

21st Century E-Student Services

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STUDENT SERVICES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Developments in information technology and distance learning are revolutionizing the way postsecondary education is organized and delivered in the United States and the world. Higher education is undergoing a fundamental transformation. How higher education transforms in the early years of the 21st century will set the context for the extent to which higher education as an institution will continue to serve as the primary deliverer of educational content, certificates, and degrees. A critical element in this knowledge transfer is the depth and breadth of online student services support. This article will explore the design and development of such services in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System¹ (www.mnscu.edu).

In this Knowledge Age, citizens can learn every day—anytime and anywhere. In addition to a growing student population that is not only becoming older and increasingly diverse, there is a rapid rise of a digital generation (Tapscott, 1998) that expects and demands that this learning be interactive, collaborative, distributed, and lifelong. To meet the changing needs of students and the changing nature of work and careers in the 21st century (Howell, 2003), colleges and universities need to develop and design not only appropriate emerging curriculum, but also on-demand interaction and online services (Kassop, 2003). It is not only the distance education or technology-savvy students who expect, need, and use such services, but also commuter and dormitory students. It is not about distance, but the amount of technology involved, where the learning starts, and how services are structured. Some of the characteristics of these new, digital learners are:

- Older than “average” undergraduate
- Place bound
- Broad set of responsibilities/roles
- Working in a career field

- Limited time to devote to studies
- Emerging multi-mode student
- Technology savvy
- Accustomed to service on demand
- Expect choice and convenience
- Become the ‘hardy’ learner of the future (Milliron, 2001)

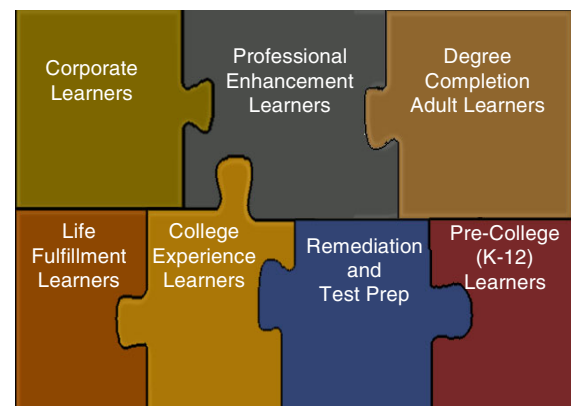
Online student services connect students to the institution, to the faculty, and to other students on their schedule and needs. But are all students the same, with the same needs?

Learner Segments

There is more than one learner type. Through research conducted for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, seven different learner segments have been identified (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2001).

1. Corporate Learners—individuals employed in a corporate setting and seeking education to advance their careers

Figure 1. Seven learner segments



2. Professional Enhancement Learners—individuals seeking to advance or shift their careers
3. Degree Completion Learners—individuals seeking to complete a degree, typically older students also employed full time
4. Life Fulfillment Learners—individuals interested in education for its own sake
5. College Experience Learners—typically the traditional 18- to 24-year-old residential college student
6. Remediation and Test Preparation Learners—individuals interested in learning as a prerequisite for an examination or entrance to an educational program
7. Pre-College (K-12) Learners—individuals interested in taking post-secondary work prior to completion of high school

Online, interactive services will need to be provided to each segment in an individualized and content-specific way. Current portal developments (St. Sauver, 2004) provide the customization and personal content and services all learners in this digital age expect.

A higher education e-learning system must leverage the best content created and establish a seamless gateway so that learners can access the content from any number of entry points. In the digital age, with e-learners taking control of their learning process, these relationships are simply indispensable. As these “hardy” e-learners (Milliron, 2001) control and manage more of their own information and knowledge, educational institutions must help learners do so actively and responsibly.

Learners need easy access to career and education information and decision-making tools through gateways or portals in order to create their seamless pathway to lifelong learning and occupational success. Critical to this process is the development of an electronic mentoring system. Since learners today are digital, they will be presenting their accomplishments, résumé, and competencies in digital formats within the context of electronic portfolios (Educause, 2004). The examination of 21st Century E-Student Services at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities will feature online information and tools that provide access and interaction.

INFORMATION RESOURCES, TOOLS, AND REPOSITORIES

To navigate their lifelong education journey, digital learners need to have access to: a) career and education information, b) decision-making assessments and tools, and c) a personal, electronic repository or portfolio. The portfolio provides an electronic locker for relevant information and other personal documentation, such as journals, goals statements, résumés, academic history, and course/work projects, and forms the basis of an e-mentoring environment.

Career and Education Information Resources

ISEEK (www.iseek.org) is a portal in Minnesota for seamless access to career and education information. ISEEK is an acronym for Internet System for Education and Employment Knowledge and is managed through a collaboration² that is unique in the country. The site provides information on exploring careers (descriptions, labor market information, skill requirements, career planning process, etc.), planning your education (finding a school, program, area of study or course, admission and financial aid information, and steps to higher education), and finding a job (job application steps, search job postings, salary search, information on state and local businesses, information on job loss and transition, etc.). In addition, there is an employer section with resources to find employees and employer services, such as immigration or unemployment tax issues. There is also an interactive training fulfillment center that electronically connects counselors with other counselors, as well as employers with training providers to fulfill requested needs.

Through ISEEK, a user does not have to search different Web sites to find information, but can go to one place to learn about a career, view a video about that career, and find skill requirements and schools offering that training, along with typical salaries. By sharing information that typically is maintained in silos by the different data custodians, students from middle school through lifelong learners have a user-friendly system in which to research and find appropriate career and education information.

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