

7 *This chapter describes exemplary community college student services programs and proposes a model designed to help community colleges reconfigure their support services for distance learners while also improving their services to on-campus students.*

New Roles for Student Support Services in Distance Learning

Deborah L. Floyd, Deborah Casey-Powell

Although “student services [have] always played a major role in the two-year college” (Helfgot, 1995, p. 45), many students’ physical time on campus has become virtually nonexistent as community colleges have expanded their distance learning programs. Hence, two-year colleges are challenged to find new ways to provide high-quality support services to both traditional and distance learners. This chapter discusses ways in which community colleges can strengthen the delivery of online courses to ensure that programs such as admissions, advising, and financial aid, as well as career and academic counseling, and library and registration services, are meeting the needs of distance learners. We rely on relevant research and literature in offering practical advice and ideas for research, policy, and implementation.

Characteristics of Successful Online Support Services

Successful online support services aid both students and faculty. As higher education expands its distance education offerings, “the diversity of its student population increases, particularly in the area of students’ proficiency with technology” (Bruso, 2001, p. 9). This inequity in skill level can create problems for institutions that desire to provide sound support services for students taking online courses. What kind of tutorials, for example, should be developed to help students navigate online curricula? Do online student support services have the potential to be a great equalizer among students, or will they provide quality services only to those with access to the most current technology? These are just two of the myriad questions and issues that must be explored by colleges hoping to effectively support distance learners.

Research indicates that successful distance learners have a distinct profile. According to Seeman (2001), they possess self-discipline and self-confidence and have the ability to work independently and overcome frustration and confusion. In addition, successful online students must have access to required software and technological services. Yet providing access to technology for all students creates several challenges for community colleges, especially in light of the diverse clientele that most of them serve.

Colleges must also support faculty and create learning environments and campus cultures that support the teaching of online classes: “Successful distance learning institutions support their faculty who, in effect, become both students and users of the technology tools they will use to deliver the courseware” (RDR Associates, 1998, p. 17). Positive integration of student and faculty support, as well as the use of effective technology, encourage meaningful interaction between students and college professionals, and can provide a successful model for effective teaching and learning that helps to ensure student success.

Guidelines for Developing Effective Online Support Services

A plethora of literature describes successful online student support services. The term *student support services* refers to a variety of nonacademic interactions that the student has with a college or university (Dirr, 1999). These include preenrollment services (recruiting, promotion, and orientation), admissions and registration, academic advising, financial planning and management, library and bookstore services, academic and career counseling, social support services, degree and transcript auditing, and technical support.

Several organizations have published guidelines for institutions offering distance education. For example, a policy statement from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2000) suggests that institutions offering distance education need to provide adequate access to an appropriate range of student support services, including admissions, financial aid, advising, delivery of course materials, and placement and counseling. Similarly, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) developed the *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (2002–03), which lists specific program requirements for supporting distance learners. Bruce Chaloux describes these SREB principles in detail in Chapter Ten of this volume.

In addition to these guidelines, colleges can use a variety of tools to assess the support services they offer. One assessment tool, the Online Student Services Self-Assessment Tool (OLSS-SAT), helps users review college Web sites for important links and online services for students. It is an effective tool to use to evaluate existing support services and to identify new services that may still be needed.

Practices for Incorporating Online Student Services

Community colleges often lack the resources or flexibility to implement separate support services to meet the unique needs of the distance learner. However, it is not always necessary to develop new services for these students; often support already exists in other college units. For example, instructional faculty already provide much advising and technical support. Rather than implement a dual system of student affairs programming, which can be a fiscal burden, Floyd and Weihe (1985) propose that community college student support professionals serve as “catalytic partners” to design services that can be used by both traditional and distance students in order “to ensure that all students’ needs are being met” (p. 128). As increasing numbers of students enroll in distance courses, a collaborative and efficient system of student services is essential.

