear to meet the needs of these individuals in that they provide all forms of contact: email, text message, and personal contact information for phone calls and postal mail. Both applications are also unaffected by obstacles such as the current SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19, as students were already aware of the presence of the Canvas system as well as making usage of it as evidenced by the chart of Fall 2019 participation rates. Additionally, the office of Institutional Research at Southwest Virginia Community College will also play a large role going forward in this project to review changes in student data and how current variables such as the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic has played a role in the trends seen throughout 2018 through 2021.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

      Seth Helmandollar, a Non-Traditional Success Coach with the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative at Southwest Virginia Community College, has prior experience in areas such as recruitment and retention. After completing an A.A.&S. in General Studies: Psychology at Southwest Virginia Community College, he went on to complete a B.A. in Human Services and Counseling from Lindsey Wilson College. Seth is currently in pursuit of an M.Ed. in Counseling and Human Development at Lindsey Wilson College. With a heightened empathetic understanding for non-traditional students as a result of being one himself, he was also a first-generation college student. This provides for a heightened empathetic understanding for the students served.