

# USABILITY EVALUATION OF THE UNC ACADEMIC ADVISING WEBSITE

**Date of Report:** 17 April 2015

**Dates of Evaluation:** 20 March 2015 - 01 April 2015

**Location of Evaluation:** Manning Hall,  
University of North Carolina  
Chapel Hill, NC

**Prepared for:** The Academic Advising Program

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MS in Information Science, 2015

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Academic Advising Program provides critical student advising services to UNC students in the College of Arts & Sciences. The Advising site attempts to allow students to access these critical resources online. Our user study evaluated several hypothetical scenarios based on real world tasks. This study found that the Advising Site has several usability challenges and is in need of a reevaluation of its information architecture.

**Scope of evaluation:** The public interface of the Advising website as accessed from a desktop web browser

### Goals:

- Determine whether the current information architecture of the site is suited to common information finding tasks.
- Assess the extent to which the site is usable and satisfactory for undergraduate students at UNC.
- Provide recommendations for system changes that will improve the usability of the UNC Advising website.

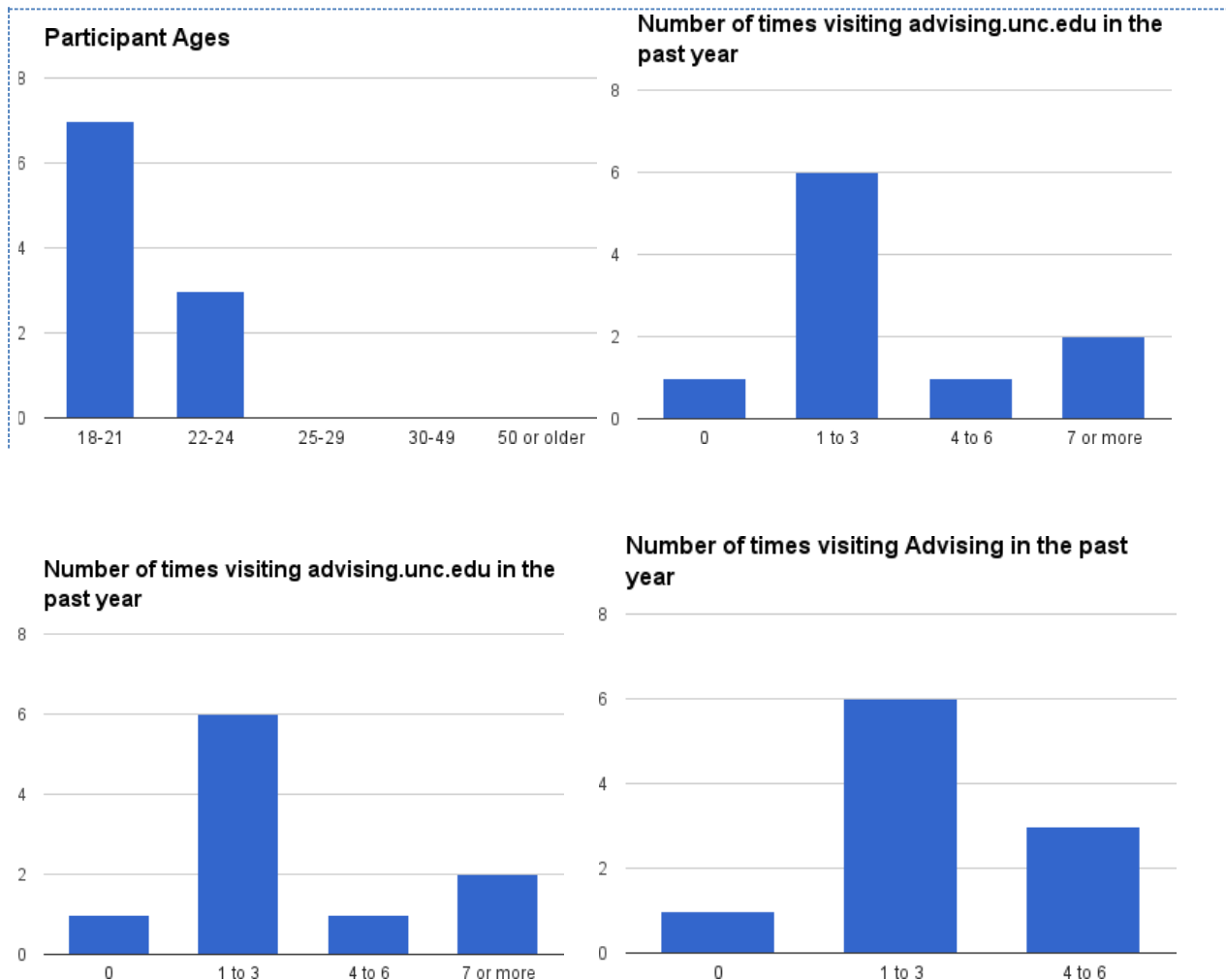
### Why you should care

If students can easily find the relevant information that already exists on the site, they are less likely to make unnecessary in-person appointments with advisors. This would help reduce the numbers of student appointments, and would allow advisors to focus on those students who need more in-depth attention.

## METHODOLOGY

### WHO PARTICIPATED IN OUR EVALUATION

We recruited ten undergraduate students with the following characteristics.



### WHAT PARTICIPANTS DID

Participants were asked to imagine they were in a variety of hypothetical scenarios, and use the Advising site to find information. Giving participants a scenario helps frame their exploration of the site in realistic contexts. As they navigated the Advising site, participants were asked to think aloud to communicate their thoughts and impressions.

## WHAT DATA WE COLLECTED

While participants navigated the Advising site, we recorded the computer screen & the participants' voices using Camtasia. A note taker in the testing room recorded the participants' observations and notes about their actions. After each participant completed each scenario, we asked them to complete a short questionnaire.

