

Online Student Services: Current Practices and Recommendations for Implementation

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Abstract

Recommendations for planning and development of online student services based on a review of the literature on research conducted in a variety of college settings. Focus topics include the institutional website, help desks and information centers, student orientation, academic support, and library services.

Keywords

online learning, online student orientation, online student services, online student support

The Need for Online Student Services

Support services have been shown to have a large impact on student retention (e.g., Adams, 2011; American College Testing [ACT], 2010; Frost, Strom, Downey, Schultz, & Holland, 2010; Rummel, MacDonald, & Cornelius, 2011; Turner, 2011). Students in online classes are more likely to disappear silently without a strong sense of presence on the other side of the screen, and without help if they feel stuck (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Kostina & LaGranza, 2012).

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Student affairs professionals may provide a sense of community and connection with the institution, which combats isolation and thus contributes to student persistence, as inclusion leads to increase feeling of responsibility, loyalty, and openness to the experience (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Tinto, 1993). To encourage and engage students within the institution, as well as providing equal access to service in compliance with accreditation, student affairs professionals must be mindful to reach out to online students as well as those on campus.

Due to the distance of the online student, potentially by both space and time, there is a strong need for accessing student services in order to connect personally with the institution (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). In fact, students “expect the efficiency, ease, and effectiveness of using electronic means to interact” (Crawley, 2012, p. 2). Yet, an observable gap arises in the conflict between the expectations and needs of online learners—who may select distance education for the provided flexibility in time and location—and student services, which are often limited to normal institutional business hours and practices (Crawley, 2012). Those services that are available online may be limited, thus preventing online learners from gaining full access to the services needed for success.

While technology and trends are ever developing, technology still produces flexibility in terms of interacting. Regardless of format, it is important for student services professionals to remember the goal is the same: “communication must be accurate and timely and messages must reach intended recipients and accomplish intended goals” (Crawley, 2012, p. 8). Professionals can now take advantage of the technology available to create virtual communities and as a means of engaging students and facilitating success. Distance learning pedagogy emphasizes building connections to minimize distance, increase trust and relationships, and provide encouragement and safe exploration, which can result in a more successful learning experience (Kostina & LaGanza, 2012; Schwier & Dykes, 2007). The same emphasis on connection can be applied to student services. Student services provide learning opportunities and support for success outside of the classroom, and student affairs professionals are encouraged to promote interactions which will support student needs (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2015).

From planning, to implementing, to evaluating and revising, “supporting online students is a collaborative effort” (Crawley, 2012, p. 1) and should involve individuals from across campus while seeking to address administrative, academic, and personal services. Likewise, examining current and innovative practices from other institutions may assist professionals in creating quality programs for success of online students at their own institution.

Current Practices

Online services, much like course interactions, are primarily delivered through learning management systems, websites (external and “secure internal websites, sometimes referred to as student portals” Crawley, p. 7), and social media applications. Communication may be asynchronous (occurring over separate times) communication, synchronous (real time) communication, or both.

Common administrative or logistic supports include “course registration, examination requests . . . purchasing textbooks and course materials” (Moisey & Hughes, 2008, p. 425). It is important to consider offering comparable services to online learner in a way that minimizes confusion for the student yet also limits duplication of services for the institution. The institution should make the available services, methods, and timeliness explicit to students. The service standards can also be useful in the setting and comparing of service benchmarks.

The Institutional Website

On a basic service level, websites provide information for students, especially prospective students. According to research by Eduventures (2008, as cited in Crawley, 2012), about half of prospective adult students turn to websites for program information, and report wanting to find (a) “photos of people who look like them” (Crawley, p. 15), (b) cost, (c) scheduling, (d) reputation, and (e) class size. The website should align with Knowles’ theory of adult learning, recognizing adult learners benefit from understanding why they are learning particular material, benefit from seeing the immediate value of content, benefit from experiential learning, and tend to approach learning as problem solving.

Online Student Vetting

It is important potential online students make an “informed decision” (Moisey & Hughes, 2008, p. 421) by understanding the needs and demands of online learning in general, and their program in specific, and are able to assess their personal fit. Many institutions use self-assessment tools to encourage learners to check for readiness, verify technical minimums are met, and that the student has appropriate career goals. Stanly Community College provides *The EDGe Experience*, an online preparation tool to introduce students to the learning management system, and provide information on the technological, self-efficacy, and communication skills necessary for online learning success (Stanly Community College, 2015a).

