

# Enhanced Academic Advisement with Online Learning Management Systems

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## Abstract

Many faculty strive to use academic advisement as more than simply scheduling classes for students. For example, proactive advisors use advisement opportunities to teach, mentor, encourage, and motivate students to apply classroom concepts to fieldwork opportunities; to master specific professional competencies; and to develop learning communities among their advisees. Online learning management systems (OLMS) (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle) can be used and adapted to enhance undergraduate academic advisement. To more fully construct and maintain a learning community, this article uses Shapiro and Levin's (1999) learning communities framework to better understand the benefits of using OLMS for academic advisement in combination with face-to-face interaction, fieldwork, courses, and professional student organizations. The use of OLMS to enhance academic advisement directly supports three of Shapiro and Levin's (1999) eight learning communities characteristics: 1) organizing students and faculty into smaller groups; 2) helping students establish academic and social support networks; and 3) providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of the profession. Thus, the purpose of this article is to convey the benefits of using OLMS as a tool to enhance academic advisement for the construction and maintenance of a learning community among faculty and students (Shapiro & Levin, 1999; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002) and provide an overview of content that one might consider when developing a similar site for their student advisement process.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic advisement, learning communities, online learning management systems

## Introduction

Often academic advisement is a central role and responsibility for faculty, particularly in programs that are housed in professional schools like recreation and leisure studies. In these cases, many faculty strive to use academic advisement as more than simply scheduling classes for students. For example, proactive advisors use advisement opportunities to teach, mentor, encourage, and motivate students to apply classroom concepts to fieldwork opportunities; and to master specific professional competencies. Moreover, recreation faculty attempt to develop learning communities among their advisees; socialize students into the profession; and ensure the successful transition from student to professional through course work, fieldwork experiences (Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002), professional student organizations/departmental clubs (Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2008), and academic advisement.

Technology has been a useful tool in the post-secondary setting to facilitate learning and to increase knowledge. However, technology in the university setting can be integrated more fully into the student educational experience in ways other than through course work. One commonly integrated technological advancement in the college classroom is online learning management systems (OLMS) (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle). OLMS can be used and adapted to enhance undergraduate academic advisement, but not replace face-to-face interaction.

When establishing and maintaining a learning community to facilitate students' application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of concepts and professional competencies in recreation and leisure studies, using OLMS to enhance academic advisement can serve as a link between course work, fieldwork, professional student organizations, and face-to-face academic advisement (Bloom, 1956; Shapiro & Levin, 1999; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to describe the benefits of using OLMS as a tool to enhance academic advisement for the construction and maintenance of a learning community among faculty and students (Shapiro & Levin, 1999; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002). An overview of content that one might consider when developing a similar site for their student advisement process, desired outcomes, and recommendations for its use by others will also be discussed.

## Conceptual Framework

Learning communities within recreation and leisure studies programs are important, because they stimulate intellectual interaction to promote higher levels of learning (Bloom, 1956; Cross, 1998; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Shapiro & Levin, 1999). Cross (1998) defined learning communities as groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning. Smith, O'Dell, and Schaumleffel (2002) provided an overview of learning communities in recreation curricula and used Shapiro & Levin's (1999) learning communities framework to highlight the importance of controlled fieldwork sites to promote professional competence in recreation management. This article uses the

same framework to better understand the benefits of using OLMS in combination with face-to-face advisement, fieldwork sites, course work, and professional student organizations to more fully construct and maintain a recreation and leisure studies learning community.

The learning communities framework (Shapiro & Levin, 1999) outlines eight basic characteristics for constructing and maintaining a learning community: 1) organizing students and faculty into smaller groups; 2) encouraging integration of the curriculum; 3) helping students establish academic and social support networks; 4) providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of the profession; 5) bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways; 6) focusing faculty and student on learning outcomes; 7) providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs; and 8) offering a critical lens for examining the fieldwork experience. Specifically, integrating OLMS into academic advisement processes supports three of Shapiro and Levin's (1999) eight characteristics: 1) organizing students and faculty into smaller groups; 2) helping students establish academic and social support networks; and 3) providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of the profession.

### **Description of Learning Activity**

To develop an OLMS web site for academic advisement, most faculty can simply contact their campus OLMS administrator to electronically establish a site and to enlist the faculty as the course builder/instructor. Typically, using OLMS course sites for purposes other than for use in conjunction with an established course requires a few campus phone calls and brief explanations. Once the course is established electronically, the academic advisees/students will have to be "enrolled" in the OLMS site by the faculty member administering the site. Ordinarily, instructional technology departments will not populate the students into your course site for academic advisement, nor will they maintain the list of students involved in your academic advisement website. Using OLMS for academic advisement requires some regular maintenance of student record to give access to the site.

The value of OLMS course web sites is found in the content. When developing an OLMS site for academic advisement, faculty should determine what information will be the most useful for their students and the best way to organize the information to enhance the effectiveness while maintaining the learning community. To effectively use an OLMS course web site for academic advisement, content can be shared and dispersed through several functions, such as sending e-mail to one or all of the academic advisees, posting announcements, providing resources for students in the "Course Documents" section, and using the grade book function to keep track of advisees' office visits. To maintain the effectiveness of a learning community by using an academic advisement web site, it is important to have tangible examples of web site content. The typical sections of an OLMS course web site as applied to a recreation learning community are illustrated in Figure 1.

