
Chapter XIV

eLearning Support Systems

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ABSTRACT

Students who choose Web-based education (WBE) declare their preference for time- and place-independent learning. They reject relocating or commuting to university campuses and instead seek courses that they can take from the comfort of their homes or offices. Such students are seeking education that is accessible, practical, and convenient, while still providing a quality learning experience. In the WBE market, students view themselves as customers, and universities and other educational providers must consider how they plan to attract, serve, and retain students throughout the educational experience. The authors propose the development of an integrated educational support system infrastructure to help shepherd WBE students from application to graduation. Such support systems should address many aspects of the teaching and learning process, including administrative support, faculty and instructional design support, technical support, library and reference services, and student and program support services.

INTRODUCTION

Web-based education (WBE) has closed the distance between students and institutions. No longer do students need to travel to North Carolina, Maryland, or New York to attend institutions such as Duke, the University of Maryland, or NYU. Such traditional nonprofit

universities compete with for-profit ventures such as the University of Phoenix and Jones International University, offering online programs for distance learners. WBE diffusion is not limited to Western countries; universities in developing countries including India, Nepal, and Africa also offer online courses (Irin, 2002; Dawn, 2002).

The rapid growth of online courses is due in no small part to their low production costs. Unlike earlier distance education approaches, such as print-based correspondence courses and full-motion videoconferencing, WBE does not require significant equipment or publishing costs. A motivated instructor can create and publish components of a Web-based course on a personal computer and then upload the materials to a free Web-hosting service for global access. The relative ease of creating Web-based materials, however, can mask challenges that face WBE providers. Palloff and Pratt (2001) noted that institutions that fail to develop an adequate faculty and student support infrastructure will eventually encounter significant problems. In a recent survey of online students at one university, support services were ranked in the top five issues (Aggarwal, 2001; Legon, 2002).

Legon (2002) and Aggarwal (2001) proposed that organizations should view Web-based education as a form of e-business, because universities are competing with for-profit organizations in the marketplace. They argue that universities should develop WBE using the same process that e-businesses use when developing new products, including project planning, cost-benefit analysis, and market research (Alter, 2002). While universities regularly spend millions of dollars erecting new buildings to support campus-based instruction, comparably little consideration is usually given to the structural support and service needs of Web-based programs. Whether this is a deliberate budgetary decision to keep WBE expenses down or an oversight prompted by the relative ease in which Web-based courses can be created, institutions would be wise to consider the need for quality support services. A comprehensive educational support system infrastructure should be developed to help shepherd WBE students from application to graduation. Such support systems would address many aspects of the teaching and learning process, including administrative support, faculty and instructional design support, technical support, library and reference services, and student and program support services. Based on the authors' experiences with online degree programs, this chapter highlights such support issues and offers recommendations to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support quality online education.

BACKGROUND

While there has been a significant amount of literature addressing pedagogical aspects of WBE, comparably little has specifically addressed student support issues. In Berge and Mrozowski's (2001) review of distance education research from 1990 to 1999, they found that the quantity of literature addressing learner support, operational issues, and policy and management issues lagged behind more frequently addressed topics such as design issues, learner characteristics, and strategies to increase interactivity and active learning. Similarly, in a panel discussion at the 18th Annual Conference of Distance Teaching and Learning, Michael Moore noted that policy and organizational issues are the major challenges facing distance learning providers, but the research has been largely dominated by pedagogical and technological topics.

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