To verify readiness and alignment of goals, academic advising, and career counseling are also used to address motivation and preparing the student for expedient completion or transfer. A number of online programs offer online advising or counseling, such as Penn State World Campus (2015) and University of Maryland–University College (2015).

Help Desks and Information Centers

Information and technology support may be provided as an information center, a technical helpdesk, or a call center (Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Regardless of format, it is important for help to be reliable, readily available through some means (e.g., website or email) with at least some synchronous access time, have a thorough and quick follow-up, provide clear instructions, and monitor for problems, and suggest solutions to institutional barriers. In alignment with IT, the creation of a portal

system can simply a students' experience by streamlining the number of separate pages and log-ins required by an institution, making a more streamlined learning experience for the student (Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Portals can also provide individualization while integrating online interaction, both of which may increase student satisfaction. For example, Stanly Community College's "My Page" is an individualized dashboard connected to the homepage which pulls data from student records and academic planning to provide key resource links, personalized account holds, program of study and advisor information, course schedule, academic plan, and more (J. Allen, personal communication, May 11, 2015).

Student support for distance learners may parallel corporate customer support centers who are seeking to serve and retain, personalize marketing, and manage information while seeking feedback (Kondra, Huber, Michalczuk, & Woudstra, 2008). While the parallel applies to all forms of student services, a specific equivalent of a corporate call center within higher education may be an IT helpdesk or a one-stop information center. The helpdesk, like a call center, provides a service through knowledge management via trained staff and serves as a point of contact for "immediate answers to questions" (p. 373) about multiple services. In the case of a help desk, students may ask about online courses within the learning management system itself but also general technical support. Beyond having staff available to directly diagnose a problem and provide a solution, a knowledge base and other information, such as a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) page, is good practice in order to direct technical expertise and resources toward more complex issues. For online student services when staffing may be limited in terms of hours or human resources overall, it may be especially important to provide information online for students to access independently 24/7 before contacting college staff.

There are other lessons to be learned from considering corporate call centers' methods of providing service (Kondra et al., 2008). Call centers are often consolidated to increase efficiency of coverage while reducing duplication. The agents are trained in a way that limits segmenting calls to particular agents, which is similar to cross training that may occur for college staff. Call center agents also receive more training on customer service and relations rather than emphasizing very specialized skills. This allows for a broader variety of service as a whole, and then a few experts may be available for exceptional cases. Another lesson from corporate call centers is the appearance of unity. Even though agents may be housed in different locations or have different backgrounds and specialized privileges, the customer sees a "single face" of the organization (Kotwal, as cited in Kondra et al., 2008). Integration may lead to "increased customer satisfaction" (p. 378) due to increased convenience and perceived harmony within the organization.

Critical factors for consideration in creating strong customer service from call centers, which may be parallel to online student services, are processes and policy, appropriate technology and support for staff and students alike, and necessary human resources (Kondra et al., 2008). A sense of connection and a reliable contact solution can "reduce student frustration in attempting to gain information" (Kondra et al., 2008, p. 390).

Orientation Courses

As a course assignment, students at North Carolina State University (NCSU) conducted a study to examine content and structure of an online orientation, which would be designed as a one credit-hour course focusing on not only technical skills but also appropriate expectations, netiquette, support resources, and assessing online learning readiness (Bozarth, Chapman, & LaMonica, 2004). Students and instructors were surveyed in order to “recognize and address student and instructor concerns” (p. 100) to increase student success. Both populations agreed to the importance of appropriate time expectations and time management skills, and both groups agreed students needed to honestly assess “their interests, commitment and abilities before enrolling in an online course” (p. 97), as online classes are not for everyone. Instructors believe skill deficits to be a large problem, whereas students believed the largest problems were time management and unclear expectations from instructors. The NCSU study provides insight into online orientation topics, online learning concerns from both students and faculty, and consideration of orientation delivery. Within real world practice, online orientations may be available as a non-credit module (e.g., Stanly Community College, 2015b; Western Kentucky University, 2015) or through credit-based academic success courses (e.g., Oregon State University Ecampus, 2015).

