



Assessing the Effects of Covid – 19 Pandemic on Academic Advising: Challenges, Strategies, and Results at Kepler College, Kigali

Ernestine Niyobuhungiro*, George Mulingi Mugabe, Landouard Habiaremye, Jean d'Amour Nsabimana, Judith Akimana, Henriette Kayabo, James Rurwanyintare
Kepler College - KG 29 Ave 16, 5594, Kigali, Rwanda. Email: info@keplercollege.ac.rw

*Corresponding author email address: ernestine@keplercollege.ac.rw

Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic support services, particularly academic advising for students, has been significant. This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the academic advising landscape at Kepler College before and during the pandemic, highlighting challenges faced, approaches utilized, and outcomes observed. Through a combination of focus group discussions and surveys involving both students and academic advisors, this research synthesizes insights from their experiences. The study reveals that despite the disruptive effects of the pandemic, the support provided by academic advisors played a crucial role in enabling students to navigate academic challenges and sustain their academic progress. Furthermore, the pandemic context prompted students to enhance their adaptability and sense of responsibility towards their learning journey. The study also underscored the importance of holistic support approaches by academic advisors to address students' diverse needs effectively. Findings of this study emphasize the necessity for collaboration among higher education institutions to share best practices and strategies for supporting students, especially during emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. By fostering a collaborative environment and sharing experiences, institutions can better adapt to unforeseen challenges and ensure continued provision of quality academic support to students in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID 19 pandemic, academic advising, challenges, approaches

INTRODUCTION

Corona virus (COVID-19) came as an abrupt catastrophe in a way that individual people, institutions, governments, and states were not prepared for. Kepler College like other learning institutions in Rwanda responded to the government measures to the COVID-19 outbreak and shifted all its services online. Thanks to its blended mode of teaching and learning that was already in place, the transition of all the academic services including academic advising to fully online became a little bit smoother. According to the World Bank (2020), remote learning was helpful to those who have suitable infrastructure, funding, and capacity to use technological tools. The academic advising part of the faculty department had to change and find the best way to support students online since all the academic activities were being done online. During the process, there were different challenges that came with the shift, and some opportunities to learn different new ways of supporting students. So, considering the fact that any similar incident may happen, this research was conducted to assess the challenges faced, approaches used, as well as outcomes in regard to the students' and academic advisors' experiences at the time.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at Kepler College and explored the academic advising services during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, a descriptive and cross-section designs methods were used to study 207 students from the



Kepler College – Southern New Hampshire University program working in the College for America (CFA) program during the Covid-19 pandemic and who were still active as of June 2022. A total of 136 were selected considering the Yamane sample selection approach (Iddon, & Boyd, 2023). A self-administered questionnaire and focus groups were used as tools to collect data from the sample. 84 respondents from the sample (62% return rate) completed the questionnaire and a total of 4 focus groups were conducted.

RELATED WORKS

The concept of academic advising encompasses a multifaceted process aimed at facilitating students' educational journeys and enhancing their academic success. University of Maine (n.d) characterizes academic advising as a collaborative interaction between advisors and students, emphasizing the exploration of educational significance, available services, academic goals, course selection, and career planning. This collaborative dynamic necessitates the assignment of an academic advisor to each student, tasked with providing guidance throughout their academic trajectory. Conversely, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences (2023) defines academic advising as an informational exchange aimed at aiding students in achieving their academic objectives.

Tompkins Cortland Community College outlines several key responsibilities of academic advisors, including assisting students in aligning degree programs with career aspirations, devising course schedules, and facilitating access to campus resources. Similarly, the University of Arizona (2023) underscores the importance of furnishing accurate information, elucidating program requirements, policies, and procedures, and aiding students in identifying relevant institutional resources. Moreover, students are expected to actively engage in the advising process by seeking support, utilizing available resources, monitoring their progress, and assuming accountability for decisions affecting their academic performance.

The University of California, Berkeley distinguishes between passive and active approaches to academic advising. In passive advising, advisors assume an instructional role, imparting directives to students who are expected to adhere to the advice provided. This approach may inadvertently foster dependency among students and diminish their ownership of the advising process. Conversely, active advising positions advisors as facilitators, empowering students to take charge of setting priorities and goals, thereby promoting greater autonomy and accountability.

