

HIGHER EDUCATION EDITION

With the completion rate at four-year institutions hovering around 40 percent and just 1 in 5 community college students earning an associate's degree within three years, it's no secret that persistence is a big issue for higher education generally. But what about in fully online programs? Data is comparatively limited, but there's increasing discussion about high drop out in the fully online realm—a problem with potentially significant impacts given the demand for virtual instruction, which institutions are looking to (and investing in) as a means to increase access and decrease costs.

Student Services:

A diverse set of offerings that institutions develop and deliver to enhance the student experience and improve learning outcomes.

Services range from admissions and enrollment to financial aid/student accounts and technical support.

¹ Paulson, A. (2009, December). Why many college dropouts say they left: the need to work. The Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved from http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2009/1210/p02s01-usgn.html

The support given to a student throughout the online experience has almost more to do with how successful the student will be than the course itself.

Bruce Friend
Director of SAS Curriculum
Pathways, NC

Voting Percentage

100%

80%

60%

40%

20%

Link to Students' Link to Overall Institutiional Goals

Very Closely Linked (%)

Not Very Closely Linked (%)

"Blackboard Institute Student Services Survey." (2010). Quantitative Survey. Blackboard Institute.

To look at this issue more closely, we took a snapshot of effective practices that educators and administrators are using to improve retention/ graduation rates in online higher education programs—with particular emphasis on the student services institutions are wrapping around their online offering, often with different emphasis than in a classroom setting. And more than just a different mix of services, online higher education program leaders identified a need to provide 24/7 support for their 24/7 learners. The picture we pulled together—from a survey of 196 institutions with a predominantly online program, three focus groups and five executive interviews in Fall/Winter 2010—suggests that when deployed correctly, effective services are crucial to creating and maintaining successful online learning experiences, and can take a much different shape than services supporting students in a traditional environment.

Why Student Services?

"The support given to a student throughout the online experience has almost more to do with how successful the student will be than the course itself."

Bruce Friend, Director of SAS Curriculum Pathways, NC (Personal Communication, June 16, 2010)

Most online program directors understand that quality student services need to be a top priority in predominantly online programs. Over 75 percent of respondents view student services as very closely linked to students' academic success. And almost 90 percent of respondents view student services as very important to overall institutional goals, including strategic initiatives for increased reach and improved track records for student success. There is a clear connection: student services and exemplary academic content work together to support student achievement. Moreover, if students are digesting the exemplary academic content at all hours of the day, strong student services must be available to students when they need it most.

But how do you go about improving student services? With decreasing budgets and increasing enrollments, resources are strapped and new investments can be difficult. To help you focus your efforts, we asked a few experienced educators and administrators—leaders who are already running online programs and some with close to 100% retention—what advice they would offer to their peers. Here, we captured the top nine effective practices that emerged from those conversations in an effort to help you improve the online learning experience for students at your institution.

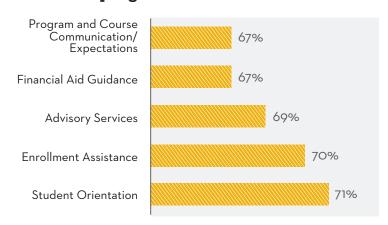
NINE EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

1 Engage prospective learners throughout the enrollment period.

"Our website is the first encounter they have with us. Then there is an enrollment counselor who they contact via phone. This person is special in that they need to be able to know everything—what programs are offered, what financial aid may be available, what it means to [take an online course]. Then we have to make sure that there is an appropriate engagement with the university, from the time that they agree to take a course, to the time that course begins. There is a sweet spot there, as to when to engage them."

Sue Talley, Associate Dean at Capella University, MN (Personal Communication, June 16, 2010)

Services offered most often before an online program



"Blackboard Institute Student Services Survey." (2010). Quantitative Survey. Blackboard Institute.

Based on Talley's experience, other program directors may want to consider the value of offering online and personal interaction opportunities to prospective students as they navigate the admissions and enrollment process. College students complete most of their class registrations online without institutional oversight. That process must be seamless, from course selection to securing financial aid. With constant contact, students are less likely to lose interest before the course or program begins. Quick responses to inbound questions and concerns in multiple modalities (chat, live 24/7 support, SMS text) help meet students where they are in the enrollment process. Proactive communication helps answer questions before they are asked, and saves institutions the time and money of addressing individual concerns.

