

ONLINE STUDENT SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

by

STEPHANIE REBECCA MARSH

(Under the Direction of Merrily S. Dunn)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the student services that exemplary distance learning programs offer and the structure and process of these programs. The study addressed research questions concerning services, methods of service provision, and the role of campus-based student affairs units. The study was qualitative in nature and utilized a multiple case study approach. A group of experts identified programs exemplary in serving students, and participants from five distance programs were interviewed. In addition, the program websites were analyzed utilizing a checklist designed from the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunication's (WCET) *Guidelines for Online Services*, which provides recommendations for 14 service components: Information for Prospective Students, Admissions, Financial Aid, Registration, Orientation Services, Academic Advising, Technical Support, Career Services, Library Services, Services for Students with Disabilities, Personal Counseling, Instructional Support and Tutoring, Bookstore, and Services to Promote a Sense of Community

The findings are presented in categories that generally parallel the research questions. For the most part, these programs provide the services recommended by WCET and utilize a variety of methods to provide them, such as websites, e-mail, chat, and call centers. Student affairs units collaborate with distance learning staff on a limited basis except for administrative services such as admissions, registration, and financial aid. While the original intent was to design a procedural or instrumental model for others wishing to enhance or initiate services for distance learners, the programs represented differed too much in terms of structure and process. However, several issues emerged to consider: (a) organizational structure, (b) funding, (c) policies, (d) decision-making, (e) program growth, and (f) overlap of distance and resident education.

INDEX WORDS: Student Services, Online Services, Distance Learners, e-learning, Student Affairs, Student Support, Distributed Education, Distance Education, Virtual Education, Online Learning

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Distance education dates back to the commercial correspondence courses of the 1830's, designed to bring educational opportunities to learners unable to attend traditional classes (Hanson & Maushak, 1997; Moore & Thompson, 1997). Distance learning or distance education is broadly defined as the separation of student and instructor by space and often time, with the utilization of technological assistance for course delivery. Distance education in the United States has spread rapidly since World War II (Schrum & Luetkehans, 1997) with the introduction of learning mediated through the use of radio and television. In the last decade, distance learning has spread still more rapidly with the advent of the Internet, which has become the new media choice of the 21st century (Boehler, 1999).

Recent exponential growth in higher education distance learning opportunities can be attributed largely to technological advances. In its second national survey of distance education, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that in 1997-98, enrollment in distance education courses had more than doubled since 1995. Enrollments increased from 754,000 to almost 1.7 million students in two years. According to the survey results, 91% of public two- and four-year institutions offered distance education courses or planned to within the next three years. The technologies most used were Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction (60%) and two-way interactive video (56%) (Lewis, Snow, & Farris, 1999). Similarly,

Peterson's 1998 *Guide to Distance Learning Programs* reported that 81% of institutions offered distance courses for undergraduate students and 34% offered courses for graduate students. The third national survey of distance education by NCES examined institutions providing courses utilizing audio, video, or computer technology. An estimated 2320 institutions offered distance courses in 2000-2001 (56% of 2- and 4-year institutions and almost 90% of public 2- and 4-year institutions) and enrollment was estimated at 3.1 million students (Waits & Lewis, 2003).

Advanced technology allows for the delivery of education to students when and where they need it (*Peterson's Guide*, 1998). Over 60% of participating institutions in the 2002 *Campus Computing Project* (Green, 2002) reported offering at least one complete online course via the Web, which was almost 20% higher than in 1999. Technology-driven distance education includes opportunities for the student to interact with the instructor and other students, thereby attempting to create a learning experience comparable to the campus model but in a way that is more accessible and convenient to students (Schwitzer, Ancis, & Brown, 2001).

To address the recent explosion in distance learning courses and programs, numerous organizations have developed guidelines for providing out-of-class services to students studying at a distance. The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) published *The Guide to Developing Online Student Services* (WCET, 2000) (see Appendix A) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) created *Standards and Guidelines for Educational Services for Distance Learners*, which include a section on *Educational Support Services* that basically mirrors the WCET recommendations (CAS, 2000) (see Appendix B). In

addition, eight regional accrediting commissions collaborated to develop *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* and included student support as one of five components that need to be addressed in a distributed learning environment (C-RAC, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

Though these organizations have established standard service levels for distance learning programs, for the most part, institutions have not implemented these recommendations. A 1997 survey of institutions in 14 western states asked distance education administrators to rate the effectiveness of the support services provided to students. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), the mean ratings for various services were only moderate, ranging from 3.6 to 6.1. The highest scores were for registration, program planning, degree and graduation audit, and transcript evaluation. Social support services, career counseling, and counseling services received the lowest ratings. Though many institutions reported strength in a few services, not one institution emerged as having a comprehensive student support program and very few institutions offered a broad range of support services for distance learners (Dirr, 1999b).

Three recent dissertations examined the support needs of distance learners. May (2002) attempted to identify student services of particular concern or importance to students enrolled in asynchronous, web-based courses but found no significant differences between the needs of these students and those of traditional, on-campus students. Bayless (2001) identified 34 possible non-academic needs and asked respondents to rate the importance, accessibility, and timing of these needs. Results indicated that the non-academic needs of distance students resembled those of campus-

based students, but services were not easily accessible. Jackson (2000) conducted a Delphi study to identify essential student services for distance learners. The panel of experts reached consensus on 47 essential services classified under nine categories. Jackson concluded that student support services are a critical component of a distance education program, yet student affairs divisions have done little to meet the needs of distance learners. Thus, while institutions are increasingly involved in providing distance education courses, they have not made genuine efforts to provide the student services that should accompany distance opportunities.