NACADA Journal (2013) introduces developmental advising as a contemporary approach that views student success as a collaborative endeavor between students and advisors. This paradigm aligns with the active advising strategy advocated by the University of California, Berkeley, emphasizing students' agency and engagement in the advising process.

Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have adapted their academic advising services to ensure continuity during disruptions. Fuller *et al.* (2022) observe various institutional responses, including the implementation of sanitation measures, physical distancing protocols, and mask mandates to mitigate virus transmission. However, some institutions encountered difficulties transitioning to remote advising formats, necessitating adjustments to accommodate student needs (Harris, 2022). Harris suggests employing anonymous surveys to gather feedback on advising practices, facilitating continuous improvement.

Abumallow *et al.* (2022) propose strategies to enhance academic advising resilience during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations encompass fostering stronger advisor-student relationships, providing clear guidance and regulations, enhancing communication between management and advisors regarding course requirements, and

clarifying graduation criteria for advisors. Such measures aim to bolster the effectiveness and adaptability of academic advising in navigating unprecedented challenges.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of this study based on the proposed content analysis about the impact of COVID-19 on academic advising at Kepler College.

Academic Advising Practices Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic

Academic advising is an integrative part of academic support services students are receiving at Kepler College. Data on academic practices and how they were considered to be contributing to students' success pre COVID-19, show that the predominant platforms for students' academic advising support were 1:1 check-in group advising and peer collaboration (figure 1).

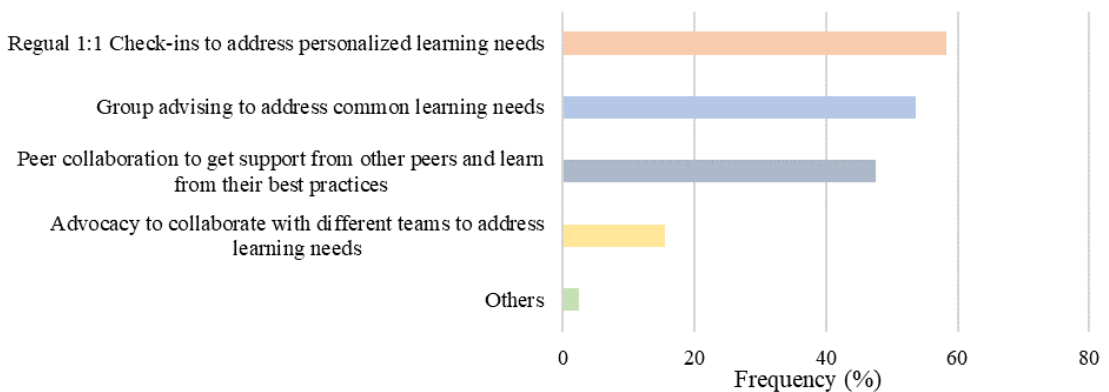


Figure 1. Academic advising support practices at Kepler College (before COVID 19)

Data also shows that 72% and 27.7% of academic advisors researched believe that the strategies used including regular 1:1 check-ins and group advising contributed to students' academic success at a rate of 4 and 5 on a scale of 5 respectively. Additionally, data also show that 72.7% academic advisors considered inter-departmental collaboration to be an effective approach that contributed to pushing students to meet progress expectations.

Data also shows that before the pandemic 60.7% of respondents could attend academic advising check-ins once a week with more than 32.1% attending sessions once a month. Face-to-face meetings, the use of emails, interactive chats, and or phone calls were predominant channels of communication between academic advisors and students. Only roughly a third or 31% could use virtual meetings.

Considering the students' level of taking responsibility to seek support before COVID-19, only 57.1% could demonstrate a high level of responsibility to take an initiative to reach out to their academic advisor to seek support. The relative low students' demonstration of taking responsibility to take initiative to seek support, feelings about the relative support given before the pandemic were due to different reasons (refer table 1).

Table 1. Students' reactions to Kepler College academic advising before COVID – 19

Respondent	Reasons
S01	Most of the time my advisor reached out to me first. So, I didn't really need to seek her out for help because my advisor was always there.
S02	I was on the right track. I was not in need of weekly check-in. However, whenever it was needed, I would consult my advisor.
S03	It was so much easier before the pandemic because I would meet with my advisor without any hindrance.
S04	Before the pandemic, it was easy to reach out to my advisor with any question even without setting a meeting because we were all on the campus.