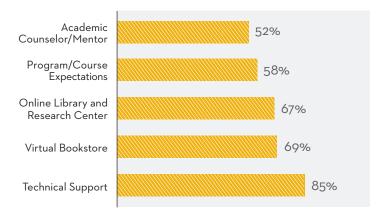
2 Allow students advance access to the online classroom.

"We let the students into the online component a week before classes so that they can become familiar with how the program works, and they can review the syllabus ahead of time."

Ellen Paddy O'Hara, Director of Masters of Liberal Arts, Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, PA (Personal Communication, June 3, 2010)

Offering students the opportunity to explore their online classroom prior to instruction increases their comfort with the navigation, basic processes of online learning and course characteristics. Students are then able to dedicate their full attention to content and collaboration when the course or program begins.

Services offered most often *during* an online program



"Blackboard Institute Student Services Survey." (2010). Quantitative Survey. Blackboard Institute.

3 Make sure online students have complete access to library and bookstore resources.

"We had to purchase more online materials—databases, online journals, etc.—but we still treat the services the same, they just have more access to online material."

Michael Bagley, Dean of Instruction, Feather River College, CA (Personal Communication, June 3, 2010)

Students should have access to a bookstore that delivers textbooks and other course materials either digitally or with shipping options. More than that, the Association of College and Research Library (ACRL)'s standards recommend that institutions offer online learners "some form of direct user access to library personnel." The Association also recommends that distance learning providers offer students essential library services such as:

- Reference assistance
- Formats accessible to the greatest number of people, including those with disabilities
- Access to online resources
- Consultation services
- ▶ Instructions on library use
- Reciprocal or contractual borrowing
- Access to reserve materials
- Adequate service hours
- Promotions
- Prompt delivery of items via courier or electronic delivery
- Point-of-use assistance

4 Offer guidance counselors and mentors targeted to online learners.

"This academic support service is critical to student retention and success. Academic advising should be available to distance learners at the same level it is for a traditional campus setting."

Carolyn Foster, M.A., Counselor and Professor at San Antonio College, TX (Slimp, Ed. D., M., 2006)

In the earlier days of distance learning, it was standard practice to use traditional guidance counselors, who split time between online and face-to-face students. But now, a growing number of institutions support online students with a separate team of counselors who are specially trained in tackling challenges specific to fully online instruction.

Similar to guidance personnel, faculty actively engaged in student mentoring is an important factor in student success. Nearly every program director we spoke to cited their program's success as being dependent upon the role of the mentor. Whenever possible, program directors also suggested that mentors and students share geographic proximity so that the mentors better understand students' community and cultural environments.

5 Quickly communicate and solve technology issues.

"Our attrition rate currently is in the low single digits. That took 10 years to build. Our first semester, our attrition rate was 57 percent! Second semester was about 26 percent. And one of the key factors there was the technology... You really have to make sure that the technology can really handle that type of curriculum coming through online. Otherwise it is a real barrier."

Clar Baldus, Program Administrator at University of Iowa, IA (Personal Communication, June 16, 2010)

Many institutions understand the importance of providing 24/7 technical support because students are doing coursework at all hours of the day and are separated from the institution geographically. But a lot of institutions do not have the personnel and funding needed to start up a 24/7 support center readily available. These institutions are increasingly looking to third party technology support providers who can fill technical expertise gaps at investment levels that often compare favorably to the expense of building out specialized capabilities in-house.

² ACRL | Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services. (2008, July 1). ALA | Home - American Library Association. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/guidelinesdistancelearning.cfm

6 Ensure office hours are flexible and transparent.

"There needs to be a higher level of communication with online students. As a provider of online services, it is crucial to have that constant contact—there shouldn't be any surprises. Everything from sending out regular correspondence to parents and to schools, giving them updates on academic performance. It has to be a highly communicative and shared experience."

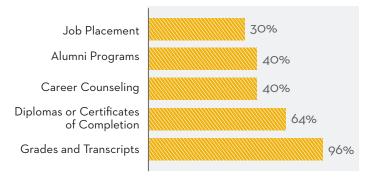
Bruce Friend, Director of SAS Curriculum Pathways, NC (Personal Communication, June 16, 2010)

For students enrolled in a predominantly online course, their coursework must fit into their already full schedules. Institutions with the highest success in this area allow students to communicate with the facilitator at times that are convenient to them, as well as make it a priority to inform students how long they can expect a faculty response to take, and take every precaution to live up to that promise.