In a recent American College Personnel Association (ACPA) membership survey, over half of the responding members rated the implications of distance learning at no interest or low interest as a professional development issue (Pickering & Calliotte, 2000). In addition, in a search of widely circulated student affairs journals, few articles could be found relating to distance learning and services for distance learners. This is interesting in light of the fact that the ACPA Senior Scholars identified technology as one of the trends shaping student affairs and asked, “What is to be the role of Student Affairs?” (Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999, p. 5). Likewise, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) created a task force to identify key issues that could launch broader discussions about the role of student affairs in leading the way “toward student centered distance learning” (NASPA, p. 10, 2000). Both of these documents pose the research question of examining what student services and programs are needed in distance education, and how they should be delivered. Unless student affairs can be reconceived in ways that can accommodate a broader conception of student learning, technology poses a threat to the goals and significance of the profession.

The creation of the *American Journal of Distance Education* in 1987 marked the beginning of distance learning as a discipline in American education (Keegan, 1996). Most of these articles in this journal, however, focus on academic and classroom aspects such as instructional design, faculty role and support, course retention and satisfaction, and course performance. Furthermore, in a review of original research on distance learning published in the 1990's, The Institute for Higher Education Policy reported that "despite the large volume of written material concentrating on distance learning, there is a relative paucity of true, original research dedicated to explaining or predicting phenomena related to distance learning" (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999, p. 2). Thus, there is a lack of research-based literature on the non-academic or out-of-class experience of students studying from a distance, the impact of student services on distance learners, and the structure and process of existing services.

Research Questions

To address this gap in the literature and gain a deeper understanding of services that can assist distance learners, the purpose was to identify and describe student services that exemplary programs currently provide to their students and the structure and process of these programs. Specifically, four research questions guided this study. From the perspective of the directors or student services coordinators of distance learning programs providing an array of student services,

1. What services can be provided to enrich distance learners' educational experiences?
2. How should services for distance learners be organized and presented to increase the probability that students will make use of them?

3. What role do student affairs divisions take in providing services?
4. What are viable models for implementing services for distance learners?

Significance of the Study

Students in distance education courses have a 10-20% lower course completion rate than students in traditional courses, with drop-out rates sometimes over 50% (Carr, 2000). Student affairs could play a role in supporting these students in order to increase retention rates. Services should be provided that are equivalent to, but not the same as, campus-based programs, and students expect this level of service: “Student expectations for typical college services such as counseling, tutoring, registration, financial aid, matriculation and articulation are placing new pressures on the past practices of distance learning programs and departments across the country” (Boehler, 1999, p. 5). Thus, the task was to identify and describe services offered by distance programs that provide a broad array of student services in order to assist other programs wishing to enhance or initiate such services.

Many institutions have yet to include distance learning in their planning initiatives (Green, 2000; Rivera & Kostopoulos, 2001). In fact, the 2000 *Campus Computing Project* survey (Green) revealed that fewer than 30% of participating institutions had a distance learning strategic plan. Therefore, as institutions begin to incorporate cyberspace into their strategic plans, student affairs needs to be prepared to *be at the table* to ensure that appropriate support services for students are included. This research provides expertise from existing program administrators and websites of exemplary programs to serve as a practical guide for the design of appropriate services. Institutions wishing to

initiate or enhance student services for distance learners can utilize the success factors identified in this research endeavor.

Operational Definitions

In this study, distance learning is synonymous with distance education. The United States Distance Learning Association defines distance learning as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (USDLA). Keegan (1996) explains distance education as being “characterized by the separation of teacher and learner and of the learner from the learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face communication of conventional education being replaced by an apersonal mode of communication mediated by technology” (p. 8).

In the present study distributed education or e-learning refers to an online or web-based form of distance education, such as coursework that utilizes the Internet for asynchronous (delayed) or synchronous (real time) communication. Likewise, online student services are those accessed through the use of the Internet.

Student services refers to non-course content focused interactions the student has with an institutional representative, interactions that are designed to facilitate the student’s understanding, deal with the instructional technology, assist in application or integration of knowledge, or address personal issues or developmental tasks (Dirr, 1999b).

Exemplary or model programs are those that provide an array of student services to their distance learning students beyond the (more common) basic administrative services, such as registration, financial aid, and transcript evaluation. These programs

also provide more developmental services identified in the WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines, including academic advising, instructional support and tutoring, and services to promote a sense of community.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Distance Education and Technology

Distance education dates back to the correspondence courses of the 1800's, which were designed to provide educational opportunities to students unable to attend traditional classes (Hanson & Maushak, 1997; Moore & Thompson, 1997). Over time, radio, television, and audio- and videotapes expanded the reach of distance education, and in recent years, computer technology and the Internet have had a great impact on the provision of courses and on access issues. Dirr (1999a) identified four generations of distance education: (1) correspondence education in the 1800's, (2) the introduction of television, (3) online courses on the Internet largely funded by the U.S. government, and (4) complete "virtual" programs. Distance education has recently entered the fourth generation and is experiencing tremendous growth due to the technological ability to create entire online academic programs, structured much like campus-based programs. This incredible rate of growth of the Internet has achieved a rate of penetration in ten years what took radio and television fifty years (Boehler, 1999).