- Qualitative data
  - Participants' verbal & written impressions of the site
- Quantitative data
  - Efficiency of navigation
    - Time per scenario
  - Ability to successfully find information
    - Complete success, partial success, failure
  - Ease of use & user satisfaction
    - Ten-question survey

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Students appreciate the Advising program, but find the Advising site difficult to navigate.

- Several participants mentioned that they found the Advising program extremely nice and helpful.
- However, many participants mentioned that they would rather schedule an appointment in person with an advisor than try to find the information on the website.
- This means that students are scheduling unnecessary appointments with advisors in situations where the information was actually available on the site. These appointments are time-consuming the Advising program.

### The Advising site attempts to serve too many disparate audiences.

*“Curriculum Tools had good information on majors, but it is not something I would click on as a student. Sounds like curriculum planning, it’s faculty-centric. I wouldn’t have thought to click on that. Especially as a sophomore.”*  
(Participant 2, Task 1)

*“My advisor explained what worksheets were. I couldn’t find them for the longest time.”* (Participant 5, Task 1)

*“I think it’s confusing because... everything that’s under Curriculum Tools and Policies & Procedures is also for students... what makes something under those different than For Students?”* (Participant 1, Task 3)

- Ensure that the site reflects Advising’s core student-services mission.
- Use language that students will understand. ([Weinschenk](#))
  - Avoid domain-specific language like “Curriculum Tools”.
  - Consider that freshmen may arrive at the site not knowing what a “worksheet” is.
- Restructure the site’s navigation to reflect a student-centered approach.
  - Audience-specific top-level navigation sections can be problematic ([Richardson](#)).
  - For example, the “For Students” section is not a discrete category--many of the resources in other top-level categories could also logically be considered to be ‘for students.’
  - However, participants did appreciate the Advice by Year section once they found it.