The Learning Anytime Anyplace Partnership (LAAP), sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, offers an excellent model for incorporating existing student support services into distance learning programs. LAAP planners noted that most of the existing services on today’s community college campus were designed from the institution’s point of view, not that of the student. All too often, students are forced to go to various offices to receive support services—perhaps getting conflicting information and advice in the process. Students in the online environment often have the same experience; they may click from page to page and encounter conflicting information and advice. Instead, the LAAP’s Project Web model offers a framework for planning, organizing, and delivering integrated student services designed from the student’s point of view. Additional information about this model is available at <http://www.wcet.info/projects/laap/guidelines/overview.asp>.

Shea and Armitage (2003, n.p.) list several questions an institution should ask itself when incorporating online student support services:

Are the services designed from the student’s point of view, but tempered with the knowledge of the veteran staff? Are they seamlessly integrated, as appropriate? Are they interactive, providing real services online—not just information online about using available offline services? Do the services accommodate all users. . . . students, staff, and others as appropriate? Are the services flexible to accommodate customization by various departments or colleges? Will the services automate tasks to free staff to spend more time on personal services?

This list is not exhaustive, but it provides the important questions a student services support team should ask when thinking about designing new or adapting old services for online students.

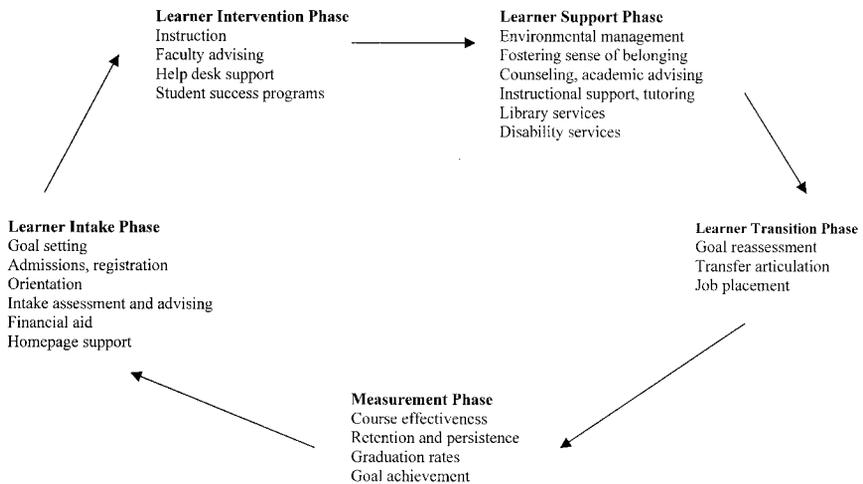
A Model for Providing Inclusive Student Services

By implementing a systematic and inclusive approach to developing online student services, community colleges can encourage the collaborative involvement of the entire academic community. The systems framework we propose, the Inclusive Student Services Process Model, is based loosely on Miller and Prince's (1976) student development process model, which was intended to "meet the needs of all students, to plan for change rather than react to it, and to engage the full academic community in this collaborative effort" (p. 21). This new model provides a framework for designing processes and programs to support students in both traditional and online courses. Following phases of student matriculation, the model identifies five phases of student support services: learner intake, learner intervention, learner support, learner transition, and measurement of effectiveness (see Figure 7.1). The following sections describe these five phases in detail and suggest student support strategies that can be used at each phase by discussing exemplary online services at ten community colleges. The community college programs were selected using the OLSS-SAT assessment tool (Cox, 2001), and their Web sites were reviewed for user-friendliness.

Learner Intake Phase. Setting goals and assessing students' readiness for learning, including their desire and ability to engage in distance learning, are the key tasks during the learner intake phase. Student support services involved in this phase include admissions, preenrollment assessment, registration, financial aid, information technology, and orientation.

In order to support prospective online students, admissions and orientation information should be clearly stated on a college's homepage because it is critical to students' decision to enroll. Similarly, a user-friendly Web site that clearly differentiates between services for distance and on-campus learners is imperative. Adequate information on the admissions process, testing procedures, phone numbers, career planning opportunities, assessment tools, and online representatives should be provided to demonstrate the college's commitment to its online programs and services. Offering virtual or online orientation is an easy and convenient way to build rapport with distance learners, and is essential to ensuring successful enrollment and retention.