The study also showed that before COVID-19, the academic support at Kepler College was mainly provided in-person and a significant proportion of students were not taking a high level of responsibility to seek for support as they believed that their academic advisors were there to recognize when they are in need of support. Implications of these findings indicate a low learning trajectory for students at Kepler College before COVID – 19 in line with Ayish and Deveci (2019) who found that learning is enhanced when individuals take responsibility for their learning. To them, once self-directed learning is activated, it helps students to develop a sense of agency necessary to sustain growth and development over time (Ibid).

Challenges that Affected Students to Meet Academic Expectations During COVID – 19

Findings of this study show that COVID – 19 pandemic interrupted the practices that were in place at Kepler College which the majority of students were used to when seeking academic advising support. The challenges reported are summarized in Figure 2. These challenges were categorized into three categories namely: Ability to stay motivated to learn, staying in touch with fellow students and collaborate with them for peer support and struggles to work from home due to different issues including lack of space and house chores.

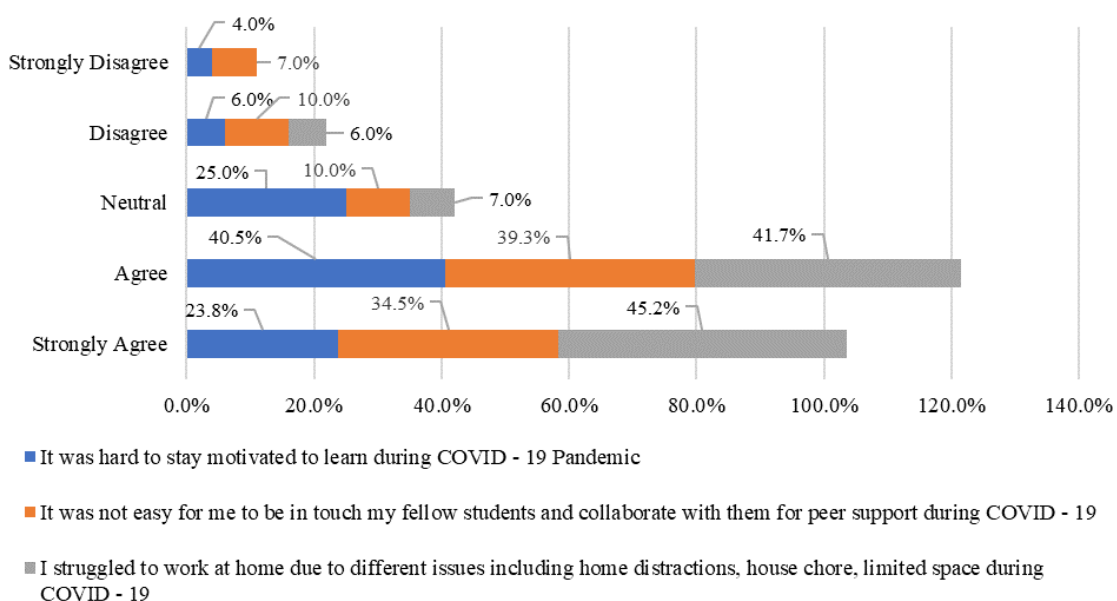


Figure 2. Challenges which affected students to meet academic expectations during COVID – 19

The findings indicate that struggles to work from home ($\geq 80\%$) and not being able to stay in touch with fellow students and collaborate for peer support during COVID – 19 lockdowns ($\geq 70\%$) were the main challenges that students faced and which hindered them to meet academic expectations.

Similarly, findings from the study to investigate the source of challenges which they face and hence hinder their progress to meet academic expectation show that a significant proportion of students, 67.9%, 65%, 48%, and 44%, identified lack of motivation, home distractions, psychological stress, and limited access to electricity and internet as pivotal factors contributing to disparities in their academic progress compared to pre-COVID-19 levels respectively (Figure 3). Intriguingly, 25% of surveyed students reported to have had ample free time during the pandemic to focus on their academic pursuits. Using a scale of 1 to 5, data also showed that 72.6% of student respondents acknowledged that COVID – 19 had a significant impact on their academic endeavors, while a staggering 94% indicated some level of influence from the COVID-19 pandemic on their ability to sustain academic efforts.