### The amount of competing text was overwhelming on some pages, particularly the homepage.

*“I’m still kind of overwhelmed by the amount information and links on the home page. There are so many things to click on, it’s tough to take them all in. Important links over here, on the top, You Need to Know section... Everything is of vital importance and spread across the page.”* (Participant 2, Task 4)

- Make carefully considered choices about the importance of content on pages, and make sure that the layout of the page reflects that.
- Use of bulleted lists, appropriately stylized text, and following general reading patterns (F-shaped) will help improve these issues ([Nielsen](#)).
- Keep the content short and sweet wherever possible--people skim when they read on the Web ([Nielsen](#)).

**There are multiple duplicate resources.**

- The current navigation has many redundant paths to the same content, which creates illusion of a larger, more complicated site.
- Eliminate duplicate content, consolidate related resources.
  - Participants found many paths to the Undergraduate Bulletin, but none of them found it helpful in their scenarios.
  - Majors & Minors; Worksheets; and Disciplines, Divisions, & Departments
- Search results should provide contextual highlighting

**Within the Advising program, there is substantial confusion over the ownership of the site's content.**

- Hire or designate a dedicated web content manager.
- Good content management is not easy or quick--it isn't a responsibility that can be tacked on top of a full-time job.

## FINDINGS BY SCENARIO

### SCENARIO 1: FIND REQUIRED COURSES

*Imagine you are a second year student planning to major in Environmental Studies. You want to get a head start on required courses for your planned major. You are planning which courses you want to take next semester. You want to find out which courses are required for your major.*

*Find the required courses for the Environmental Studies major.*

- All but one participant succeeded at this task.
- Participants who stated that they had used worksheets before completed the task more quickly than those who were not familiar with worksheets.
- Several participants attempted to find an answer in the Undergraduate Bulletin, but were frustrated by the length and complexity of the Bulletin.

### SCENARIO 2: DEGREE OPTIONS

*Imagine that you are an undecided first year student. You don't know what you want to study, but you have taken some general education classes in your first semester. You think you might be interested in creative writing.*

*What are your degree options related to creative writing?*

- This was the most challenging task.
- Only four of the participants succeeded, however six of the participants thought they succeeded.

### SCENARIO 3: ADVICE BY STUDENT YEAR

*Imagine you are a second semester Sophomore and want to make sure you are on track.*

*At the end of your Sophomore year what requirements should you have completed according to advising criteria?*

- All but one participant succeeded in completing this task and they all perceived they had succeeded, but a few were not confident about their success.
- Almost half the participants thought this scenario was "neutral" to "very difficult" in difficulty.

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#### SCENARIO 4: REQUEST MORE TIME TO COMPLETE A DEGREE

*Imagine that you changed your major at the end of your Junior year and won't be able to complete enough credits to graduate on time (within the officially required 8 semesters).*

*Find out how to request more time to complete your degree.*

- Two participants failed at this task and several found this task quite challenging.
- Those that were more familiar with Advising terminology succeeded quickly, those who had less contact with advising took longer to find relevant resources or failed the task.

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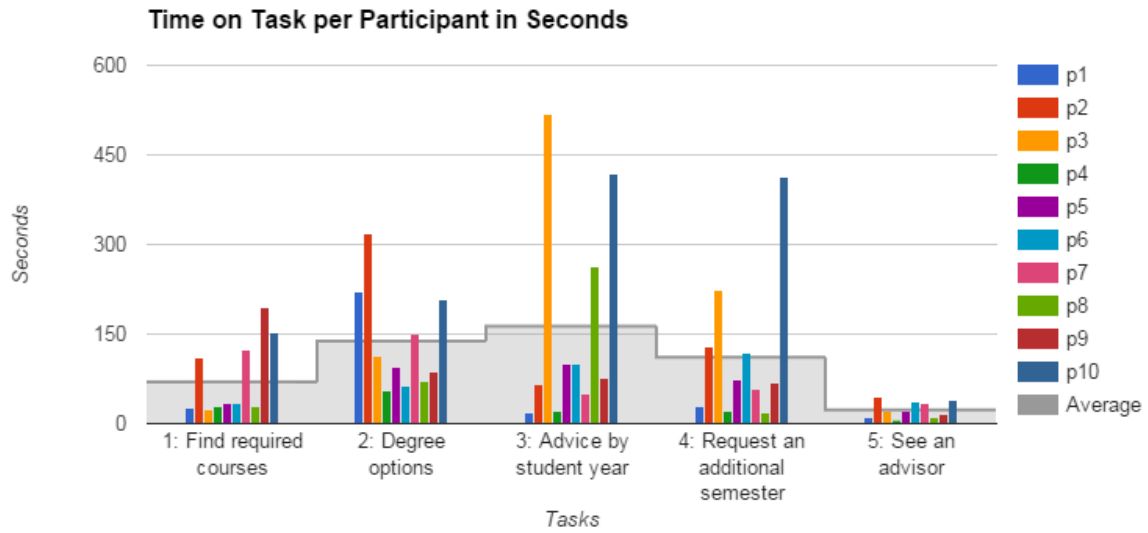
#### SCENARIO 5: MEET WITH AN ADVISOR

