

Student Support Services

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INTRODUCTION

Success secret number one for a successful online learning program, according to Jeffrey Feldberg, chairman and CEO of Embanet Corp. and who has launched several successful online programs, is “live technical support” (Feldberg, 2001, p. 1). Many student support services, like technical support, are critical to the successful learning experience of all students, but especially for students who are engaged in online learning at a distance. One director of student support services for an online learning program said it this way: “If they’re having trouble with the technology, it’s like showing up at class and the door’s locked and they can’t get in” (Kelly, 2001, p.5). And, just as trouble with technology may keep the class door locked for one student, so can any other unmet student need for another student.

Like campus students, students at a distance or online expect high-quality, effective student support services to help them achieve their academic goals. Even though the student should be the number one concern, student support services are often not considered when distance-education programs are discussed, designed and developed (Moore, 2000). Tony Bates agrees and identifies the “incorporat[ion of] student services” as one of the 12 important lessons for distance education administrators to learn. He also makes the point that, “If your distance-education program is part of a university-wide plan for learning, then you will likely find that it is equally attractive to both traditional and distance students” (Bates, 2003, p. 1), thereby expanding the reach and role of student support services.

MEETING STUDENT NEEDS

Traditional student-support services for distance-education and online students may not be enough. As one dean

of continuing education and distance learning noted: “I think we need to . . . admit that a good distance-learning program may have to deliver more services to the student than the traditional program, particularly in the administrative/student services area” (Bothel, 2001, para. 3). Moore (2000, p.1) suggests that support services for learners “should include at least the following elements: pre-enrollment activities such as recruiting and orientation, admissions and registration support, academic advising, financial planning and management, access to library and bookstore resources, personal and career counseling, degree and transcript services, and technical support.” At one institution, approximately one-fourth of the surveyed students “reported interest in various types of social function services such as . . . a student newspaper, academic clubs, . . . and access to an online psychologist” (LaPadula, 2003, p. 127). In short, the most appropriate student services are those the students at a particular institution need most. “Knowing student needs is essential to an effective student services program” (Ambler, 1989, p. 255).

After identifying what student services students would most like, program administrators must then differentiate among essential student services and those that would be “nice.” The balancing of institutional resources with student needs and wants will determine how many of the nice-but-not-so-necessary student services are made available. However, accommodating the disabled is one of those student-support services that should always be considered necessary and not just “nice” – for both moral and legal reasons.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FIT

Not only does the online or distant learner need “more services” – or at least a different configuration of services – the online program administrators also depend

on better services to complement their marketing efforts to not only current but also prospective students. It is a well-documented fact that the marketing costs to retain one student are significantly less than those costs to recruit one new student. Knowing and attending to students' needs will inform marketing strategies (Malan, Rigby & Glines, 1991). And once students' needs are identified and fitting support services are mapped to these needs, both the enrolled as well as the prospective students should be informed of their availability. One study found that many students are not aware of the services available to them. Marketing excellent student services can not only help retain current students in the program but also attract new students to it (Cain, Marrara, Pitre & Armour, 2003).

Excellent student service is sometimes the only distinguishing characteristic of two comparable online or distance education programs. The best course content and faculty coupled with the best marketing efforts cannot compensate for deficient or even mediocre student support services. Students served well serve the program well by telling their friends; students disappointed in the services of a program can easily and quickly hurt a program by discouraging other students from enrolling. The programs with the best student support services will not only retain current students but also attract new ones.

While competent and inspiring online instructors with well-designed content are frequently associated with program success, student support services cannot be ignored. Some theorists have linked student satisfaction with the academic support services to educational outcomes (Cain & Lockee, 2002). A distance education program that recruits outstanding faculty and develops exceptional courses may no longer be enough for students if support services are lacking, especially as more and more educational providers compete for online and distant learners. All three dimensions of the online or distance learning experience – that is, faculty, instruction and support services – are vital to the success of the whole academic experience. Furthermore, well-designed courses and properly trained online instructors will mitigate the demand on support services just as a well-staffed and -trained student support department will influence student perception of course quality and instructor effectiveness.

PROGRAM RETENTION AND COURSE COMPLETION

An important characteristic of a successful distance education program is high rates of course completion and student retention at the program level. Effective student services not only meet students' needs but can also contribute to both student retention and course completion. While "effective student services are student-centered and value added, superb student services not only . . . meet the student needs, but also go the extra mile to help them become successful. Student-focused services create a positive experience, which may lead to higher retention" (Burnett & Oblinger, 2003, p.28). The literature on the role of student services in the online learning process, though not abundant (Cain & Lockee, 2002), does yield significant findings, particularly in the areas of course completion and program retention rates.

Mary Hricko of Kent State University identifies seven support services to assist students in completing their courses of study:

- 1) Provide students an orientation to the course.
- 2) Allow students to engage in a formative assessment throughout the course.
- 3) Educate students that the technology and content of the course are two different elements of the course.
- 4) Bring campus life to the class.
- 5) Be innovative, and establish an online learning community.
- 6) Be available.
- 7) Partner students with study buddies (2003).

Another researcher, Kasworm (2002), lists 10 support service strategies for improving student retention:

- 1) Provide initial entry advisement, orientation and career counseling.
- 2) Offer financial assistance or financial counseling.
- 3) Provide academic and basic skill development opportunities.
- 4) Establish policies and procedures oriented to adult learners.

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