The authors explore the processes involved in moving to online student services at community colleges, relate success stories, and address the challenges involved.

Online Student Services at the Community College

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The use of online technology in community colleges has exploded over the past two decades, changing the manner in which services need to be delivered to students. This chapter examines online student services at the community college, beginning with a brief historical overview of the growth of online student services. We then explore opportunities and challenges presented by new technology; discuss the design, planning, implementation, and assessment phases of a student services technology plan; and conclude with a presentation of emerging trends and challenges.

Historical Overview

Student services professionals are integral to the success and persistence of community college students (Ender, Chand, and Thornton, 1996), and the integration of technology into our everyday lives has fundamentally changed how they do their jobs. Technology has become an invaluable tool in providing services to students and has created incredible opportunities and practices as they also present new challenges. Community colleges must provide online access to student services in order to remain competitive. Technology should “improve service to students, from recruitment through graduation and beyond” (McLean, 2007). The development of a student services technology plan is critical to the success of online services and should be part of every college’s enrollment management strategy (McLean, 2007).
Opportunities

Technology has significantly changed the manner in which students interact with colleges. According to a 2006 Cornell University survey (Erickson and others, 2007) of 885 public and private two-year degree-granting institutions, “Over 90 percent of the colleges surveyed offer online access to college catalogs, class schedules and online courses. Between 80 percent and 90 percent also offer financial aid applications, admissions applications and course registration online. Six out of ten offered bursar billing online” (p. 3). Some institutions reported offering only online access to services such as the college catalogue, course registration, class schedules, and financial aid applications. Institutions that used to rely on face-to-face interactions, standard mail, campus announcements, printed media, or automatic phone messaging systems now use Web sites, e-mail, instant messaging and chat functions, streaming video, social networking Web sites, and multiple other virtual venues to communicate with students.

Community colleges are serving an increasing proportion of students under the age of twenty-four—the millennial generation. The majority of these students not only are tech-savvy but feel technologically entitled. They expect services instantly and on demand. The have been described in this way: “Millennials are the iGeneration—always wired, always plugged in and always communicating” (Berger, 2006, para. 2). For most of these students, computer-based technologies are a way of life. We must reconsider not only the services we provide to this generation but also “the means by which these services are delivered” (Lowery, 2004, p. 95). Traditional delivery venues may not be the most effective means for this generation. It is important that colleges understand the services to be delivered, as well as the ways in which delivery will take place.

Online services are not just for students enrolled in online courses; they can enhance the collegiate experience for all students, particularly those who have infrequently accessed college resources in the past or may prefer to access help and information on the Web. Colleges use online services to attract students; improve outreach, recruitment, and student retention; provide new ways of interacting with financial aid, academic advising, and personal counseling; build a sense of community; and create new avenues of campuswide communication, such as emergency notification systems and Web-based calendars.

Before they even apply, prospective students judge colleges on their Web sites. The college Web site has become the first door of student entry. Thus, colleges should give considerable attention to site development to ensure a professional image and consistency of message, format, and style, and should avoid dazzling effects at the expense of actual student needs for accurate and timely information and ease of maneuverability.

Many colleges use customer relationship model software for outreach and recruiting. Colleges track and categorize student interactions, creating
profiles for each student. Student services practitioners then use the student profiles to tailor communications, services, and programs to individual student interests and needs.

Most students and their families find the financial aid process complex and daunting. In order to stay true to the community college mission of open access, students must be able to access financial aid information without needing to visit the campus. Resources such as financial aid FAQs address routine queries and significantly decrease repetitive staff contact.

Academic advising can provide a wide range of online services to students, including e-mail advising and advisor chatrooms that allow either live or asynchronous discussions of student questions. Integrating Web applications with the college’s student information system allows students to access their own academic records.

Some services, due to their sensitive nature, present added challenges when offered on the Web. As with academic advising, most personal counseling for students has historically been provided in face-to-face interactions. Now that students may also receive additional support in the form of chatrooms and online support groups, colleges must address new issues of Internet protocol, confidentiality, privacy, and security.

Research over the past two decades shows that building a sense of community is an important factor in maximizing student success (Ender, Chand, and Thornton, 1996). The majority of community college students commute rather than live on or near campus, and online students may never visit campus. Student services professionals must assist these students with establishing and maintaining ongoing relationships with college faculty and staff and in fostering connections within the college. Data from the 2003 National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggested that technology that is used effectively can improve student engagement (Young, 2003). For online and commuter students, technology provides an opportunity to develop virtual communities and fosters a sense of belonging to the institution, which may increase retention and completion rates (Crawley, 2004).

