# A SMART Approach to Student Success: Feedback & Evaluation

Evaluating the efficacy of an online course to disseminate effective practices in integrating advising and student support services to executive and project level leadership across the postsecondary sector

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**Introduction:**

In April 2017, the Personalized Learning Consortium (PLC) at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities launched a self-paced, online course, A SMART Approach to Student Success, to provide guidance to executive and project-level leadership on redesigning and improving the delivery of advising and student support services and incorporating the use of technology. The course was designed to facilitate access to and sharing of effective practices across institutions through in-depth video interviews with presidents, provosts, leaders in academic and student affairs, deans, advising managers, faculty and students from five exemplar institutions. To date, 77 institutions have enrolled in the course both as teams and individual learners. To evaluate the efficacy of the course, APLU recently conducted phone interviews with leadership from participating institutions and disseminated a quantitative survey to a sample of course participants.

**Course Goals: Dissemination of Effective Practices**

The objective of creating a course was to both expand understanding across the postsecondary sector of the potential impact of integrating advising and student support services as part of a campus-wide student success strategy and to increase the number of public colleges and universities implementing this model on their campuses. The course was designed to facilitate and increase the accessibility of peer to peer learning on this topic by capturing effective practices employed by colleges and universities and by delivering guidance on implementing these practices using an online platform.

The intended audience for the course included executive leadership and project level managers as well as others who are responsible for assessing systems and implementing campus-wide structural and process level changes. By anchoring the majority of the content in curated video interviews with five leading institutions, the PLC sought to provide course participants with the experience of a site visit to a successful institution.

**Development Process and Completed Course:**

To develop the course, the PLC worked with a community of 36 institutions that had received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to redesign the delivery of advising and student support services and incorporate the use of technology tools to increase student persistence and degree completion. These institutions were working together and with leading researchers and technical assistance providers in this field (Achieving the Dream, EDUCAUSE, rPk GROUP, Tyton Partners, NACADA) to identify and share effective practices. The PLC worked with these institutions and partner organizations to identify a framework of common strategies and tools that would be useful in guiding other institutions interested in implementing similar advising redesign models.

From the group of 36 institutions, the PLC identified five campuses to feature in-depth in our course. APLU visited Colorado State University, Georgia State University, Middle Tennessee State University, Austin Community College, and Whatcom Community College with a video crew and conducted over 100 hours of in-depth interviews with presidents, provosts, leadership in academic and student affairs, deans, advisor managers, advisors, faculty and students to obtain a holistic sense of the role each stakeholder played in redesigning and implementing new systems for delivering advising and student support services. The videos interviews were also captured with experts and researchers in the field including technology vendors.

These video interviews provided the anchor content for the final course which includes six lessons designed to provide guidance in the following areas: assessing gaps in current advising and student support systems, planning for structural and process change and setting goals, measuring progress through the use of qualitative and quantitative measures, implementation strategies and training, communication strategies, and projecting and quantifying return on investment in student success.

The course includes 180 minutes of curated instructional video, resources developed by experts in the field that highlight the current landscape of research on implementation strategies, and activities in the form of worksheets and excel spreadsheets to guide planning, implementation, evaluation and communication. "Anchor Videos" appear on the first page of each lesson and introduce the lesson topic through interviews with executive and project level leadership from multiple institutions. "Campus Experience" videos highlight the experience of a single profiled institution as it relates to the topic of the lesson and "Campus Voices" videos provide brief clips taken from a single stakeholder interview that address the topic area for the lesson from their perspective. The videos frame the subject matter, the resources provide a deeper dive into the subject, and the activities are designed to allow participants to assess and make plans specific to their campus context.

We are aware that colleges and universities are in various stages of reforming the delivery of advising and student support services among other initiatives to support student success. The self-paced, asynchronous, and video based format was designed to meet this need by providing learners with flexibility in choosing the content most relevant to the challenges and goals of their institution. The content can be accessed by an individual or team, over time, to support and guide assessment, implementation and planning activities and to provide examples from peer institutions addressing similar change initiatives.

**Engagement:**

The course was launched in April, 2017. The PLC worked with our internal communications team, the five institutions profiled in the course, and our course development partners to communicate to the postsecondary field about the launch of the course. To expand awareness about the availability of the course throughout the year, the PLC worked with partner organizations in the postsecondary student success field to identify opportunities for collaboration, hosted webinars, facilitated conference presentations at the NACUBO annual conference, the HBCU Summit, and NACADA's Administrator's Institute, and held a pre-conference workshop at APLU's Annual Convening.

**Learner Feedback and Results**

Seventy-seven institutions have participated in the course at this time. Campus participants have enrolled in the course as teams and as individual learners. To evaluate the efficacy of the course as a tool for scaling effective practices and to learn more about how institutions have been deploying the course content on their campuses, the PLC conducted phone interviews with five leaders from participating institutions and disseminated a quantitative survey to 154 course participants.

*Leadership Interviews: Course Value and Deployment*

*"The content from the course has influenced many of the meetings and discussions I have had on our campus – it was presented in a compelling way that I continue to refer back to."*

Interviews with leadership indicate that the course was most useful as a tool for increasing engagement and awareness and driving discussion and planning among multiple stakeholder groups about the advising redesign process. Interviewees reported that the examples provided by other institutions through the video content provided great value and were particularly useful for stoking discussion and ideation around changing structures, policies and practices.