Distance learning enrollments were projected to reach 3 million in 2002 (Connick, 1999), but a study recently published by the NCES indicated that number was reached even earlier with an estimated 3,077,000 enrollments in distance education courses in 2000-2001 (Waits & Lewis, 2003). In a profile of participation in distance education in 1999-2000, the NCES reported that 8% of undergraduate and 10% of graduate students

had taken a course via a distance delivery method, with online being the most common. These statistics, however, are actually low, since the study only included students at institutions eligible for Title IV funding; at that time, institutions that offered the majority of instruction via distance education were not eligible for this funding (Sikora & Carroll, 2002). Management guru Peter Drucker has even predicted the residential campus will be defunct within 30 years (Lenzner & Johnson, 1997). While this may be an extreme viewpoint, there is no denying the fact that the face of higher education has changed dramatically with recent technological advances and the introduction of the Internet.

This rush to offer distance learning is occurring because of the convergence of communication and computing technologies, the need for information age workers to acquire new skills without interrupting their working lives, and the need to reduce costs of higher education (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). As cyber courses and degrees receive increased academic recognition as mainstream education, traditional institutions are pressured to provide these opportunities (Mantyla & Woods, 2001).

Technology is becoming a larger part of higher education and even on-campus students regularly use technology in the classroom and for supplemental or support services. Eighty-six percent of college students have gone online, 72% check e-mail at least once a day, and 85% own their own computer. Nearly 79% believe the Internet has positively enhanced their academic experience, 73% use the Internet more than the library for information searching, and 68% report subscribing to a listserv related to their studies. Additionally, 56% believe e-mail has enhanced their relationships with professors and 85% consider it to be an easy and convenient choice for communicating with friends (Jones, 2002). As Jones reports, "Use of the Internet is a part of college

students' daily routine" (2002, p. 3). The national norms for incoming freshmen in 2002 indicated that 84% frequently used a personal computer, more than 78% used the Internet for homework or research, over 67% communicated via e-mail, and about 50% participated in Internet chat rooms (HERI, 2002).

Furthermore, the 2000 *Campus Computing Project* (Green, 2000) revealed that at participating institutions, 59% of all college courses utilized e-mail, 43% utilized Web resources, and 31% had a Web page. In the 2002 *Campus Computing Project* (Green, 2002), almost 90% of the participating institutions provided online undergraduate applications, over 70% offered online registration, and over 40% had e-commerce capacity for online financial transactions.

Distance education was initially designed primarily for the part-time, adult student; the "typical" distance learner is over 25 years old, has a job, and has previously completed some post-secondary education (Connick, 1999). However, recent enrollments indicate a more diverse student body that will likely continue to become more heterogeneous (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999; Schwitzer et al., 2001). The National Education Association (NEA) recently conducted a survey of faculty teaching distance learning courses in public 2- and 4- year institutions. Faculty reported teaching as many traditional aged as non-traditional aged students and as many part-time as full-time students. Over half of the faculty reported that most of their distance learning students live within an hour of campus, and another third reported that their students live mostly in-state but more than an hour away. Very few reported having most of their students from out of state (Abacus Associates, 2000). Additionally, recent estimates indicate that 80% of the e-learning population is comprised of campus-based students who enroll in an online or

other mediated distance course (Shea & Armitage, 2003). “Web-centric” models of education are more learner-centered and allow students greater access to courses and resources (Farrell, 2001).

In the coming years, students will be savvy consumers of educational services and will expect efficient learning resources and access to quick and easy support for their learning needs. “The majority of learning has always occurred outside the classroom; this will increase ... Learning is moving off-campus: to the home, the workplace, the field, or wherever the learning is” (Boettcher 2001, p. 60). Support services need to become as portable as classroom resources. In the past, institutions have provided services for distance learners as an add-on to campus-based services and generally required the students to visit campus. However, with the increasing numbers of students now engaging in distance learning, this is no longer a viable option (Krauth, 1999). Students from a distance often operate from a “consumerism” approach and view higher education as a commodity (Levine, 1993); they expect services to be self-service, just-in-time, personalized, customized, and customizable (Shea & Armitage, 2003). Interactive technology enables student affairs to create virtual services that mirror on-campus services and provide interactions and experiences for distance students similar to those available to on-campus students. In fact, some services, such as administrative processes, can be better provided utilizing technology than in person (NASPA, 2000).

In a review of research on the impact of college attendance, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) consistently found students learned more and persisted more when their in-class experiences were complemented by their out-of-class experiences. They also found that while a bachelor’s degree had a strong net influence on socioeconomic

attainment, where and in what field the degree was completed had only a small impact. Thus, it can be inferred that a degree earned from a distance is likely to have similar impact on career achievement. Yet, if students are to get the most out of distance learning, they must receive support services to complement their courses.

Effectiveness of Distance Learning

The literature on the effectiveness of distance learning tends to focus on outcomes (academic performance), attitudes, and satisfaction (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). The question of whether or not a distance format provides the same quality of education as the traditional model is a popular topic in the literature. Russell (1999) reviewed 355 such references and overall found no significant difference between distance and in-class learning. Studies that found a difference generally favored the distance student. Russell continues to update this project on the website:

<http://teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference/>. Results continue to indicate no significant difference in course performance: “No matter how it is produced, how it is delivered, whether or not it is interactive, low-tech, or high-tech, students learn equally well with each technology and learn as well as their on-campus, face-to-face counterparts” (Russell, 1999, p. 124). It stands to reason, then, that out-of-class experiences delivered via technology can aid in the cognitive and psychosocial development of the learner just as face-to-face services have been shown to do.

