

School Guidance Counselors

Are They Distance Education's Biggest Ally?

Sonya R. Durden

Are guidance counselors really misguided when it comes to distance learning? I ask this because during an online course discussion forum, a former distance learning instructor posted an interesting comment surrounding the issue of guidance counselors and their role in the distance learning process. This instructor stated that guidance counselors are "misguided" in their attempts to recommend at-risk students for distance learning courses. The implication being that the probability of completion is low for this demographic. As a guidance counselor

I was surprised to learn that there are still individuals who are not open to the idea of equal access for all students, but it did start me thinking about the counselor's role in the whole distance learning process.

There is a common misperception that equates at-risk learners to higher failure rates when the truth of the matter is, not all at-risk learners have the same characteristics. There are many elements that predispose students to the risk of dropping out of school. Some elements are based solely on academic achievement while others are environmental. However, this article will consider only students from low socioeconomic and single parent households when discussing at-risk students.

The number of students taking distance learning courses is on the rise. Those numbers have increased across ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic lines. While the numbers reveal a slightly higher growth rate for students enrolled in recovery courses, there appears to be an overlap for the at-risk student population. Why? How? Could this be the result of school guidance counselors recommending distance learning as a viable recovery option? Are students finally beginning to realize that, for many, a combination of distance learning and traditional face-to-face courses might be the right instructional mix to fit their learning styles? Well, it certainly does appear to be this way and it might be why distance education institutions are rapidly expanding. Susan Patrick, the director of the



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U.S. Department of Education's office of educational technology, stated that she was expecting a "huge growth" in the availability of online and distance learning. "We expect the growth to continue, consistent with the growth in higher education distance learning," she added (Honawar, 2005).

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Distance education institutions are rapidly becoming more effective at accommodating a larger volume of learners with a variety of learning styles, but is every student being included? Is the digital divide preventing certain learners from not fully realizing this rapidly growing trend in education? Quoting Nielson (2006), "The 'digital divide' refers to the fact that certain parts of the population have substantially better opportunities to benefit from the new technology than other parts of the population" (para 2). Research conducted by The Center for Children and Technology (2001) found what educators and community leaders alike have long suspected, that technology use for low income communities tends to be unequal. The research indicates that while all ethnic groups have experienced significant increases in technology ownership, gaps between Whites and minorities still exist today, thereby affecting the rates at which minority students are enrolling in distance learning courses. As this problem becomes more evident, many school counselors are asking themselves "what can be done to ensure that more at-risk and minority students are included in the distance learning process"?

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

School guidance counselors are a vital part of helping children develop into well-rounded individuals. Counselors provide valuable information to students in regards to academics (elementary, middle, high school and pre-college preparation), classroom schedules and life choices (job infor-

mation, dropout prevention, and drug abuse issues). To answer the question of how to include at-risk students, as well as more traditional students in the distance learning process, one needs to look no farther than the state of Florida. Starting in the 2009-2010 school year these students will be able to earn a diploma from their local public schools entirely online. A new state law requires all school districts within the state create their own full-time virtual schools, collaborate with other districts, or contract with providers approved by the state. This is encouraging news for the distance education community. The new law sends a clear message that distance learning is no longer a trend; it is an effective and credible way for all students to learn. Given that distance learning courses will be offered for students from kindergarten through 12th grade, counselors will need to be diligent in stressing the importance of students utilizing the numerous community resources (i.e. libraries, community computer labs, before- and after-hour school computer labs).

MANY STUDENTS ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL

As a result of high stakes testing, students from at-risk schools have experienced higher rates of retention than those from other schools. One way that guidance counselors have been able to combat this growing epidemic is through offering distance learning as practical alternative for grade recovery. However it hasn't been easy because Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has done a poor job with marketing their product. FLVS has heavily relied on word of mouth as its advertising method. Word of mouth is an inexpensive advertising method, but is it effective? Yes and no. Yes because the school is allowed to grow at a slow steady pace, but no because it allows outside entities to interfere with that growth rate.

FLVS was established in 1997 to offer educational alternatives to students within

the state. That was over a decade ago, so why are some local school officials failing to inform parents and their children about this distance learning option? The answer might be a bit more complicated than one thinks. While I have no reliable data, the answer appears to be twofold. The first part of the answer is *competition*. Due extensive budget cuts throughout the state and the growth within the charter and private school sector, schools are having a difficult time retaining students. Local school administrators are concerned with the impact of how offering alternative routes to education will affect their overall student count, thereby their funding. Simply put, *no students equals no funding*.

The second and more complicated answer is the *success rate* of distance learning students. Since FLVS is a state operated school, grades earned are transferred to the student's local school district. If a student fails a course taken through FLVS, that grade will be placed on that student's permanent record. Failed courses not only affect grade point averages, they have the potential to interfere with graduation rates, which is a valid concern for school administrators. To combat large scale failures, it is imperative that local school guidance counselors closely monitor students taking distance learning courses. Research conducted by the National Education Association (2008) suggests the greatest difficulty distance education students will encounter is time management and student workload. Since Oblender (2002) and other researchers have had similar findings, guidance counselors, with the assistance of parents, will need to be diligent in monitoring these components when overseeing the progress of online learners, especially learners at risk of dropping out.