Academic Support

Students also need support in learning how to study and do their best; this may include tutoring, writing services, information literacy training, learning communities, and more (Moisey & Hughes, 2008). In particular, online students may need help adjusting to the new learning environment and expectations (both college and online). A holistic approach to the learner, aimed at encouraging the person to be an active participant in their education and become self-directed, may be beneficial. Online tutoring and writing assistance should be considered to provide academic support to students regardless of course format, whether the academic support service is based in-house, provide through a third-party service, or a combination thereof. For example, Oregon State University Ecampus (2015) provides tips from their Academic Success Center, uses a social media app to coordinate virtual study groups, and provides an online tutoring services; the University of Maryland–University College (2015) provides in-house online tutoring, mentoring, and writing support; and Western Kentucky University (2015) also provides in-house tutoring and writing center services.

Virtual Library

Virtual library support is an important element of online student services for successful completion. An increase in online and hybrid programs, plus the

increase in digital information being more and more readily available for learners, has “require[d] librarians to re-evaluate the way they develop, manage, and deliver resources and services” (Johnson, Trabelsi, & Fabbro, 2008, p. 397). As learners are more remotely located, they may be expected to be more self-reliant by instructors, and the vast amount of information possible online often means an increased need for information literacy; therefore, the role of librarian is shifting to educators rather than a traditional information keeper.

The provision of education on access and evaluating resources not only helps online students be more successful in their class, interactions with library staff can “increase the e-learners’ sense of connectedness to their library” (p. 402). Educational trainings may be provided through webinars, personalized text or video chats, phone calls, or emails. Websites are often be customized to make information easy to access as well, making librarian knowledge conveniently available to learners 24/7. Typical examples are weblogs or FAQs, and imbedded or linked website multimedia, such as instructional videos on research.

As with other services, students, and faculty or staff, may turn to convenient digital resources and services regardless of course format. The digital delivery of content increases flexibility, portability, and availability of content in an on-demand timeliness. Online content may include “licensed digital resources . . . online catalogues, indexing, and abstracting systems” (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 400). Additionally, libraries may provide subscription and training on accessing subscription-based and open-source databases hosted online (e.g., NCLive, Google Scholar). In addition to online services, some colleges provide their online students with access to physical resources through collaborating with other, closer to the student higher education institutions for the use of their physical libraries (e.g., East Carolina University (2015)). Others may use the postal service to deliver, and return, content to the distant learner (e.g., Appalachian State University, 2015a).

As with other student services, the virtual library works best through planning and partnerships. As a starting point, librarians would benefit from the correct technology and support, ongoing professional development, and strong collaboration among library staff. Building relationships and support with other campus faculty and staff can strengthen the assessment, development, delivery, and ongoing review of services to better serve the institution, programs, and classes (Johnson et al., 2008). Through ongoing communication with staff, resources and support will be better selected and tailored toward specific student needs. Student feedback is also beneficial to make materials and support more user-friendly. Collaboration beyond the institution, through institutional or professional partnerships, can also increase effectiveness of online services.

Counseling and Disability Services

Educational and career counseling may be beneficial through online services, but personal counseling is likely to be limited to referral, which may be more challenging due to the possible variety of locations for online students (Moisey &

Hughes, 2008). Services for students with disabilities are also of particular importance to consider when creating online services. Such services may include providing information, being institutionally prepared to implement appropriate academic and technical accommodations and support, providing related program or career counseling services, assisting with service registration and advocacy, and having staff available to serve as liaison or provide assistance services. As with on-campus students, online students with disabilities may need course accommodations, exam accommodations, external support (e.g., interpreter or note taker), or assistive technology, with possible technical support.

Student Committees

Online students would benefit from an advocate, who may identify and work within policies and procedures of the institution. An advocate would serve as someone who is willing to speak up on behalf of the student should an issue arise (Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Students may also be able to participate in committees or institutional governance in a way that allows students to advocate for themselves or their fellow online learners. One such example is Appalachian State University's Distance Education Student Advisory Committee (Appalachian State University, 2015b). Within the committee, a number of volunteers from various levels, programs, and delivery sites or methods are selected in order to "exploring and reporting on issues related to Distance Education at Appalachian State, collaborating with each other on projects, and leading discussions on assigned topics" (Appalachian State University, 2015b, p. 3).