Challenges

The generational divide—an average thirty-year difference (Stephens, 2007)—that is often noted between students and faculty is also present with staff. Millennials often show an ease and facility with technology, but faculty, student services practitioners, and staff who do not see the benefit of these modalities or feel technologically adept may be daunted by the explosion of new technological opportunities.

Many student services professionals also find it difficult to accept using technology to interact with students in areas where they are used to face-to-face contact. For instance, there is often a disconnect between the institution’s increased online academic offerings and the rigidity with
which student services personnel adhere to the need for on-campus orientation programs. An online orientation can use different formats and timelines in information distribution to address different learning styles and information needs. These same arguments can be made with regard to academic advising.

It will take a cultural shift within institutions to realize the benefits that technology can bring to the services and programs provided to students. Staff already proficient in current technologies may take the lead in restructuring how to share information, engage students, and provide services.

Although many students are proficient and highly skilled in technology, others, especially at community colleges, may not be as familiar with or have access to various forms of technology. Martin and King (2009) view this dilemma as another “barrier that is often detrimental to [the success and persistence] of our disadvantaged students.” The digital divide requires careful analysis of the range of student knowledge and familiarity with online technology during online planning, implementation, and assessment stages. Continuous training in information literacy and online skills is essential for faculty and staff if they are expected to use technology effectively.

It also is important to recognize that 60 percent of students with disabilities who attend public colleges or universities are at two-year institutions (Erickson and others, 2007). In the Cornell University study of Web-based student processes, thirty community colleges were evaluated regarding their compliance with Section 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Web accessibility standards. The study found no institutional compliance in financial aid, academic programs, and class schedule information pages, and admissions application pages were only minimally compliant. Web accessibility policies within community colleges are a good first step but are not sufficient to ensure that all users, including those with disabilities, can use and access Web content.

Designing Services

The design of online student services should consider the multiple forms of technology that students use. Access is no longer limited to personal computers (Moneta, 2005). The majority of community college students are proficient in tools that include handheld devices, podcasts, Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking (Junco and Cole-Avent, 2005).

More than 85 percent of students report frequent use of a personal computer (Hurtado & Pryor, 2007), so colleges must provide online services that are fully functional and effective. Students should have the ability to save and reopen various online applications as well as track the receipt and processing of their transactions. Ease of use and navigation of interactive services, such as providing a secure, single log-in so that students do
not have to enter and exit with each discrete interaction, must also be taken into ongoing consideration.

**Planning**

Planning should begin with an assessment of the essential services students need in order to be successful. This should be done with a cross-campus team that includes professionals from information technology, student services, and academic affairs. Students should also be part of the conversation and planning, as some may be far more comfortable and up to date in the technological environment than staff are. Once essential services are identified, the team should discuss the urgency of online access and the resources necessary to complete the task. It is not necessary or desirable to move everything to the Web all at once; colleges should instead first identify the essential services that can be easily accessed using the Web. Next, a timeline should be established to determine when services would be moved and become operational virtually. For example, it may be determined that an online orientation is essential for students, and so the plan to go online with orientation becomes a top priority. Conversely, it may be determined that paying tuition through a secure site is not a top priority, so resources are not mobilized at that time toward that effort. Priorities on the list should be determined by the college’s needs, as well as the resources available to put services online. The long-term goal should be to put all student services online (Shea, 2005), but not at the expense of quality. As much as possible, the online environment should allow students to navigate without staff assistance and without difficulty.

**Implementation**

The next step in moving toward Web-based student services is implementation, which needs to be accomplished with care and concern for quality and access. The implementation plan should begin with an analysis of the technical support available within the college. What hardware and software standards does the service require? What levels of technology support does the campus provide for internal and external assistance? What types of security safeguards does the service require? What level of access should be provided? What is the expertise of students using the online student services? Many other questions may arise as the implementation process and plan are carried out. Implementation frequently occurs in stages. As the college learns how to use technology to support and educate students, an ongoing assessment plan needs to be built into the long-term strategy.