Several community colleges have effectively implemented online admissions and orientation services. For example, Colorado Community Colleges Online (<http://www.ccconline.org>) has a virtual admissions representative who is available to answer questions, accept applications, and complete orientation. In addition, a link on the Web site allows students to take self-assessments to determine if distance learning is the right modality for them. Similarly, Pitt Community College's (North Carolina) Web site (<http://www.pitt.cc.nc.us>) offers distance learners a tutorial and a quiz to help explain how online instruction works at the college. As well, Houston Community College (Texas; <http://www.hccs.edu>) places the

Figure 7.1. Inclusive Student Services Process Model

student handbook online so students can read the code of conduct, find resources on campus, and learn about other student support services. Pitt Community College and Houston Community College also post links to their course catalogues and academic calendars.

Online support services for students seeking financial aid should be clear and concise and include deadlines for applications, fee schedules and payment options, and links to scholarships, government loans, and other loan sites. The Web site should also include a link to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov>). Pitt Community College and Bellevue Community College (Washington; <http://www.bcc.ctc.edu>) both offer links to scholarship and federal financial aid resources on their Web sites. These links provide valuable information on available financial resources as well as on procedures for applying for and receiving financial aid.

Community college Web sites should also clearly describe and explain the registration process, schedule, and policies. As well, students should be able to find out how to add or drop a course, check grades, verify tuition owed, and access course schedules through the registration Web site. Brevard Community College (Florida; <http://web2010.brevard.cc.fl.us>) and Bellevue Community College both give students online access to course schedules, registration procedures, grades, and transcripts.

Learner Intervention Phase. Online courses are delivered during the second phase of the model, learner intervention. The primary goal during this phase is to assist students in self-development and independent learning. Support strategies offered in this phase include instruction on student success strategies, student help desk support, technology training, and online faculty advising. Faculty advisers and help desk support are integral to ensuring student success in the learner intervention phase.

Rio Salado College in Arizona, for example, offers distance learners ample resources in support of traditional and online academic services. Rio Salado offers a technology help desk and “Successful Start Workshops,” and its Web site (<http://www.rio.maricopa.edu>) provides links to problem-solving resources. The site also includes a link to a “suggestion box,” where students can deposit ideas for making the Web site more user-friendly.

Effective community college Web sites also provide technology training to both students and faculty. Rio Salado College’s Web site links to a training site for adjunct faculty. Similarly, Brevard Community College’s site provides links to tools for faculty and students, and to a help desk that can assist the online user.

Learner Support Phase. During the learner support phase, students learn self-development strategies so that they can accept responsibility for developing their own skills. Key support services during this phase are academic advising, instructional support and tutoring, library and bookstore services, disability services, and networking.

Community colleges offering distance learning courses must provide effective online advising, tutoring, and testing to assist students with course selection and placement. Professional advice is critical in helping students meet their degree or certificate objectives, and students must be placed in the correct course levels if they are to succeed academically. Student services during the learner support phase must offer study tips, test-taking tips, and external instructional resources such as tutoring; also important is providing reasonable accommodations to distance learning students with disabilities, and designing Web sites with links to information about articulation and transferring credits.

Rio Salado College’s advising program for distance learners is exceptional. Its Web site offers students the opportunity to e-mail questions, seek tutoring, transfer courses, determine prerequisites, and join a chat room. Similarly, Bunker Hill Community College (Massachusetts; <http://www.bhcc.edu>) links students to an external tutoring service and facilitates e-mail communication with advisers. Portland Community College (Oregon; <http://www.pcc.edu>) has developed online writing labs as well as a College Survival Success course, and the Community College of Baltimore (Maryland; <http://www.ccbcmd.edu>) offers cybertutoring. As well, Colorado Community Colleges Online has developed clear policies for online students with disabilities that are consistent with other college disability service protocols and provide an inclusive environment for distance learning students with disabilities.