DISTANCE LEARNING GOING MAINSTREAM

Whatever the reasons for school officials not fully embracing and informing their

consumers about FLVS, the 2002 Florida School Code adopted by the Florida Legislature provides parents and students with numerous statutory rights for educational choice. The Florida Department of Education (n.d.) lists these guidelines as:

- Section 1002.20(6), F.S., regarding K12 student and parent rights includes the Florida Virtual School as an option for parental choice.
- Section 1002.37(3)(c), F.S., clearly states that districts may not limit student access to courses offered by the Florida Virtual School.
- Section 1001.42(15)(a), F.S., includes as a duty of the district school board the requirement to adopt procedures to inform the general public of the educational programs, needs, and objectives of public education, including the educational opportunities available through the Florida Virtual School.
- Section 1001.42(21), F.S., lists as a duty of the district school board, to provide students with access to enroll in courses available through the Florida Virtual School and to award credit for successful completion. It also stipulates that access shall be available to students during or after the school day and during summer school enrollment.
- Section 1003.02(1)(i), F.S., requires school boards to notify parents at the beginning of the school year about acceleration mechanisms, including the opportunity and benefits of Florida Virtual School courses.
- Section 1003.03(3)(b), F.S., relating to maximum class size requirements provides, as an implementation option, the adoption of policies to encourage students to take courses from the Florida Virtual School.
- Section 1000.04(4), F.S., designates the Florida Virtual School as a component of the delivery of public education within Florida's K-20 education system.

- Section 1007.27(1), F.S., states that it is the intent of the legislature that a variety of articulated acceleration mechanisms be available to public secondary and postsecondary students and lists the Florida Virtual School as one of those acceleration options.

THE MONITORING PROCESS

Guidance counselors are essential to the success a student can have in a distance learning program. Some ways in which counselors can assist students would be to provide them with the most current information regarding the distance learning program, assist with the registration process, communicate with the distance instructor and require weekly or biweekly counseling sessions via small group discussions or individual interactions. During these sessions, counselors should require students to log into their accounts to verify firsthand that course objectives are being met. It is expected that this act would encourage students to stay on track. However, if the counselor finds that a student is in danger of failing, this would allow the counselor ample time to encourage that student to drop the class.

WHICH GUIDANCE COUNSELOR, VIRTUAL OR SCHOOL SITE?

Why am I stressing the utilization of the student's home school counselor over the virtual school counselor? Because the student-to-counselor ratio is higher within the distance learning school than in traditional school settings. While the Miami-Dade school district has one to four counselors per school, in the state of Florida, FLVS has three internal guidance counselors who support students, teachers, and parents. While there is no doubt that FLVS counselors are effective at their jobs, there has been a small number of complaints that they are not productive in informing parents of their role in the distance learn-

ing process. In 2005-2006, on an FLVS' annual survey, 13% of the parents said their child's guidance counseling services were not helpful because they were not aware of all the services guidance counselors provided. The parents had no idea that counselors had the ability to report their child's progress and monitor the results. To exacerbate matters, FLVS counselors are available to answer general questions on Tuesday at 11 A.M. or every 1st, 2nd, and 4th Thursday 7 P.M. (FLVS, 2008).

A COUNSELOR'S PERSPECTIVE

How I help students recover courses using Miami-Dade Virtual School and FLVS:

It all started 4 years ago when a student stepped into my office and stated that he was retained 3 times at his former school. The student wanted to know what could be done to ensure that he was placed in his proper grade. In the past I would recommend course recovery and monitor the student's progress using daily progress reports forms. Unfortunately, due to extensive budget cuts and curriculum reductions, recommending recovery courses was no longer a viable option, so I began taking a closer look at FLVS.

The first couple of students I referred to FLVS failed miserably and had to withdraw before the 28-day grace period ended. I take some responsibility for the failures because I was ineffective in the monitoring process. However, I was concerned that the counselors at FLVS made no attempt to contact the school site about the poor performance of its students. Not one courtesy phone call, e-mail, or letter was attempted. I suppose I should not have been surprised, since this was pretty much how they marketed their product. Nevertheless I forged ahead, attempting several monitoring concepts. At this point I was willing to do anything I could to help my students become successful online learners.

After about a year of recommending students to FLVS, I decided to learn as much as

possible about FLVS and appointed myself the FLVS liaison at my site. As part of my recommendation protocol, I began to closely scrutinize the types of student recommended for the program. Approximately a year later, I began to look at all incoming students' grades, test scores, and characteristics to see if they would be a good candidate for distance learning. Months later I included a school-based needs assessment as for students interested in FLVS as part of my promotion package. Once students were enrolled in FLVS, I would call them down to my office to inquire about their courses. As a part of these individualized counseling sessions I would have the students log into their account so that we could fully discuss their progress. If the student needed assistance I would ask a colleague to set up tutoring sessions, but if the student was too far behind I would have a parent conference and recommend that the student drop the course before the end of the 28-day grace period. What I began to notice was my strategies would almost guarantee successful outcomes. My most interesting finding was that the students preferred utilizing their home school counselor over the distance learning counselor due to trust issues. At the end of the day, the students simply were not comfortable with nor did they trust these counselors they'd never seen.