An Example of Comprehensive Services

Lone Star College-Online provides an innovative approach to online student support services, offering online services seven days a week (Britto & Rush, 2011). A variety of services are available, including (a) online advising, (b) case management advising for first-time, online college students, (c) new student orientation, and (d) an early alert system. The vast majority of students surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the college's online services, and Lone Star's report includes information on staffing and tools used for implementing such a system. Insight into the real world practices of other colleges can be beneficial in seeing how various services can be successfully integrated for online students.

Western Kentucky University (2015) provides a Student Resource Portal with convenient tab categories to help online students find a range of support services, from student support to technology services, exams library services, helpful hints, and quick links. Other online institutions, such as Oregon State University Ecampus (2015), Penn State World Campus (2015), Stanly Community College (2015c), and University of Maryland–University College (2015), provide student services website pages with summaries of support services and links to the unique sites to make support evident and easy to navigate.

A Closer Look

Because online learning now includes a diverse population of students and situations, there are a variety of student needs and approaches when it comes to student services. Some students may be partially online or at least live nearby, whereas others may be across the state, country, or even world from the college. Some want live interaction and personalized help, whereas others want to review information themselves.

Organizations have created different models of online student services to emphasize the cohesiveness needed. The WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) had produced a spider web framework of various services to “help institutions plan and implement online student services” (Crawley, 2012, p. 54; WCET, 2002). Services within the WCET model are divided into the following major categories: academic services suite (academic advising and counseling, assessment and testing, bookstore, library, technical support, tutoring), communications suite, administrative core suite (admissions, catalog, course schedule, financial aid, registration, and student accounts and records), student communities suite, and personal services suite (orientation, career services, personal counseling, health and wellness, ethical and legal services). Each area is important for student success and should be seamless to the student, who is impacted by and functions within the influence of all different departments of a college. Because a variety of services are necessary for student support, it is important to plan, implement, evaluate, and revise online student services with input from a team of professionals from across campus while seeking to provide services which retain students, encourage completion, and “develop the whole person” (p. 80).

As students’ time on campus has become limited to none, it is important to offer quality online services. Rowh (2014) suggests increasing quality of services through the “seven ways to provide exceptional support for online students” (para. 7): robust orientation, timely responses, trained advisors, accessible sessions, included social experiences, help with job connections, and collected student feedback. Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) offer the Inclusive Student Services Process Model with five phases: learner intake (goal setting, admissions, registration, orientation, intake assessment and advising, financial aid, homepage support), learner intervention (instruction, faculty advising, help desk support, and student success programs), learner support (environment management, sense of belonging, counseling, academic advising, instructional support and tutoring, library services, disability services), learner transition (goal reassessment, transfer articulation, job placement), and measurement (course effectiveness, retention and persistence, graduation rates, goal achievement) to examine the overall effectiveness of online programs. To retain students, purposeful and satisfactory online services are required and should be carefully planned and implemented systematically to “ensure satisfaction and success among *all* students” (Floyd & Casey-Powell, p. 63, emphasis added).

Even if an institution does not plan comprehensive services based on model like the WCET framework or the Inclusive Student Services Process Model,

common services for online students are varied and include “academic advising, academic support (tutoring), admissions, bookstore, bursar, career counseling and job placement, financial aid, library, registrar, student community, and testing” (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, p. 89). Additional services may include student legal affairs (such as “harassment, discrimination, stalking, and other unwanted activities,” Shelton & Saltsman, p. 95) and services for students with disabilities. To help student retention and success, students need to connect with faculty and staff, feel safe and secure in interacting with others online, become increasingly comfortable with technology, oriented to college or online learning, and have necessary student support services. A comprehensive approach is beneficial. The Blackboard Institute (n.d.) surveyed 196 institutions with high retention rates in order to identify nine effective practices that may be most effective in helping online students persist and complete. The nine practices for strong student services included engaging prospective learners throughout enrollment, allowing advance access to the online classroom, providing access to course resources, offering counseling or mentoring for online learning, addressing technical issues right away, providing clear and flexible office hours, identifying “at risk” students, offering services after program completion, and making financial aid seamless.