Descriptive studies examining attitudes about distance education indicate that faculty and students have mostly positive attitudes. Students hold positive attitudes about distance education because of the access and convenience it allows (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Faculty who teach distance courses generally view the academic quality as equal

to or better than traditional programs: “Increased experience leads to increased acceptance” (Moore & Thompson, 1997, p. 25). However, faculty with no experience teaching from a distance hold the opposite viewpoint.

Quality of content, instruction, and support has been found to be major factors in student satisfaction with distance learning. In a study examining student satisfaction with provision and quality of instructional and student support services, Tallman (1994) found five variables that explained approximately 41% of the variance associated with satisfaction: (a) admissions support, (b) learning, (c) mailing of materials, (d) faculty contact, and (e) instructor feedback. Significant student support variables were helpfulness of the admissions staff, convenience of mail registration, clarity of admissions forms and information, availability of phone registration, and helpfulness of orientation manual. Student evaluations from the first two semesters of Penn State’s World Campus indicated access to higher education, high quality course content, opportunities for career development, and level of interaction with faculty and support staff enhanced satisfaction with courses, while technology difficulties and course workload detracted from student satisfaction (Thompson & McGrath, 1999).

Retention

Tinto (1993) hypothesized that weakness of integration of the student into the social fabric of the institution indicates potential drop out. Applied to distance education, virtually all distance students would be classified “at-risk.” Distance systems “produce a customer/business atmosphere which negates the integrative support mechanisms which Tinto hypothesizes as vital” (Keegan, 1996, p. 151). Keegan suggests that there is a propensity for distance students to drop out; however, “this propensity can be attenuated

by the planning of quality learning materials, but above all by the provision of adequate student support services for the avoidance of avoidable drop-out” (p. 151). If adequate services cannot be provided, students should understand that distance study could be constantly fraught with the risk of attrition. Clearly, student services have an important role to play in improving retention.

Since the expansion of distance education has come so rapidly, most institutions have not kept records differentiating distance from campus-based students. Thus, accurate statistics on the retention or attrition rates of distance students are not available. However, much literature indicates that distance students have a higher attrition rate than campus-based students. The reasons for this attrition rate may be attributed to a wider variety of reasons. While traditional students generally have a higher rate of attrition due to academic failure, distance students more often choose to leave due to personal circumstances. In addition, students studying at a distance may have different educational goals than campus-based students and may not be degree-seeking (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999).

Numerous researchers have found that factors beyond institutional control, such as personal, job, or domestic pressures, are the main factors contributing to distance students’ withdrawal (Phythian & Clements, 1982; Rekkedal, 1982; Woodley & McIntosh, 1977). However, several studies have identified institutional issues as a barrier to distance education (Mulenberg & Berg, 2001). Additional reasons cited are loneliness and lack of support when encountering difficulties and a mismatch between the course and students’ academic preparation (Phythian & Clements, 1982). These are issues student affairs departments typically address on traditional campuses and thus could address in distance learning programs.

Peer interaction and involvement in the campus environment are important variables in a student's learning experience, especially at the undergraduate level (Astin, 1993). The need for contact and exchange with others varies for individual students and depends on their age, gender, and personality, purpose of study, and previous experience with and level of education. For example, self-directed or autonomous students or professionals returning to school may need or want less interaction, whereas adult students from disadvantaged backgrounds and younger students will require more interaction and support. In addition, women seem to need more connectedness than men. Missing out on these out-of-class interactions impacts distance students' social activities and experiences and the quality of their learning (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). "There are no chats over a cup of coffee at the student center, no casual encounters on campus with either the professor or with fellow students, no contact with people who took the same course previously. There is no way for the distant student to check progress" (Mood, 1999, p.103). Students in distance education have fewer opportunities for social interactions so are more isolated: "Isolation from fellow students is a grave shortcoming of distance education, and is of no lesser effect than remoteness from the teacher" (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, p. 87).

Keegan (1996) hypothesizes that the separation of teaching and learning characteristic of distance education results in a weak integration of the student into the life of the institution, which is linked to attrition. This separation also results in weaknesses in the achievement of interpersonal communication. The drop-out rate for distance students is highest during the first year (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999), so providing the proper support mechanisms should help these students with adjustment to the distance learning environment, thereby increasing retention.

The University of Maryland's University College provided a test group of potential students with student services from the moment they made an inquiry about the institution's offerings. Staff helped students determine their motivation for enrolling and select the most appropriate curricula, provided assistance with degree mapping, and clarified financial aid policies. This heightened attention to students' pre-enrollment resulted in 62% retention to the next semester, compared with a 42% rate for the group who received no attention until actually enrolled (Hrutka, 2001).

Student Affairs Perspective

The organization of higher education into separate realms of academic and student affairs is recent history. Student affairs is largely a 20th century American creation developed on humanistic values beyond higher education such as the importance of self-awareness and the emphasis on the development of the "whole student." The creation of land-grant institutions, an increase in enrollment and diversity, the elective course system, an emphasis on vocationalism, the changing role of faculty (resulting in less time to personalize the student experience), and the changing role of students influenced the development of student affairs as a professional field of study (Rhatigan, 2000). The profession has been gaining momentum in the past several decades, yet the philosophy and practices are steeped in the tradition of meeting on-campus student needs. Student affairs, while recognizing the need to progress beyond services and programs dependent on time and space, has not made much progress in appropriately serving students at a distance.

In general, the profession is dedicating a low level of attention to student services for distance learners. This is evidenced by the lack of literature in mainstream student

affairs journals and by a recent ACPA survey in which members reported a low level of interest in distance learning (Pickering & Calliotte, 2000).

