Using Technology to Reform Advising: Questions to Ask Before Getting Started

As part of the completion agenda, colleges are rethinking student support services within the context of constrained budgets and staff. Many colleges turn to technology to help their efforts. Integrated Planning and Advising Services (IPAS) technologies help students plan courses of study, alert instructors and advisors when students are at risk of falling off track, and allow college staff to share information. However, many colleges face unexpected difficulties in adopting IPAS technologies.

A recent CCRC study at six colleges suggests that a key contributor to successful IPAS reform is using the implementation of new technologies as a way to spur broader improvements in student services (see Fletcher & Karp, 2015). This supplement identifies five key questions colleges should ask prior to embarking on IPAS projects.

1) Why IPAS?

IPAS and its related reforms should address clearly defined needs so that stakeholders across the college understand how the reforms relate to broader institutional goals and challenges. By identifying the challenges to be addressed, colleges can more easily communicate the rationale behind implementing IPAS reforms. College staff will, in turn, be more inclined to embrace technology-mediated reforms and the changes in practice that they entail. Furthermore, by clearly identifying their needs at the start of IPAS projects, colleges are more likely to design and enact reforms that significantly strengthen how students are supported. As your college begins to plan for IPAS, you should ask what specific needs the new technologies address, and how will they do so.

2) How will IPAS technologies enhance other tools and processes that already exist?

Some colleges are surprised by the extent to which college personnel like their existing tools and by how some staff members resist losing certain features associated with those tools. Other colleges adopt IPAS technologies without realizing that they do not add value over current systems. Colleges must be sure that IPAS technologies fill a meaningful functional void. Ask staff who use student support technologies which functions they use, which they like and dislike, and why. Then ask IPAS vendors to clarify how their products will enhance or improve upon what you already have. One college in our study created a flow chart of every step students take, from first inquiry through admission, registration, and completion. They identified the technologies used each step of the way, and were able to focus on gaps that could be filled by new IPAS products.

3) How will student supports change once IPAS is up and running?

Often, colleges describe the planned end result of IPAS implementation using vague phrases—such as "students will receive personalized support"—which do not help college personnel understand how their current practices will need to change to take advantage of IPAS technologies. Colleges must think deeply about what changes in procedures and what behavioral shifts among advisors, faculty, and students will be needed. Try to be specific when thinking through the necessary advising-related adjustments. How exactly will the delivery of supports and interactions between college personnel and students change? Specificity helps college staff envision how their day-to-day work will shift as IPAS technologies are implemented.

4) Who will lead and carry out IPAS efforts?

Colleges often struggle to assemble a project team that can both implement IPAS technologies and ensure that IPAS contributes to broader reform. Our study suggests that successful IPAS reforms are driven by leadership at two levels. A project leader, such as a dean, guides the daily work of the project, while an institutional leader, such as a provost, provides the gravitas and influence to ensure that college personnel treat IPAS-related reform with the thoughtful attention it requires. Successful colleges in our study put together teams with a mix of members from all departments touched by the project. These teams included *content masters*—experts in the college's information technology systems and in advising—who provide information on how IPAS will play out in practice; *influencers*, valued and trusted members of the college community; and *decision makers*, who can approve choices and help maintain the project's momentum.

5) Who has the time to devote to the project?

Designing, implementing, and communicating about broad-based reforms requires a substantial investment of time for all staff involved. Project teams in our study felt rushed, and they were surprised at the amount of staff time that was required to sustain momentum even after IPAS technologies were deployed. Professional development provided for college personnel as they shifted their practices, for example, had to be sustained for months. Before embarking on IPAS projects, colleges should reflect on how job responsibilities will need to shift so that key members of the project team can engage in planning, redesign, communication, and professional development efforts. Colleges should also develop realistic implementation timelines. IPAS projects often take much longer than anticipated.

Source

Fletcher, J., & Karp, M. M. (2015). *Using technology to reform advising: Insights from colleges.* New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.