*Imagine that you need to meet with an advisor in person. How would you go about doing this?*

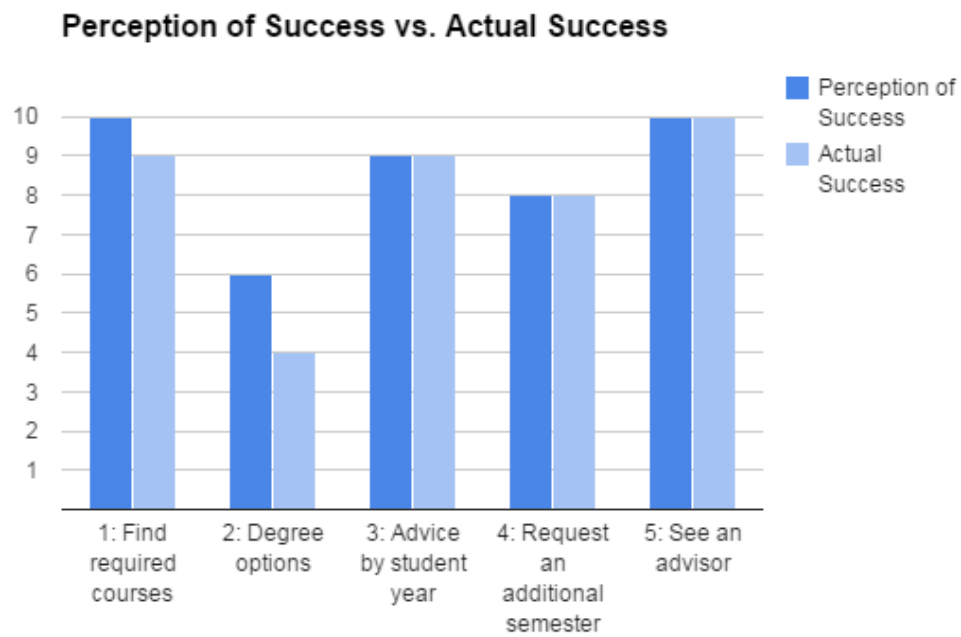
- Participants found this task very straight forward and completed it easily and quickly.