Most online libraries offer students links to full-text databases, electronic books, journals, and the college’s online library catalogue. Distance learners today expect remote access to these services. The most effective community college Web sites offer library services as a direct link from the college’s homepage. Online library orientations, e-mail access to librarians, and online tutorials on how to conduct Web research help distance learners succeed.

Learner Transition Phase. During the learner transition phase students need career, transfer, counseling, and job placement services. To be successful in this phase, community colleges must work collaboratively to coordinate resources and design programs that assist students in their personal and professional transitions. Career development and counseling services are key during this phase; helping students to build their professional resumes, develop interviewing strategies, and deal with life issues, are instrumental in retaining students.

Portland Community College has excellent career and counseling services for distance learners. Students can take a variety of courses focused on career development, such as a ten-week course that covers occupational information, interviews, decision making, and goal setting. Similarly, Rio Salado College offers distance learners a self-assessment tool to help determine their interests, locate job market information, and find information on educational requirements for specific jobs. In addition, personal development and resume writing tips can be found on its Web site. Houston Community College has counselors available specifically to address mental health issues and disability accommodations for distance learners.

Measurement Phase. The final phase of the model focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of a college's online programs and delivery systems. In this phase, colleges should assess retention, graduation, and persistence rates, and they should review online course evaluations. This phase is important because it ensures that institutions focus on accountability and use feedback about student services programs in order to continually improve.

Taken together, these five phases of the Inclusive Student Services Process Model provide a systems approach to supporting online students in meaningful ways, regardless of campus location or instructional delivery system. The model relies on traditional methods of student support services, and challenges professionals to create new paradigms for ensuring distance learning student success. However, each individual college needs to refine the model to meet its specific needs. The most important point is that the student comes first: all programs and services should be designed and implemented with student success as the primary goal.

Two advantages of this model are that it provides support for students from matriculation through graduation and it emphasizes student success. This multidimensional model benefits all students while also demonstrating a college's commitment to the success of distance learners.

Recommendations

The key to implementing successful student support services for distance learners in the twenty-first century is for faculty and staff to pragmatically and systematically redefine traditional student support services to ensure success for all learners. Traditional services such as admissions, advising, registration, financial aid, career services, counseling, and library services

must be reframed to incorporate strategies that meet the needs of a technologically oriented student population. This effort requires all campus constituents to work collaboratively toward student success, regardless of the instructional delivery system.

To tackle the challenges of reframing and implementing distance education support services, administrators and student service educators may want to consider the following recommendations.

- First, community colleges must develop a process model for student support services that measures the effectiveness of programs and services for all types of students. All support services must be designed and implemented around a commitment to the learner, regardless of delivery system. This may appear fundamental, yet most student services are geared toward the traditional rather than the distance learner.

- Second, colleges must realign their priorities and redesign how student services are delivered to ensure consistency with the institution's commitment to offer online courses and degrees. Distance learners should have access to the same resources as on-campus students. To accomplish this, student service educators need to redefine their roles, as faculty have done, to accommodate distance learners.

- Third, changing student support services to incorporate distance learners requires professional development and in-service training. A community college counselor who has worked primarily on campus, for example, may feel uncomfortable working with students online. Such feelings can be addressed, along with technical issues, during in-service training. In-service training can also help student service educators better understand the distance learner population and learn current theories and intervention strategies for this group of students.

- Fourth, to be effective, distance learning support services must be integrated into a college's mainstream activities. Although most campus Web sites include links to such essential information as applications, registration, and course catalogues, many still do not provide interactive links to all services.

- Finally, an institution's funding priorities must be aligned with their commitment to distance learning student success. Community colleges must commit financial resources to develop technology for student services. Technology should be budgeted as a fixed cost, similar to electricity and insurance, and colleges should fund distance learning support services as an integral part of the institution.

Conclusion

Distance learning students expect to receive online support services that will allow them to succeed in their educational endeavors. Moreover, they are willing to shop around for institutions that can offer the services and

learning experiences they want. Without question, online support services must be user-friendly and learner-centered. This is an extension of the basic community college philosophy and student services mission.