However, the Senior Scholars of ACPA recently identified an agenda for future research and selected technology as one of the eight higher education trends for the next century (Johnson & Cheatham, 1999). In this technology paper, Upcraft and Terenzini (1999) identified several of the basic technology-related trends in higher education: (a) an increased reliance on technology in students' classroom and out-of-class experiences and in administrative and support services, (b) the growth of distance/virtual education, and (c) the impossibility of keeping up with technological innovations. The growth of distance/virtual education results in expanded access and the removal of time and space barriers; an increasing number of students can access courses and entire degree programs without ever having to go to campus. The implication for student affairs is that technology has the power to alter the way services have traditionally been provided: "Advances in distance education have the potential to transform the philosophy, definition, structure, and activities of student affairs in ways far more consequential and far-reaching than did the legal challenges to *in loco parentis*" (p. 5). Yet student affairs has done little to address what programs and services need to be offered in distance education or how they should be provided.

NASPA has also begun to address distance learning issues. A task force examined issues related to serving students from a distance to encourage dialogue in the profession: "It wasn't designed to come up with answers; it was designed to come up with questions" (G. Kleeman, personal communication, March 4, 2003). This group determined that there are very few things that cannot be translated from a brick and mortar campus to a cyber

campus. They also warned “it is hard to imagine distance education without courses. It is easy to imagine it without student support services and equally easy to rationalize not providing them” (p. 2). Thus, student affairs professionals need to be involved from the beginning of any distance learning venture to identify students and their learning needs, and to provide expertise regarding student needs; otherwise, they will be left out of the distance learning enterprise (NASPA, 2000).

In fact, the distance education literature addresses the changing role of faculty and recognizes that faculty who teach from a distance may revert back to taking on responsibilities generally associated with student affairs since they are often the major point of contact these students have with the university (Wimbish, 2000).

They’ve [students] been placed in a position of sink or swim ... so the faculty are there trying to get them registered, trying to make certain they have their measles shots, trying to make certain that their financial aid forms are in, trying to make certain that all these different kinds of things get done, and of course, faculty aren’t familiar with how to do those things. (G. Kleeman, personal communication, March 4, 2003)

In a recent survey of student affairs preparation programs and chief student affairs administrators, 89% reported not having a written goal statement about the inclusion of technology in the curriculum (Bowman & Cuyjet, 1999). Thus, lack of skill, not just lack of interest, may impact student affairs’ ability to serve students from a distance. “Because of rapid changes in technology, there may be gaps in the level of skill development students receive in their graduate programs that are necessary to succeed as a student affairs professional today” (Elling & Brown, 2001, p. 100). Elling & Brown (2001) recommend that student affairs practitioners have a “basic technological tool set” (p. 100) and an understanding of how technology is changing staff roles. This is especially valid when considering results of a 2003 IT survey in which online student services and web

services/web-based systems made the top-ten list of IT issues that institutions need to resolve for strategic success (Crawford & Rudy, 2003).

Distance Learning and Student Services

While an expansive base of literature exists on distance learning, the majority focuses on academic aspects such as instructional design, faculty workload, class performance, retention issues, and student satisfaction. Although Muilenburg & Berge (2001) conducted a large-scale exploratory factor analysis and identified student-support services as one of ten underlying factors that comprise barriers to distance education, literature examining the out-of-class experience of distance learners is minimal and mostly anecdotal in nature. Little empirical research has been conducted to determine the needs of students who study at a distance or the impact of services and programs. In a review of the literature on student support as an area of research in distance learning, Moore & Thompson (1997) gave an overview of only four studies. From these studies, they identified gender differences in student needs, student perceptions of support services, and the relationship between support services and satisfaction as the research foci in student support literature.

No real body of literature exists on any particular student service; however, it is generally assumed that administrative services are more efficiently and effectively provided by utilizing technology (e.g. NASPA, 2000). Ethical and professional issues have been raised concerning career assessment (Barak, 2003) and virtual counseling (Carlson, 2002). In addition, questions of how to build community in an online environment are common (e.g. Crawford & Rudy, 2003; NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999). One group that has been particularly proactive in addressing technology

issues is the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), which has published monographs dedicated to providing information on advising students through the use of technology (Kramer & Childs, 2000).

Furthermore, popular guidebooks for students emphasize the importance of student services in distance education programs. *Distance Learning Online for Dummies* (Stevenson, 2000) lists several support services students should expect to be able to access either by phone or online, including assistance for international students and students with disabilities, tutor programs, counseling, and work placement programs. Princeton Review's *Complete Book of Distance Learning Schools* (Ice & Edelson, 2001) advises students to "pay specific attention to the institution's track record in serving students away from campus" (p. 13), and recommends that students assess the strength of student support systems such as academic advising and a 24x7 help desk. Access to library resources, registration, academic records, technical support, and other students are also listed as issues to consider when selecting a distance learning program. *The Distance Learner's Guide* (Connick, 1999) warns students that "if the institution has not organized services to support you at a distance, you are likely to spend an enormous amount of time trying to connect to an office or individual" (p. 27) and suggests students need access to orientation, a contact person, advising, the library, the bookstore, financial aid, admissions, registration, and career counseling from a distance.

Recent increased efforts by government programs, such as FIPSE, and private programs, such as Pew, to examine student services for distance learners indicate the importance of supporting these students and recognizing that they are not "second-class enrollees" (Dirr, 1999a, p. 27). In addition, a few recent works discussed below show a

promising beginning in expanding the literature base and assessing the needs of distance learners.