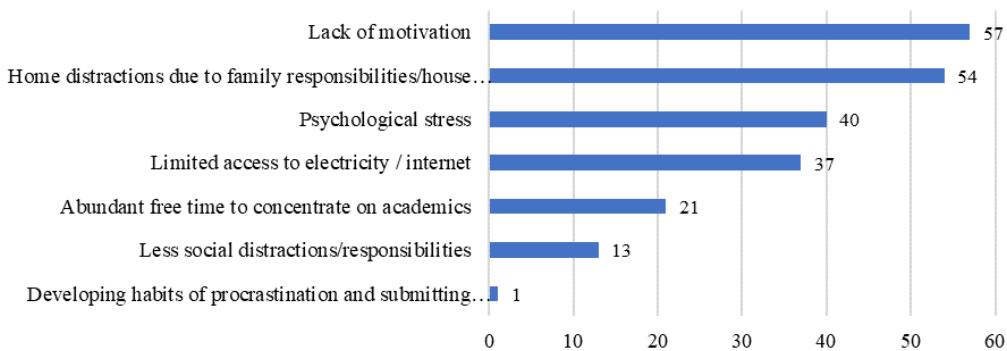


Figure 3. Students' experiences during the pandemic that made their academic progress different compared to the time before the COVID – 19 pandemic (n = 84).

Moreover, findings from the study also show that academic advisors at Kepler College encountered significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered their ability to support students effectively. According to data presented in figure 4 below, 72.2%, 45.5%, and 72.2% of academic advisors cited home distractions, family responsibilities, and unstable internet connection respectively as major obstacles that affected their work during this period. These challenges, stemming from the pandemic, affected advisors at Kepler College, albeit with varying degrees of resilience in managing them. These disruptions in turn impacted the learning process and student support mechanisms at Kepler College.

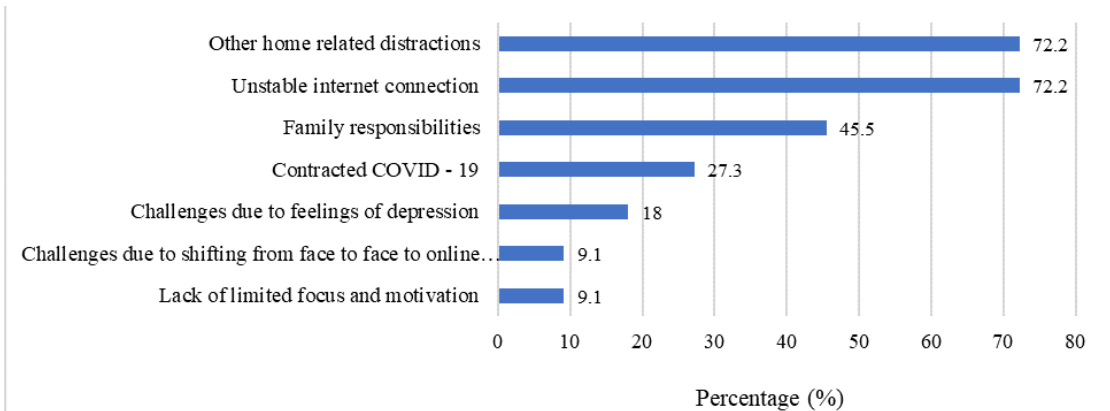


Figure 4. Challenges which affected the efforts of academic advisors to support students as expected at Kepler College during COVID – 19 pandemic (n = 84).

The Guild (2020) reported uncertainties among university students regarding the continuity of exams, particularly for those experiencing lockdowns in foreign countries, leading to feelings of isolation and occasional depression. These experiences parallel the challenges identified in the survey conducted in this study for both advisors and students, including declines in motivation, increased psychological stress, and a lack of peer support, all of which significantly impacted students' academic progress.

Approaches Used to Keep Supporting Students During COVID – 19 Pandemic at Kepler College

Despite the national lockdowns imposed and ensuing physical distance challenges during COVID – 19 pandemic, findings showed that academic advisors at Kepler College continued to find ways to support students to work meet their academic expectations (Table 2).