Distance learners expect student support services to accommodate them from their point of entry (learner intake) through completion of their certificate or degree (learner transition). They expect rapid responses to requests for advising, career and academic counseling services, and library resources (learner intervention and support). As Dalziel and Payne (2001) note, "Providing effective, efficient online student services is an enormous challenge for higher education administrators" (p. 5). Yet doing so is necessary if community college educators are to honor their commitment to student success by enhancing support services for all constituents.

Enrollment in online programs and courses is rapidly increasing. Yet retaining these students will become problematic if community college administrators do not commit to maintaining appropriate support services for this progressive population. Distance learners dissatisfied with one college's online support services will simply enroll elsewhere. Thus, student support services must be redefined and implemented systematically, and they must be continually evaluated to ensure satisfaction and success among all students.

References

- Bruso, J. L. "A Comprehensive Orientation to Address Diverse Student Needs." In C. Dalziel and M. Payne (eds.), *Quality Enhancing Practices in Distance Education: Student Services*. Washington, D.C.: Instructional Telecommunications Council, 2001.
- Cox, D. H. *Online Student Services Self-Assessment Tool*. Unpublished paper adapted from the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications' "Online Student Services Provision: A Guide for Good Practice" and the Council for the Advancement of Standards and Guidelines, 2001. <http://irt.austinncc.edu/presentations/2003/aacc/McRaeOnlineStudentServices.pdf>. Accessed Aug. 16, 2004.
- Dalziel, C., and Payne, M. (eds.). *Quality Enhancing Practices in Distance Education: Student Services*. Washington, D.C.: Instructional Telecommunications Council, 2001.
- Dirr, P. J. *Putting Principles into Practice: Promoting Effective Support Services for Students in Distance Learning Programs: A Report on the Findings of a Survey*. Project report funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, 1999. <http://www.wcet.info/projects/studentervices>. Accessed Aug. 17, 2004.
- Floyd, D. L., and Weihe, L. "Commitments to Non-Credit Students: Issues for Student Development Educators." *Journal of Staff Program and Organization Development*, 1985, 3(4), 128–132.
- Helfgot, S. R. "Counseling at the Center: High Tech, High Touch." In S. R. Helfgot and M. G. Culp (eds.), *Promoting Student Success in the Community College*. New Directions for Student Services, no. 69. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Miller, T., and Prince, J. *The Future of Student Affairs. A Guide to Student Development for Tomorrow's Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.
- RDR Associates. *New Connections: A Guide to Distance Education*. Washington, D.C.: Instructional Telecommunications Council, 1998.

- Seeman, E. "Creating an Online Orientation and Student Support Services." In C. Dalziel and M. Payne (eds.), *Quality Enhancing Practices in Distance Education: Student Services*. Washington, D.C.: Instructional Telecommunications Council, 2001.
- Shea, P., and Armitage, S. "Guidelines for Creating Student Services Online." In P. Shea and S. Armitage (eds.), *WCET LAAP Project Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-Based Student Services for Online Learners*. Boulder, Colo.: Western Cooperative for Educational Technologies, 2003. <http://www.wcet.info/projects/laap/guidelines/overview.htm>. Accessed Aug. 16, 2004.
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges. *Distance Education: Definition and Principles: A Policy Statement*. Atlanta: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2000.
- Southern Regional Education Board. *Principles of Good Practice: The Foundation for Quality of the Electronic Campus*. Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board, 2002–03.

DEBORAH L. FLOYD is an associate professor of higher education leadership at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. She has also been a community college dean, vice president of student affairs, and community college president.

DEBORAH CASEY-POWELL is director of student affairs for the Honors College at Florida Atlantic University. She was previously dean of student affairs at South University and has worked in housing and student life as well as in student activities at Holyoke Community College.

Copyright of *New Directions for Community Colleges* is the property of Jossey-Bass, A Registered Trademark of Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.