**Assessment**

Assessment is essential to understanding the effectiveness of online student services. The assessment process should be an ongoing loop that begins
with the development of the goals of the services. The assessment plan should have benchmarks that measure the sophistication of the online services and how they are meeting the needs of the students. Modifications should be expected and ongoing as the technology and needs of students change.

We recommend that the technology plan include an in-house pilot component that tests the site before students gain access. “User testing is a critical first step in creating websites and design based on actual user perspectives, rather than institutional perspectives” (Erickson and others, 2007, p. 6). Having a pilot site ensures that bugs are identified and problems resolved before going live. This can be accomplished with a static site as well as a dummy site that is behind the live site.

The assessment plan should be inclusive of the departments that are responsible for not only the information technology functions but also the student services units that deliver the services. All departments should be involved from the planning and implementation stages through the assessment plan. The assessment process needs to be fully detailed at the onset, and each time a component is assessed, the findings should be disseminated and problematic issues addressed. The assessment process is essential to continuous quality improvement, as it will drive changes in processes and upgrades in software and equipment.

**Future of Online Student Services**

Millennial students expect colleges tailored to their interests. They expect customization and active and collaborative learning. They also expect learning to occur at high speed with instant feedback and payoffs. This population, with values formed by the Internet, will be a growing proportion of the total enrollment (Seppanen and Prince, 2009).

The future of student services will be dramatically affected by the transition of all traditional services into various combinations of online services and face-to-face interaction. Students will continue to view their world and education through the lens of technology as a means to expand connectivity and improve personal convenience. Individual student-centered processes and interfaces will become specialized, personalized, and socially networked. Students will unilaterally determine the timing of the information flows that meet their individual needs. They may prefer to use one central source for all online student service interfaces. This source will have intelligence programming that enhances its capabilities at a rate consistent with each student’s growing technological ability to manage it. Customization of tools will be the norm. Using specialized technology, students will be able to manage their own academic progress with understanding of the possibilities and opportunities available to them.

The effects of the Web on a student’s worldview are profound. Students see the world as dynamic, fragmented, and saturated with ever-
shifting information, capital, and social and environmental struggles. They use technology to solve complex problems drawing on multiple skills and face an expanding interdependent world community. Mobile online student services will continue to get more and more dynamic student usage. Smartphones and the future generations of telecommunications will become the principal interface for students and online student services. Online student services technologies will channel student access to the institution’s multiple touch points into a constructed student life pathway that meets each student's personalized needs.

Democratic equalization of students and online student services staff will lead to new styles of lateral communication and marketing because of the Internet. Content service professionals will drive system, performance, and assessment design. Service levels will expand over time through the use of technology-based “service counters” that track questions, answers, and technology difficulties into databases of help strategies. The construction of technology-led pathways will drive design of student services practices. Training and retraining of staff will become part of the ongoing work structure because of constant technology changes. Technology itself will demand new business models for all staff functions.

Costs for keeping current with new technologies will be progressively mitigated through systemwide purchasing, which will require new governance rules and new business models (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 2008). Online student services will take advantage of semantic Web data technologies to offer students and staff interactive pooled data. Business intelligence based on Web analytics in real time will inform the administration’s business decisions and business processes. Green sustainability practices will touch all areas of higher education, including the powering of online student services through sustainable energy solutions. All student services, including online student services, will be subject to progressively more rigorous assessments, measurement, and standards.

Student leadership will demand greater input in institutional planning and decision making about technology that is important to their lives. Interaction with students will happen within their personalized, customized, technology-based mobile technology. Online student services will develop ongoing student course mapping for a wide variety of career opportunities. This expanded service will greatly contribute to students’ abilities to plan their collegiate experience to meet their long-term career goals.

Conclusion

Effective delivery of online student services can increase access, convenience, and timeliness of information distribution and improve student-staff interaction. It can also assist students in developing self-management
skills. Online services will continue to evolve, “creating decision support systems that offer students a variety of opportunities for self-help and that customize services for individual students” (Krauth and Carbajal, 2001).

A student services technology plan is critical to the success of online services and should be part of every college’s enrollment management strategy (McLean, 2007). Community colleges must prepare for the further integration of new and yet-to-be-developed technologies into both curricula and online student services and stay abreast of the rapid changes that will come with ongoing staff and faculty enrichment courses, while also providing opportunities for students less familiar with technology to catch up. A well-designed online student services plan will increase institutional organization and efficiency and empower students to navigate both their academic experience and the world beyond confidently.

References


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