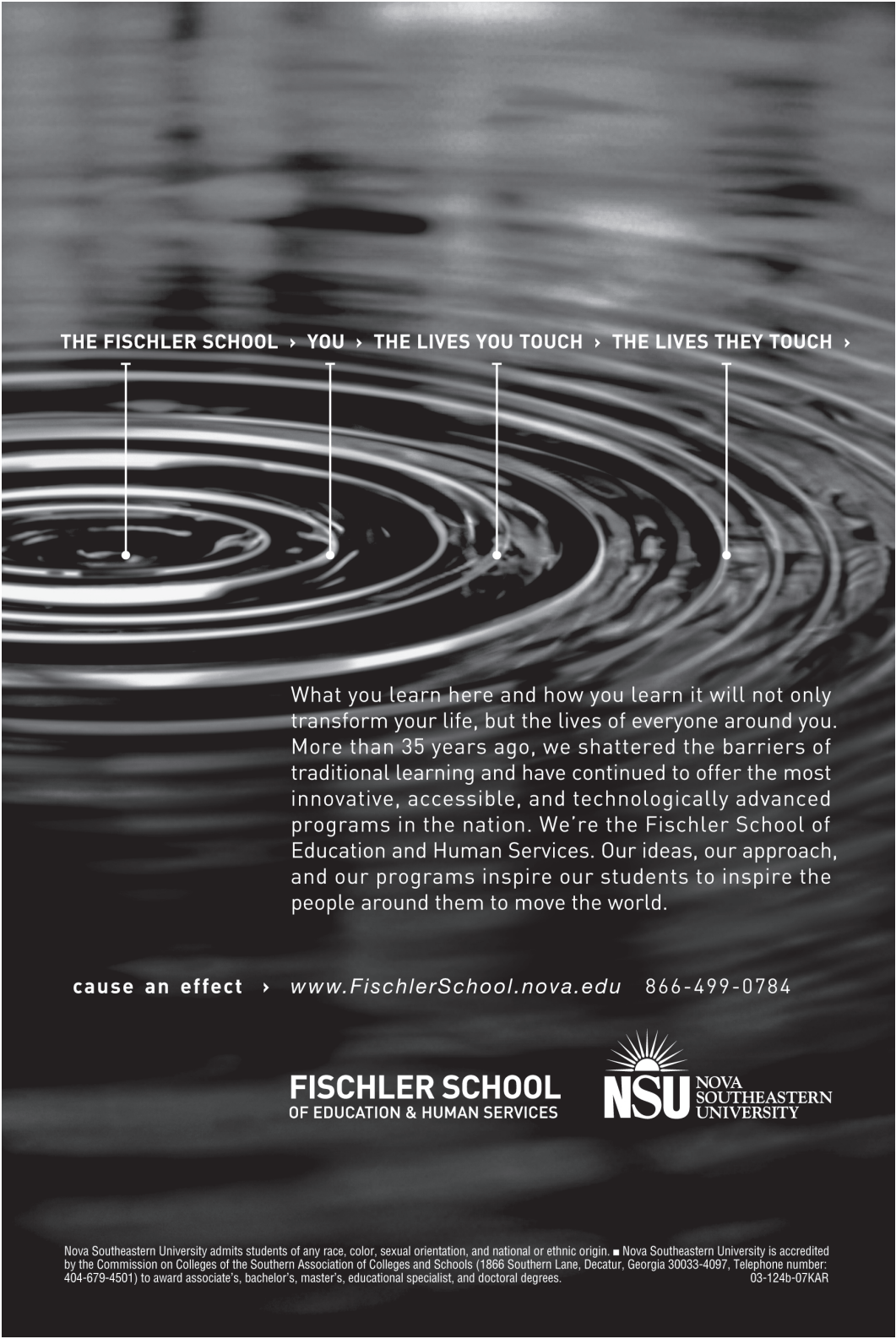
CONCLUSION

Distance learning has been around in one form or another for many decades, but over the past decade the computer and Internet have catapulted distance learning to the forefront of the educational arena. With more distance learning opportunities available each day, school guidance counselors need to be more visible and vocal with students interested in this educational choice. As educational stakeholders, guidance counselors must ensure that students utilizing the distance learning alternative

are meeting their stated goals through counseling sessions and observations. Since many states are now making distance learning opportunities available for all learners, guidance counselors will need to be diligent in ensuring an individualized academic plan is in place and being followed. Finding the right fit in academics can be a challenge, but having access to a distance learning model significantly diminishes that challenge. As members of the educational community, many school guidance counselors have taken up the formidable challenge of ensuring students are familiar with every educational option available and this is being done with no additional compensation.

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