Recommendations for Implementation

Implementation is a challenge separate from understanding the support service options available. It takes a dedicated staff and faculty to develop, deploy, and maintain online student services. This includes active support from administrative leaders and careful planning that engages support from a wide range of institutional stakeholders.

Leadership

Leadership, especially “upper-level administrative support” (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, p. 10) is crucial in creating and carrying through with an online educational program. Online education needs someone in a position of top power who is willing to be a “champion” (Shelton & Saltsman, p. 10) for online programs at the institution. He or she will be able to advance the program best by being seen taking active role and displaying leadership traits such as “integrity and openness, fairness, honesty, and respect” (p. 10). Through “construct[ing] a vision and plan for accomplishing the vision,” a leader can influence “conditions for innovative change” (p. 11). This is not to say that only those within top leadership positions should be involved or championing for online educational programs, but that good leadership is also necessary for advancing change and innovation. I am in agreement with Shelton and Saltsman, who point out, “a combination of top-down leadership alongside bottom-up support ... creates the most success” (p. 12). By having buy-in from a variety of levels and positions, the institutional climate and culture is more likely to be conducive for implementing and supporting online programs.

Services Planning

Providing online student services, as with any program development or modification, will provide careful planning. It is beneficial to bring together voices from across campus to create a stronger, more comprehensive service approach to helping students online (Crawley, 2012; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). A collaboration from multiple departments will encourage communication and help to breakdown silos to increase collaboration of services without duplication.

Planning of the committee may vary from short term (i.e., tactical, which refers to the shortest scope of action within the next year), to moderate (i.e., operational, preparing for the next 1–5 years), to long term (i.e., strategic, as short as 3 years or as long as 20 or so; Pisel, 2008). According to Pisel, creating a strong strategic plan requires a number of people working through 10 separate phases: (a) creating a cross sectional team, with leadership support; (b) generation of support and statement of needs and goals, typically from leadership; (c) SWOT and needs or gap analyses; (d) generation of a program mission, in alignment with institutional mission and vision; (e) filling in the knowledge gaps; (f) create courses of action; (g) select and present top course of action to leadership, with clear rationale; (h) create team for execution of plan, with proper authority to do so; (i) ongoing assessment and adjustment of program; and (j) periodically evaluate in terms of overall goals and SWOT.

An assessment of current practices and policies, to determine services, availability, delivery methods, and any gaps and overlaps between student services, is important to begin the process (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Such a close needs and services examination will be beneficial in realistically evaluating and planning to provide services not only for online students but also for all student populations (e.g., evening students, commuters, part-time students, etc.). To assess current services, creating a workflow of the current practices and procedures can help identify potential barriers for online students, such as requiring students to complete a process on campus.

There are a couple of major tensions to consider when creating an online learning system: academic or administrative computing and centralization or decentralization (Davis, Little, & Stewart, 2008). From the standpoint of delivering a quality experience to the student, and even staff, interdependence and seamless service is important. An online system can actually deliver a stronger product to the user, as integration and customization can be provided in a way that is “only achievable through online delivery” (p. 133), as physical services run into economic and practical barriers that necessitate separation of divisions. Yet, ongoing assessment and adjustments, and careful consideration of “related issues” (p. 134), such as hardware, policies, support and training, human resources, and administration, organization change, leadership, ongoing changes and trends, clear communication, and more, need to be honestly discussed and evaluated.

Conclusion

As more students take advantage of online learning options, both 4-year institutions and community colleges need to make greater investment in the online support services offered to students who may rarely (or never) come to the college's physical campus. Online services can encourage a relationship and foster engagement if handled correctly. Regardless of the institutional context, academic and non-academic support is important in the interest of "ensuring success, promoting persistence, and avoiding drop-out" (Moisey & Hughes, 2008, p. 419). Students need to feel connected to their college and to have access to useful support. For online learners in particular, said support needs to be readily and continually available, much like their mode of study.

Student services support students in both their academic pursuits (e.g., virtual access to libraries, tutoring options, and writing center availability) and engage students as part of the college community, with access to social and institutional governance activities. Online student support can and should offer distant learners opportunities to engage with the college at all levels. Research and current model practices indicate engagement is possible and practical, but it takes careful planning and active leadership to put viable support services in place and maintain them over time. Continued study of the services necessary and case study reports of successful implementation of these services is recommended.

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