



Chapter 19

Meeting in the Middle: Envisioning Postpandemic–Responsive Student Support Services

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ABSTRACT

As institutions of higher education began their full returns to campus in Fall 2021, questions arose about continuing the flexible student support services that emerged during the pandemic, the expectations students might have of the post-shutdown world, and whether there would be equity between the support of on-campus students and those who remained at a distance. This chapter details the literature amassed during the height of the pandemic and the findings of a study focused on the online organizational structures that emerged as campuses were shut down when COVID-19 was sweeping the United States in early 2020. Interview participants detailed the rapid rollout of robust student support services that were offered in a virtual mode during the height of the pandemic. Participants hoped for the long-term continuance of services that offered better support to online and remote students, as well as those that could more robustly support on-campus students who choose to consume services in a more multimodal way.

As institutions of higher education (IHE) began their full returns to campus in fall 2021, questions arose about continuing the flexible student support services that emerged during the pandemic, the expectations students might have of the post shutdown world, and whether there would be equity between the support of on-campus students and those who remained at a distance. The long-standing affinity for

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on-campus services had already started to reappear at campuses worldwide, as some virtual services offered in 2020 and early 2021 began to recede. Key lessons may be quickly forgotten as postpandemic life returns to in-person interactions, even with surges in viral outbreaks causing temporary shutdowns in 2022. This chapter details a call-to-action for a recommitment to online and virtual student support by institutions of higher education by highlighting the literature amassed during the height of the pandemic and the findings of a study focused on the online organizational structures that emerged as campuses were shut down when COVID-19 was sweeping the United States in early 2020. Interview participants detailed the rapid rollout of robust student support services that were offered in a virtual mode during the height of the pandemic, such as learning support, tutoring, and mental health services. Participants hoped for the long-term continuance of services that offered better support to online (students who access their courses primarily through the internet) and remote students (students being taught through methods only particular to the pandemic shutdowns), as well as those that could more robustly support on-campus students who choose to consume services in a more multimodal way (e.g., an on-campus student choosing to access mental health services virtually for convenience).

Multimodality refers to using different modes to do something such as accessing a service in-person or through the internet (Dictionary.com, n.d.). In an educational setting, the term is more often situated within a learning context: “learning environments [that] allow instructional elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (visual, aural, written)” (Sankey et al., 2010, p. 853). Ample literature suggests that any time an institution can leverage student choice through multimodality, learning is activated at deeper levels. This results in increased student motivation and success (Adie et al., 2018; Bahou, 2012; Gordon, 2018; Koops, 2017; Luo et al., 2019). While multimodality has been heavily studied in learning environments, it can also apply to the services students can benefit from (whether in-person or virtually) during their academic journey, including but not limited to the areas of student onboarding (e.g., application for admittance, acceptances, and other orientation and welcoming events), financial aid (e.g., availability of financial aid counselors to assist in electronically completing and filing for educational funding), registration (e.g., class registration and degree planning), learning support (e.g., extended staff hours, tutoring, coaching, and disability accommodations), student activities (e.g., clubs, student events, honor societies), and career development (e.g., career counselor availability on the evenings and weekends, career development activities, and job fairs).

Applying multimodality across the span of services at institutions of higher education lines up with recent societal shifts related to the on-demand economy as well. Technology companies have transformed the mindset of consumers: they want to access goods and services immediately and through the mode of their choice (Jaconi, 2014; Thayer, 2021). This consumer shift has reached different sectors, such as retail and news, and the on-demand economy and what some call “experience liquidity” is also more recently found in higher education. Students now compare services accessed through different modes and express the need for more on-demand support and services (Thayer, 2021). Thayer (2021) argued that institutions that fail to heed the call for more multimodality in learning and student support may fall behind peers that are doing so or already had strength in these areas prior to the pandemic.

This chapter provides a set of clear and actionable recommendations that highlight the need for a balance between student support services that can be accessed in-person and those that can be accessed virtually. This chapter’s advice brings attention to the need for multimodal (on-campus and virtual) models of student support at institutions of higher education. These would address equity between online, remote, and on-campus students, as well as the needs of contemporary students. It makes the case for how institutions can: (a) learn from the shutdowns and pivots related to the pandemic and the

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