Use technology to quickly identify students at risk for dropping out.

Continual monitoring of student engagement and course participation empowers educators to intervene appropriately and proactively. Technology-enabled alert systems can make these initiatives effective and efficient to manage.

Services offered most often *after* an online program



"Blackboard Institute Student Services Survey." (2010). Quantitative Survey. Blackboard Institute. Fito Kahn, Director of Instructional Technology, Seminary of the Southwest, TX (Personal Communication, June 3, 2010) noted the advantage of a solution that is embedded in the institution's learning management system, saying "Ours is built in and I really like the convenience of it."

Early warning systems should also be flexible. In addition to allowing teachers to spend less time tracking and more time teaching by offering real-time information about student progress, early warning systems should offer options for how and when to address poor performance. Warnings can be generated based on graded performance, late or missing course work, or attendance within the online course. The instructor should have control over the message each time a warning is communicated, to modify it and more accurately communicate the seriousness of the situation.

8 Extend services beyond course or program completion.

"We offer online support for career services, and a year membership to the alumni association. There is a repository for e-portfolios, resumes, etc. So there is no distinction between online and traditional... everyone has the same services."

Cathryn Chellis, Distance Learning Coordinator, Ohio State University, OH (Personal Communication, June 3, 2010)

Extending services beyond course or program completion continues to connect students to their schools and underscores the quality and value of their online learning experiences. This includes the delivery of grades, transcripts, or other completion certification; the process of re-enrollment and registration for additional courses; and perhaps most significantly, the delivery of counseling and advisory services to help students take the next steps in their education plans or career goals. Several institutions host virtual job and career fairs to serve both their traditional and their online students, including Florida State College, Roanoke College, Carleton College, Texas State University, Florida State College, Skidmore College, Ball State University, and University of Maryland, University College.

9 Ensure a seamless financial aid process.

"I wish financial aid would catch up to the way people are living and learning."

Lee Tansock, Director of Technology Instruction and Distance Education, Bridgeland Applied Technology College, Logan, UT

With challenging economic conditions and rising costs for tuition, fees and course materials, financial assistance plays an increasingly important role in a student's decision to attend—and stay—in school. Many eligible students do not take full advantage of the aid that is available to them. Leading causes of underutilization include missing or incomplete information about the financial aid process, form complexity and lack of knowledge about eligibility requirements. It is incumbent upon financial aid offices to provide financial literacy and clarity to the most in-need students, however, facing an unrelenting workload and tight budgets, this can be challenging for overburdened teams. We have found that best practice institutions are leveraging technology-multi-modal outbound engagement strategies and improved self-service solutions, for example—to improve the quantity and quality of information delivered to students. Furthermore, we have found that the most progressive institutions recognize the importance of bringing this financial aid information to the devices where student work, learn and live-online, mobile phones and social media outlets included.

Conclusion

There is growing agreement that student services in predominantly online programs can be as important to student success as course and instructor quality. Because of that, a discussion of quality virtual education should include close consideration of the priority and portfolio of student services. Online educators should think critically about services that cater to the unique needs of the non-traditional student, and keep in mind that students who do a significant amount of their coursework online require a different mix of services than their peers on campus, as well as around-the-clock availability. These nine effective

practices are intended to serve as a guide as you develop a service infrastructure that can support the breadth and depth of services necessary for student persistence and progression online.

This digest is part of a body of work that highlights effective practices in teaching and learning with technology. For more effective practices, visit us online at www.blackboardinstitute.com.

About the Blackboard Institute

The Blackboard Institute draws from Blackboard's global community to surface and share actionable, practice-driven guidance on how education institutions are leveraging technology to build better education experiences.

Methodology: We used both qualitative and quantitative research to provide a quick overview of the role and value of student services in supporting student success, including:

- Three focus groups with virtual learning administrators, as well as five executive interviews with the following:
 - Clar Baldus, Program Administrator at University of Iowa, IA
 - Bruce Friend, Director of SAS Curriculum Pathways, NC
 - Pete Goldsmith, Dean of Students, Indiana University-Bloomington, IN
 - Virginia Padilla, Executive Director, IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning in New Mexico), NM
 - Sue Talley, Associate Dean at Capella University, MN
- 13,192 survey invitations were emailed to personnel at higher education institutions. Institutions receiving the survey included two-year, four-year, public, private, and virtual colleges and universities. A total of 281 responses were collected representing 196 institutions with a predominantly online program.

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