
In 2002, I moved to academia after a career in the engineering industry. One of the questions I was asked in my interviews at the college was whether I could teach online. I had taught via distance learning in a fairly loose model, working with engineers and support staff across the globe in my role as a technical communications manager. To say I could teach online was a bit of a stretch, but I was not one to shy away from a challenge, and frankly, I really wanted this job.

I got the job. In those first semesters of my new position teaching English, the online student services we offered were growing, and we were trying to keep up with the demands of our students. In the early years of our distance learning initiatives, we instituted a cross-functional team that worked on streamlining processes and extending assistance to our online students, at a time when there were few out-of-house alternatives. We focused extensively on what our students needed, and we adjusted where we could and made workarounds wherever we could not change a process or policy. Now, sixteen years later, how we support online students has changed dramatically—mostly because we have continued to seek solutions that help our students succeed in their courses and obtain their career objectives.

As of 2016, over 6 million students are taking online courses each year, and over two-thirds of those courses are at public institutions.¹ The numbers are stabilizing, after a fairly sharp rise before 2016. Part of the reason for the stabilization is that learning management systems and support structures have solidified and more colleges and universities have joined the online-offering arena. Online classes range from fairly independent study courses to robust, interactive courses, and from completely asynchronous courses to courses with some synchronous components. Some institutions have fully embraced online learning as another modality, whereas others have determined that this path does not meet their mission. While many colleges and universities are offering online student services to support their online learners, the types and levels of support vary widely. Accrediting bodies have been concerned with student services for online students for some time, and a very simple tenet to follow is that whatever student services are offered for on-campus students should be offered in an equitable fashion for online students. While this tenet may seem simple, its implementation can be complex and involved.

What?
What services are needed to support online learners? When offering online courses, higher education institutions should consider their students and how to best maximize the services already in place. What support is there for students to apply and register for classes on campus? Are there any variances for students who are not on campus? Once students are in classes, what technical support is available? Is there a help desk? Tutors? Computer support? Any service that students have available to them on campus should have an online equivalent. This may feel like an overwhelming, even Herculean, task. But as institutions review what they have in place, they can focus on the times and days that are available to support students and then review any obvious gaps. Not surprisingly, online students favor flexibility. Therefore, expecting online students to access student services only on Monday through Friday, and from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., is unrealistic. Staffing a comprehensive help desk is expensive and likely unrealistic, and even if some extended hours are offered, it is unlikely that an institution can guess which hours and times will be the highest volume. Much of the need for student access depends on how faculty set up their online courses. As an example, if the bulk of faculty who teach online have their class assignments due Sunday night at midnight, there will be a high demand for student support on Sunday evenings after 7 p.m. Very few institutions have established consistent due dates across classes for when assignments must be completed. While this type of flexibility is normal in traditional on-campus classes, it complicates the task of anticipating when online learners will need help.

Where?
Where should these services be housed? Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of determining where to offer online services can be determining the need (as noted above), but a second concern is understanding what can be most effectively handled in-house and what would be best supplied by an outside company. Those who provide student services on campus may have definitive ideas about how to provide services to those students who may not ever set foot on the physical campus. It is important to get this input as decisions are made; however, understanding online student learning patterns is also critical. Some staff may want to shift hours

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and see if they can provide additional services at different times. Technical staff or a student help desk that can assist with a broad range of issues may be the most useful in this regard. In other areas, such as tutoring, offering 24x7, all day, every day, access to subject-matter assistance may bring value to all students, including those who are not in online classes. Companies that offer tutoring services often employ tutoring professionals who live across the globe, which allows for the ability to offer assistance at any time. One of the best aspects of online learning is that students can learn at any time, which often means late at night or on the weekends. If institutions can provide subject-matter assistance at any time or any place, then student learning is not stalled when guidance is needed. Although providing this expertise in-house can be challenging, various global companies offer assistance in numerous subjects and across a range of available times.

Who?
Who should provide these services? The marketplace of online services has exploded in the past few years, including text-to-speech systems, tutoring services, help desks, intrusive advising, and more. Criteria to consider when reviewing the multitude of companies and services available will depend on the type of institution, the breadth of online offerings, and the dollars available to invest in external systems. Institutions should review the online courses offered and where students seem to have need and then work on delivering the solutions that meet those needs. If there are low-cost/no-cost solutions (e.g., online writing labs that provide a resource site), reviewing the need for online writing feedback services, such as paper review or plagiarism checkers, can be the next step. Text-to-speech software is especially helpful for those learners who may have reading challenges or for whom English is not their first language. Additionally, text-to-speech software tools generally have a recording component, allowing students to transfer print to aural modality, which can aid in processing and retention for some learners. Advising systems often function through the use of data and intelligent agents, and once set up, these systems require little personal intervention to send messages and follow up with students. Additional personal interventions can be handled during traditional work hours.

When?
When should institutions offer services for online students? The answer to this question should be obvious. If an institution is offering online classes, it should be providing student services to those online students. If an institution chooses not to provide services to online students, student retention and persistence will be negatively impacted. Start small if needed, but institutions should invest time and resources into the services that are necessary to support online students.

How?
How should institutions provide services? There is no cookie-cutter approach to serving students, whether those students are online or on campus. Institutions follow best practices in ways that make sense for them, and they make modifications as needed to support their own programs, departments, and student population. For example, if an institution has a high population of English learners, then providing additional support in that area makes sense because it will benefit those students. Using a text-to-speech reader, or a language-conversion tool, will be a useful service to these students, both on and off campus. To find best practices for online student services, look to organizations like EDUCAUSE or other nonprofits, to businesses that specialize in IT services for education, and to publications such as EDUCAUSE Review, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Inside Higher Ed.

Why?
Why support online learners? This is the easiest of all the questions to answer. Student success is why we do what we do. Supporting students in ways that benefit their learning and help them achieve mastery is the lynchpin for any service; helping students navigate through the higher education landscape and complete their programs of study is the key for ancillary student services. Failing forward is key. Do not be afraid to try new approaches to online student services, and do not overanalyze situations to the point of paralysis. Identify needs, review costs, make a good investment, and adapt as needed.

Note

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