Table 2. Kepler College students and academic advising support during COVID – 19 pandemic

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My advisor helped me to understand why I should resume working on my academics.	44%	36.9%	16.6%	2.3%	0%
My academic advisor challenged me to find time slots with limited home distractions where I can concentrate on my academics.	35.7%	36.9%	21.4%	4.7%	1.2%
My academic advisor pushed me to talk to my family and let them know that I needed time and a calm space to use for my academics	25%	27.3%	28.5%	16.6%	2.4%
Staying in touch with my fellow students through interactive chats contributed to my motivation to resume working on my academics.	28.6%	40.5%	21.4%	7.10%	2.4%
My academic advisor was flexible to use a communication channel that was convenient to me during the pandemic	53.6%	34.5%	9.5%	2.4%	0%

Moreover, study findings also showed that, different advising practices were used at Kepler College during the Covid-19

pandemic to facilitate and sustain students' motivation towards meeting their academic expectations. As indicated in figure 5, discussing strategies to sustain motivation (70.2%) was the most effective practice in contributing to students sustained academic progress compared to collaborative goal-setting for attainable targets and acknowledging students' efforts while encouraging further progress. Additionally, academic advising check-ins also saw an increase in frequency, with advisors able to engage with over a third of students as needed. Overall, 88.1% of students attended academic advising sessions frequently to ensure sustained motivation and academic progress amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

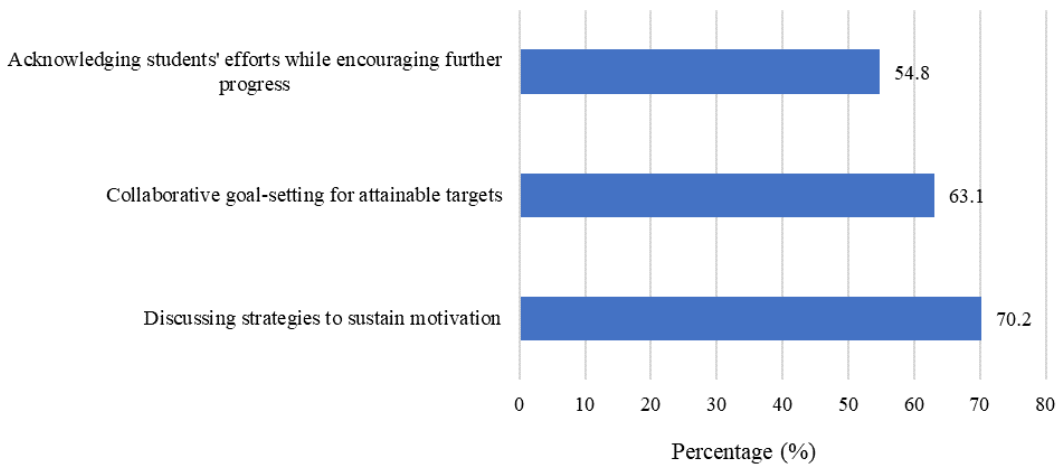


Figure 5. Key advising practices at Kepler College during COVID – 19 to sustain students' academic progress

On the other hand, amidst the pandemic, finds show that academic advisors at Kepler College adapted their communication methods to accommodate students' preferences and circumstances. Study findings show that phone calls (70.2%) and virtual meetings via platforms like Google Meet (63.1%) were the two predominant channels. This flexibility underscores the advisors' commitment to meeting students' needs effectively. Moreover, this aligns with research by Van Geel *et al.* (2023), emphasizing the importance of identifying students' learning requirements and tailoring support mechanisms accordingly. Such proactive adjustments in communication strategies reflect a concerted effort to foster student engagement and success amidst unprecedented challenges.

Outcomes of Approaches Used to Support Students During COVID – 19 Pandemic

Findings from the study show that the efforts from academic advisors to support students contributed to students' academic progress during the COVID – 19 pandemic. Students' survey results indicate that around 80% agreed that the academic support offered during the pandemic contributed to their motivation towards sustaining academic progress (Figure 6).