## APPENDIX

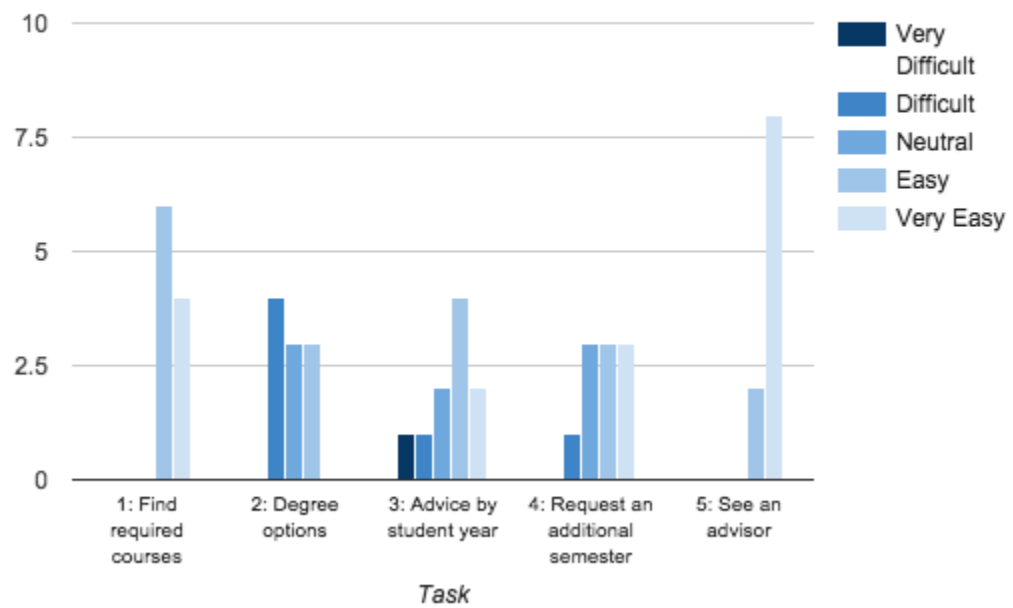


Time on task by participant with average time on task



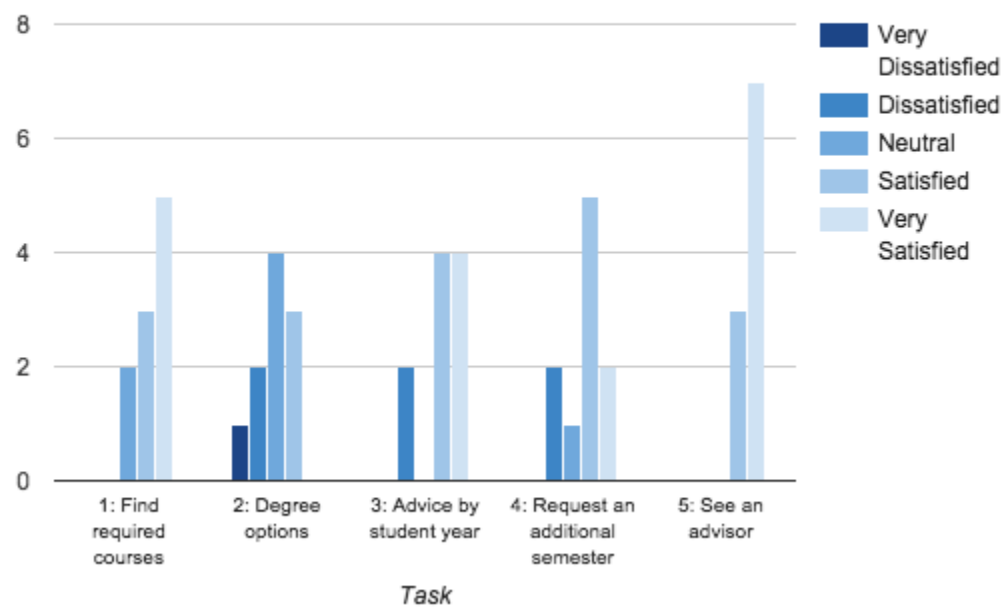
Perception of Success against Actual Success

### How difficult did you find this task?



Ease of use per task as measured by Question 2 in the post-task questionnaires

### How satisfied are you with the amount of time it took to complete this task?



Satisfaction per task as measured by Question 3 in the post-task questionnaires

**System Usability Score (SUS): 68.** This puts the Advising website at the 50th percentile for sites that have been evaluated by the SUS. This means that half of the websites evaluated with the SUS are considered more usable and easier to learn than the Advising website. This translates to a letter grade of a D when compared to the thousands of other sites that have been evaluated using the same scale.