The *Putting Principles Into Practice* project conducted by the Western Commission for Electronic Telecommunications (WCET) was a three-part project funded by FIPSE to help institutions “improve the availability and quality of support services they provide to students enrolled in distance education programs and courses” (Dirr, 1999b, p. 1). The early part of this project consisted of a survey of institutions in 14 western states focusing on various aspects of support services provided to distance students. Although this was an early study, results indicated institutions had not invested much effort into developing support services for students studying online. Sixteen percent of the institutions still required students to go to campus to register, 31% had no special library services for distance learners, and 76% had not established social support networks for their students. Twenty-four of the 417 responding institutions rated themselves as “not effective” on at least 5 of the 14 student support services. Only 12 rated themselves as “extremely effective” on at least 7 of the 14 services but still reported being weak in career counseling, social support services, counseling services, and orientation services. Thus, while several institutions were doing a few things well, not one institution provided a comprehensive support program to students, even those that had been involved with distance learning for many years (Dirr, 1999b).

Another WCET project, *Beyond the Administrative Core*, addressed time- and location-independent access to student services for distance learners. WCET coordinated with institutional and corporate partners to produce *Guidelines for Creating Student Services Online*, which identified motivating factors for creating online services: (a)

declining budgets, (b) growing enrollments on campus and online, (c) increased accountability, (d) student expectations, (e) competition among institutions, and (f) smart usage of new technologies (Shea & Armitage, 2003). This project also produced resources on the development and implementation processes for particular service areas: academic advising, financial aid, library services, orientation, personal counseling, and tutoring (Shea & Armitage, 2003).

Jackson (2000) conducted a Delphi study to identify essential student services for distance learners. The panel of experts reached consensus on 47 essential services classified under the nine categories of: (a) recruitment and enrollment, (b) academic support, (c) educational materials and research resources, (d) career development, (e) community development, (f) quality assurance and evaluation, (g) financial services, (h) faculty development resources, and (i) technical support. At least four of these categories represent service areas that would generally be considered the responsibility of student affairs professionals on-campus. Jackson concluded that student support services are a critical component of a distance education program, yet student affairs has done little to meet the needs of distance learners. In addition, while institutions are increasingly involved in providing distance education courses, they have not made genuine adaptations in providing the accompanying out-of-class services.

Bayless (2001) surveyed distance learning students and faculty about 34 possible non-academic needs. Respondents rated the importance of these needs for the success of distance learners, the accessibility of these services, and when the needs presented themselves. Participants identified pre-enrollment information, admissions, academic advising, registration, bookstore, contact person, technology support, and opportunities

for internships/co-ops and to use the skills, values, and knowledge learned as the most important needs. Results indicated 15 of the 34 needs were difficult to access or non-existent. Most of these clustered in the areas of community building, academic support, and personal and career counseling, such as learning to be a team member, getting to know peers and developing friendships, training about quality of information on the Web, learning and practicing leadership skills, assistance with writing, study skills, time management and learning styles, and exposure to diversity. Consistent with other literature (Dirr, 1999b), students found information about an institution or a program, admissions, registration, the bookstore, and a contact person the easiest to access.

Professional Association Perspective

Though there is a lack of empirical study on student services for distance learners, several professional associations and accrediting agencies have published guidelines for good practice. After a review of hundreds of institutional websites for the second part of the *Putting Principles Into Practice* project, the WCET designed the *Guide to Developing Online Student Services* (2000). This Guide expands the traditional concept of services for students studying from a distance to include “support services that directly affect the student’s learning experience” (p. 1). The Guide addresses the following services:

- Information for Prospective Students
- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Registration
- Orientation Services
- Academic Advising

- Technical Support
- Career Services
- Library Services
- Services for Students with Disabilities
- Personal Counseling
- Instructional Support and Tutoring
- Bookstore
- Services to Promote a Sense of Community

The Guide also provides general tips for designing effective services, discussions on the needs of online and distance learners, and guidelines for good practice in delivering services via the Internet.

CAS recently published *Standards and Guidelines for Educational Services for Distance Learners* (2000), which includes a section on *Educational Support Services* that reproduce, almost exactly, the WCET guidelines (2000) and contain the same 14 student service components. Additionally, a document produced by the eight regional accrediting bodies lists similar services and states that these services “must be available for students of electronically offered programs, using the working assumption that these students will not be physically present on campus” (C-RAC, 2000, p. 12).

The Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs (Witherspoon, 1999) includes *Students and Student Services* and makes the following recommendations:

- The program provides students with clear, complete and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction,

assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.

- Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning.
- Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

Similarly, in a study entitled *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education* (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000), The Institute for Higher Education Policy reviewed existing principles and guidelines and combined them into 45 benchmarks, then tested the list through interviews with leading practitioners. This resulted in a list of 24 benchmarks essential to quality assurance in online education. Four of these were classified as Student Support Benchmarks:

- Students receive information about programs, including admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, and student support services.
- Students are provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing material through electronic databases, interlibrary loans, government archives, news services, and other sources.
- Throughout the duration of the course/program, students have access to technical assistance, including detailed instructions regarding the electronic media used,

practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course, and convenient access to technical support staff.

- Questions directed to student service personnel are answered accurately and quickly, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.

Benchmarks in other categories addressed interaction with other students, access to library resources, and advisement about the program, which are often classified as student support functions.

In 1993, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities initiated a project to improve the provision of support services to their distance students, recognizing that “appropriately designed and well-maintained support systems are key to successful distance education enterprises” (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, p. 97). Thus, even in Europe where the student affairs tradition is not nearly as strong as in the United States, educators acknowledge the importance of student services for distance learners’ success.