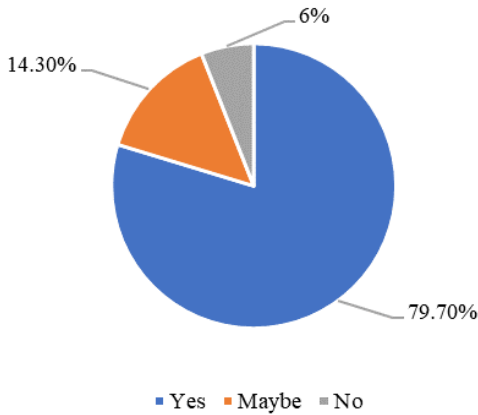


Figure 6. Students' perceptions on the role academic advising support provided at Kepler College during COVID – 19 pandemic played on sustaining academic progress

Moreover, whence findings show that two out of three students agree that their academic performance and or progress was lower during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic, 35.7% confirmed that steady progress was maintained. As shown in figure 7 below, majority of the students 62%, 60% and 66% agreed that the academic support provided by Kepler College during the pandemic to stay motivated to work to meet academic expectation, helping students to create personal space for conducive environment for discussions and managing stress to sustain academic progress respectively, had a significant impact on enabling them to make steady progress.

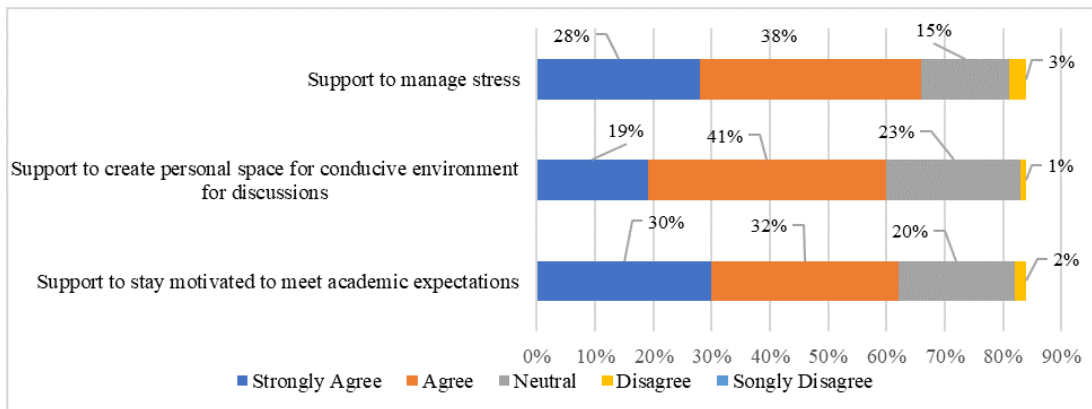


Figure 7. Impact of Kepler College academic advising during COVID – 19 pandemic

Specifically, findings from the study demonstrated students' emphasis on the importance of the academic advising support offered during the pandemic in navigating various challenges through regular follow-ups and reminders. Similarly, findings also demonstrated advisors' support towards innovative approaches through individualized sessions, comprehensive discussions encompassing academic non-academic issues and tailored advice to specific challenges and individuals as among the most effective approaches to sustain students' academic progress during the pandemic. Furthermore, recognizing the pivotal role of student academic advising support for student success, efforts to enhance advisor accountability, empowerment and support are crucial as evidenced by Hawthorne *et al.* (2022). These findings



mirror the assertion that continued focus on adapting student academic advising support to students' evolving needs can lead to a more effective and impactful experience for students, fostering their academic success in challenging times.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study aimed to undertake a review on the impact of the COVID – 19 pandemic on academic advising services and student experiences at Kepler College. Using a mixed and descriptive approach a sample of 84 students and advisors were surveyed. According to findings of the study, academic advising at Kepler College relied heavily on in-person interactions before the emergence of COVID – 19 pandemic, with a significant portion of students demonstrating limited initiative in seeking support. However, the abrupt shift to remote learning posed various challenges, including struggles to stay motivated, maintain peer collaboration, and cope with distractions while studying from home.

Despite these challenges, academic advisors at Kepler College employed various strategies to continue supporting students during the pandemic. These approaches included discussing strategies to sustain motivation, adapting communication methods to students' preferences, and providing individualized support. The study findings indicate that these efforts contributed significantly to students' academic progress and motivation during the pandemic.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of ongoing adaptation and enhancement of academic advising services to meet students' evolving needs, especially in times of crisis. By fostering stronger advisor-student relationships, providing clear guidance, and tailoring support mechanisms, institutions can better support students' academic success amidst unprecedented challenges.

We recommend the governments to be ready to support the education system to continue running regardless of the time. Academic institution needs to build a system that can survive calamities/disasters that can hinder the physical learning. Again, the students need to be trained in how they can learn independently and cope successfully with what can affect or disrupt their learning like COVID-19.

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