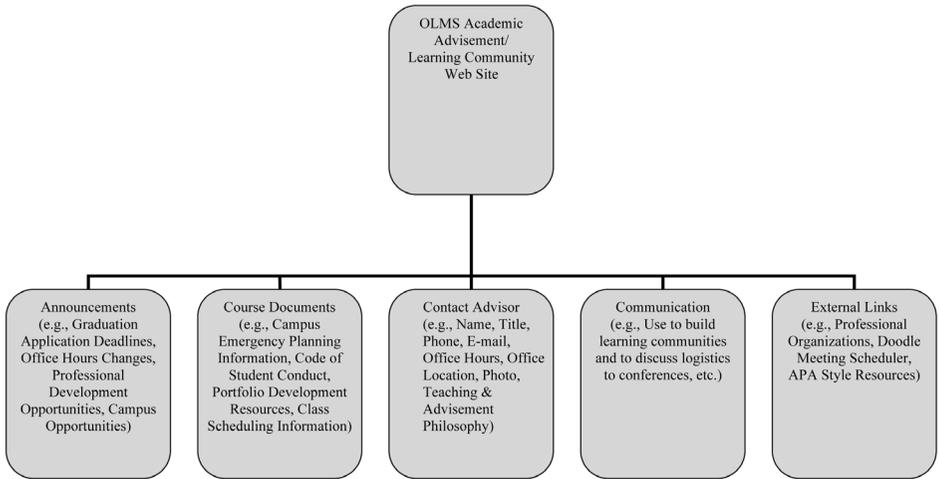


Figure 1: Sample Content Outline for OLMS Academic Advisement/Learning Community Web Site.

### Desired Outcomes

Learning communities as discussed by Shapiro and Levin (1999) provide justification that academic advisement is an important component of the college experience. As previously mentioned, using OLMS to enhance academic advisement, in combination with face-to-face interaction, professional student organizations, courses, and fieldwork, facilitates the establishment of three of Shapiro and Levin's (1999) eight learning communities characteristics:

*Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups:* Students are assigned to a faculty advisor from their concentration area (e.g., recreation, sport, or recreation therapy). Most faculty advise an average of 20-30 students, which provides opportunities for one-on-one interaction and small group activities outside of the classroom and online via OLMS discussion boards. Also, the faculty advisor creates and incorporates an Academic Advisement OLMS site, as discussed in this article, into the advisement process. The online learning community is the same small group of students and faculty in the campus-based learning community.

*Helping students establish academic and social support networks:* Students develop cohort relationships as they progress through the curriculum and regularly use the communication technology on the OLMS to lead and participate in professional development opportunities that are announced through the web site.

*Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of the profession:* From the time students declare a major in recreation management and youth leadership they are oriented to the department, have high expectations set, and are inundated with opportunities to build their experience level and credentials through participating in professional student organizations, conferences, certifica-

tion courses, and training seminars. Actively participating in person and online in academic advisement is critical to socializing students into the recreation profession.

This paper offers a new concept to the discipline of using OLMS to enhance academic advisement and to facilitate the establishment and/or maintenance of learning communities. However, it is not suggested that the advisement web site replace face-to-face interaction. The academic advisement OLMS web site should supplement the advisement experience in between face-to-face meetings. The use of OLMS in academic advisement and learning communities might also provide the following desired benefits:

- Enhance the face-to-face advisement experience by providing a visual reminder on the OLMS of the importance of advisement.
- Improve long-term course planning, so that students are more likely to enroll in the appropriate courses, met the prerequisites for each course, and graduate in the students' expected time frames.
- Improve student's knowledge of university and departmental policies, procedures, deadlines, and resources (e.g., Student Counseling Center).
- More effectively socialize students into the profession of recreation and leisure studies and build a sense of belonging and identification by providing access to professional ethics, traditions, and history.
- Develop long-lasting collegial relationships among students and faculty by increasing the amount of interaction between student and advisor.
- Increase self-directed professional development activities.

Moreover, the academic advisement OLMS web site might serve as a visual reminder to students every time they login to OLMS for other classes that academic advisement is an active process that should be continually sought out and participated in and that advisement is more than scheduling classes.

### **Recommendations for Its Use by Others**

Due to the accessibility of OLMS, most faculty who have advisement responsibilities can implement a similar academic advisement web site for advising students in recreation and leisure studies majors, minors, and professional certificate programs (e.g., American Humanics). Furthermore, using OLMS as a tool for advisement can also be adapted to advising professional student organizations/department clubs by developing a separate OLMS site for each student club. Using OLMS to enhance academic advisement is useful when combined with other learning community building methods, such as controlled practicum sites (Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002), and professional student organizations (Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

This article described the potential benefits of using OLMS as a tool to enhance academic advisement for the construction and maintenance of a learning

community among faculty and students (Shapiro & Levin, 1999; Smith, O'Dell, & Schaumleffel, 2002). This article describes the experience of one recreation and leisure studies faculty member that utilizes a learning community model to structure academic advisement as an integrated part of a recreation management and youth leadership curriculum. Based on the author's experience, using OLMS for academic advisement sparked more student-directed and led portfolio building/professional development opportunities through projects and certification training courses at the university outdoor education center (e.g., Project WILD and Wilderness First Responder certification courses). Using OLMS has been a useful tool to enhance academic advisement and to build a more professional culture of emerging recreation professionals. Through the establishment of a learning community and the use of OLMS to enhance academic advisement and learning community maintenance, students can be more connected to their advisor and each other and have the necessary resources readily at their disposal for more informed academic and professional career decision-making.

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