Chapter Summary

While the profession of student affairs is committed to serving the “whole student,” it has given little attention to students who study from a distance. Available literature on distance education focuses on course design, academic performance, and faculty training. With the increasing sophistication of technology, there is potential to create student support services that provide experiences from a distance similar to those available on campus. The provision of these support services could have the potential to increase the enrollment, retention, and satisfaction of distance learning students.

Guidelines for practice published by professional organizations and accrediting bodies

suggest components that should be included in serving distance learners and tips for providing effective services.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative, multi-site case study; I identified institutions providing exemplary services to students studying from a distance, examined the similarities and differences between programs, and identified good practices. The purpose was to identify and describe student support services that exemplary programs provide to their students and the structure and process of these programs, thereby providing a practical guide for others who wish to implement good practices in student services for their students studying from a distance.

Qualitative research methods were utilized since the purpose of the study was to examine the process of providing support services to distance learners, not just the product that is produced. Qualitative research is used to “explore a topic when the variables and theory base are unknown” (Creswell, 1994, p. 146); thus the scarcity of research on support services for distance learners justified an exploratory study for an in-depth look at the types of services being provided and how they are provided. A descriptive case study is used to present basic information in areas in which little research has been conducted; it is atheoretical because its intent is to present “a detailed account of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 38), not to generate or prove hypotheses (Merriam, 1998). Including multiple cases can “strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings” (Miles & Huberman, p. 14, 1994).

In addition, Stake (2000) would define this project as an instrumental case study because the goal was to have the cases facilitate understanding of an issue external to the cases; the cases were studied “to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization ... the case still is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest” (p. 437). The external interest in this study was the provision of services. Since several cases were included in the study, this is also considered a collective case study; several cases were chosen because they could provide a better understanding of a still larger collection of cases.

Sources of data were professional staff members responsible for providing student services to distance learners in programs identified as providing exemplary services to distance learners and the corresponding program websites.

Data Collection Strategies

To find participants for the study, I identified a panel of experts comprised of authors and presenters of information about student services in distance learning and student affairs professionals working in the field of distance education. These experts were asked via e-mail to identify staff members who were working in programs providing exemplary services to their distance students, had been instrumental in the implementation and provision of student support services in their distance education programs, and could provide rich, detailed information about these student support services (see Appendix C).

I then contacted the suggested potential participants via e-mail and asked them to participate if they had been recommended by at least two of the experts (see Appendix

D). Six potential participants were contacted and five agreed to participate; thus a total of five programs were included in the study. In addition, I included a sixth participant who was recommended by the experts, not for information about a specific program, but for background information and expertise. This participant had extensive experience in student affairs before becoming involved with distance learning, headed up NASPA's Distance Learning Task Force, and has frequently presented on the topic of serving students from a distance.

I designed an interview guide to outline topics to explore with each of the participants (Patton, 1990) and before conducting actual interviews with the participants, piloted the interview protocol to refine the questions. The interviewee for this pilot was a dissertation committee member who has a background in student affairs and is currently working in distance education.

After receiving consent forms from the participants (see Appendix E), I conducted audio-taped, semi-structured phone interviews with them to collect quantitative but descriptive data (Merriam, 1998) on topics such as their experience with student affairs and distance learning, the organization of distance learning and student affairs at their institutions, the types of distance courses and programs offered, the student support services that are available and most utilized, and the number of students served. Participants were then asked for more in-depth information about the programs and services, policies and procedures, and organizational issues (see Appendix F). Interviews were used because they allowed for participants to describe their experiences related to the programs under investigation and to discuss the meaning of these experiences in more detail than could have been gathered through surveys, observations, or other methods

designed to determine participants' perceptions of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). The information gathered facilitated an analysis of the unique practices employed by various institutions and a comparison of commonalities. There was no attempt to keep responses, identities, or institutions anonymous; since participants represented exemplary programs, they were willing to have their identities known.

I also conducted a document analysis of the program websites. For this, I designed a document checklist from the recommended WCET guidelines (2000). One participant also provided materials the program sends to students interested in or enrolling in the program. Since the websites are easily accessible, all of these documents were considered public records of the various programs (Patton, 1990).

Throughout the data analysis process, I conducted some brief follow-up e-mails and phone calls to gather additional data, clarify points the participants had made, and pursue leads provided by the documents. I also contacted an additional staff member in two of the programs based on the suggestion of the main participants for follow-up information.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in data collection and analysis, so all observations and analyses are filtered through her or his worldview. This requires an explanation of past experiences and personal biases that may shape interpretations (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998). I have taken a televised and an online course, created and taught an online course, and created online tutoring services for students. These experiences led to a personal understanding of some of the issues associated with studying from a distance. However, they also resulted in biases. My

perception at the beginning of this study was that services for students studying from a distance are limited so the online student experience is not comparable to the campus experience. For example, faculty members are often responsible for providing student affairs functions but don't adequately address them. Facilitating interaction between students and building community is possible but difficult to achieve and faculty are not necessarily proficient in using technology to do this. Another assumption I had was that distance and resident student populations were very different; however, many students classified as distance learners are actually campus students taking an online course for convenience or some other reason. I made every attempt to ensure objectivity by recognizing these biases and taking them into consideration in data analysis.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were each e-mailed a copy of their interview transcript to give them an opportunity to clarify or add to the information gathered through the interview process. Data were hand-coded to compile descriptive statistics of background information about the programs (descriptions of the cases) and to generate themes about the provision of services.