Interviews with campus leadership indicate that the content on institutional change, as depicted through video interviews, was particularly useful as a tool for engaging in dialogue about what a systemic approach to advising looks like and how to create similar systems. The course content that addressed the use of early alert systems was also mentioned frequently in our interviews as particularly valuable, specifically the content related to engaging faculty and advisors in the use of early alerts to improve communication about student performance.   Several participants said they developed concrete next steps and strategic plans as a result of participating in the course and indicated that they continue to use the video gallery component of the course to return to specific interviews.

One interviewee, an Assistant Vice President for Student Success and Director of Academic Advisement, assigned the course to 106 campus representatives including advisors, advisor managers, and career advisors.  She instructed each college associate dean to disseminate the course to their advising team. Advising staff then took the course and participated in discussions about how the strategies depicted related to efforts on their campus. This institution conducted an internal survey of course participants about their experience in the course and received very positive feedback indicating that the greatest value of the course was that it facilitated engagement on the topics of advising redesign, maintained a dialogue, and stoked ideation about next steps for their institution.

One institution used the course with faculty and other student success staff to create a list of topics they wanted to address. This institution found the organizational change components to be particularly useful specifically for understanding that "organizational change and technology change are married". The interviewee indicated that the course sharpened their institution's understanding of the impact that

putting data in the hands of advisors can have on student outcomes and sparked new strategies for using resources more effectively.

At another institution, the Director of the Advising Resource Center enrolled 20 participants including college advising directors, front line advisors and student affairs representatives. Course participants reviewed the material on their own and then met as a group to review the material together. At this campus, the course has prompted the formation of new groups, informed strategic planning and a re-launch of early alerts.

At several institutions, the course was suggested to student success leadership by the provost. In each of these cases, student success leadership indicate that additional context about the course content, reasons for taking the course, and intended next steps would have allowed their institution to deploy the course more strategically. In these cases, it would have been beneficial for executive leadership to review the course content first, and then decide on a strategy for disseminating the course with stakeholders across their campus.

For example, one interviewed institution enrolled a 25 person team including, advising leaders, supervisors, advising coordinators, advisor managers, directors of advising, associate deans, vice provosts, and two representatives from the career center. Each participant reviewed the course content independently and the Vice Provost led a meeting to review the first three modules using the course as a catalyst for discussion. They used the course to put together ideas for change that they then presented to the provost. Leadership from this institution indicated that, had they reviewed the course content before deciding how to deploy the course and who to engage, they would have engaged institutional researchers and institutional technologist and would have provided clear objectives and framing around how they intended to use the course with each group.

Leadership from several campuses indicated that, if they were to use the course again, they would have engaged executive level leadership in the course first and then deployed the content with specific teams. Participants who did not share the course with senior leadership or faculty indicated that the content in the course would be useful in expanding understanding among senior leadership of their role in cross-institution student success efforts and for engaging faculty in understanding the importance of the roles of advisors and faculty and for developing strategies for these groups to work together to better support their students.

Interviewees also indicated that if they were to use the course again, they would set clear expectations among participants about why they were being asked to take the course, how to use the course, and what the objectives and next steps for the campus would be. They indicated that the course could have provided a greater benefit if participants had a better understanding of what they should take away from the content.

***Participant Survey:***

The PLC also gathered feedback through a 14 question survey that was sent to 154 course participants. The participants were chosen based on course records indicating that they had been active as course takers. There was a 20% response rate. The key findings from those that responded are as follows:

- Eight-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that the course provided comprehensive and applicable information.
- Seventy percent indicated that they would recommend this course to a peer institution interested in redesigning advising on their campus.
- Many participants indicated that senior leadership (provosts, deans) encouraged or required them to enroll in the course. Reasons for course participation included participation in a review of current campus advising practices, implementing or developing strategic plans around student success or incorporating new technology tools and practices to move to a proactive advising model. Participants noted that they were interested in learning what effective practices other institutions were using in these areas.
- Over seventy percent of participants were engaged in implementing early alert systems and pathways, math pathways or degree mapping initiatives and over 60% were also implementing predictive analytics systems and changing the structure of how and where they delivered advising on their campuses.
- Participants found the content in Lesson 2 on assessing advising gaps and planning for change and Lesson 4 on implementation to be the most useful.
- Participants found the video content to be the most useful course asset, however, 48% indicated that all content (videos, resources, activities) was equally useful.
- The majority (58%) participated in the course as a team and included academic affairs leadership, advisor managers and advisors.
- Eighty-three percent agree or strongly agree that the course was an effective tool to facilitate learning about advising reform.
- Ninety-six percent did not experience technical difficulties and found the course navigation to be clear or very clear.
- When asked what topic APLU should explore further if we were to develop another course, the answers centered around providing specific guidance on the use of technology tools and predictive analytics and on exploring other advising models, faculty roles in advising and proactive vs. reactive advising.

**Summary and Recommendations:**

Based on the feedback we have received, the Personalized Learning Consortium at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities could improve the course experience by creating updated course guidance which recommends that institutions use the course with a team and instructs campus leadership to either participate in the course or review the content first so they can guide and support appropriate and targeted dissemination on their campuses. Providing an abbreviated "review" curriculum for provost and executive leadership and suggested team building guidance would also assist institutions in deploying the course effectively on their campuses.

The course participants' experience could be improved by providing clear guidance up front on how to use the course content with a team including direction on using the activity and resource assets to complement the video content. Participant feedback indicates that activities were not used frequently and that specific guidance on how to use the course activities with a team could also improve the course user experience.

Overall, the feedback we have received indicates that the course has been a useful tool for many campus teams in guiding evaluation of their advising and student support systems, and furthering discussion and planning at their institutions for changing structures and processes in this area. We look forward to continuing to support institutions using this tool to engage their campuses in advising redesign efforts in the coming year.