I simultaneously collected and analyzed the interview data; i.e. from the second interview on, new data were compared with data collected from previous interviews to look for tentative themes to explore in future interviews. The constant comparative method was utilized, which involved comparing segments of data to determine similarities and differences, with the objective of finding patterns (Merriam, 1998). As tentative categories continuously emerged, they were compared with the data. I conducted intensive data analysis when enough data had been collected, determined by

exhaustion of sources, saturation of categories, and emergence of regularities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I also conducted content analysis (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the program websites by using checklists designed from the WCET (2000) and the CAS (2000) guidelines to explore the online provision of student support services and to triangulate the interview data. Each website page was thoroughly examined to determine if the programs provided the recommended service, and if so, how it was presented and accessed (see Appendix G). These data were used to find common service provision among the programs and to look for patterns of services that were not being offered. I also examined the web structure and design in relation to the WCET's tips for designing online services (2000) and a stage classification scheme through which online services evolve: (1) static web pages, (2) interactive forms, self-assessment, and e-mail, (3) personalized services, access to own records, (4) web portals to establish communities of interest, and (5) use of artificial intelligence (Johnstone, 2002). In addition, I tested the index pages with the Bobby approved software program to check for adherence to the Web Accessibility Guidelines and Section 508 Guidelines, which mandate certain levels of website accessibility for persons with disabilities (CAST, 2003).

The website analysis was also used to triangulate interview data, i.e., comparing and cross-checking the information on the websites with that provided by the participants in order to ensure consistency. "Validating information obtained through interviews by checking program documents and other written evidence that can corroborate what interview respondents report" (Patton, 1990, p. 467) is an important part of ensuring the validity of the data.

In addition to examining the web-based services, I examined various other online documents such as pdf files of student handbooks, strategic plans, and annual reports. I also collected and analyzed documents and materials sent to students through the mail, such as “getting started” information, software, marketing information, and “goodies.” These data provided a more complete picture of the programs by demonstrating services available to students via alternative methods, items that connected the students to the program or institution, and organizational structure and support. Additionally, these documents further triangulated other sources of data.

To ensure the data analysis accurately reflected what participants intended to convey and accurately represented the programs, the researcher conducted member checks (reviewed data and tentative interpretations with the participants) (Merriam, 1998). Participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on the interview transcripts, case descriptions, and general findings.

Methodological Limitations

Qualitative research methods, which have inherent limitations, were utilized. I confined the study to interviewing staff members from select institutions identified through a purposive sampling procedure and made no effort to represent different types of institutions or to include all exemplary programs. This may limit generalizability, but a detailed description of the cases enables the reader to determine if findings can be transferred to other settings.

Participant self-report data were gathered through interviews; thus a subjective view is presented. However, document analysis of websites help substantiate this data. Finally, as in all research, findings are subject to other interpretations, but triangulation,

member checks, and an audit trail should minimize this (Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Though there were limitations to this study, I utilized several methods to ensure that the study did what it was designed to do: on-going member checks for credibility, triangulation of multiple forms of data, and a statement of assumptions to reveal potential bias. I also provided thick, rich description and an audit trail for external validity. In addition, a detailed description of the five programs follows in the next section (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998).

Cases

The five cases included in this study were Penn State World Campus (WC), Thomas Edison State College (TESC), University of Texas-System TeleCampus (UTTC), Washington State University Distance Degree Programs (DDP), and Weber State University Online (WSU Online). These programs were identified by a group of experts as providing exemplary student services to their students who study from a distance. The participants from the programs were purposefully selected because they could provide detailed information about the background of the programs and the student services. This section presents descriptive historical and quantitative data, gathered through interviews and program websites, to provide the reader with a better understanding of the sites.

Penn State World Campus (<http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/index.shtml>)

Wherever you want to go, the World Campus can help you get there! The mission of the World Campus (WC) is to provide learners worldwide with access to Penn State

academic programs and resources in a sustainable, technology-based learning environment. Penn State was one of the first institutions to offer distance learning starting with correspondence study via Rural Free Delivery in 1892, and continued to develop distance offerings as technology developed via radio, television, and video. In 1997, the President of Penn State appointed a committee to design a plan for a World Campus that utilized new technologies to expand globally. In 1997, the Sloan Foundation provided a grant for start-up funding and the first students enrolled in signature Penn State programs offered through the World Campus in 1998.

Though the WC is often viewed as the “25th campus of the Penn State System” and credits are not noted on student transcripts any differently than for on-campus students, the WC receives no state funding and is self-sufficient on tuition generation; tuition costs per credit are determined by level of course (lower, upper, or graduate level). Additionally, the WC has received \$5 million in grants for program development.

The “World Campus” name was originally used for just the online programs until recently, when it became the trademark for all Penn State distance learning offerings. The WC offers online courses and independent study courses with optional technology for complete degree and certificate programs. There are approximately 125 undergraduate and 30 graduate online courses available with several sections taught of each for a total of approximately 750 sections per year. Less than half the students are from Pennsylvania and there are students enrolled from all 50 states and over 40 countries. The gender breakdown is approximately 50% female and 50% male and the age range is 25-44. Most students are working and have families and take one or two classes per semester. Last year, the World Campus had 3000-4000 students for 5900 course enrollments.

The WC has about 125 staff members, with 42 of them in the Student Services department who provide student service functions such as advising, pre-admissions counseling, call center, registration and records, and technical support.

Thomas Edison State College (<http://www.tesc.edu/>)

Thirty years ago, Thomas Edison State College (TESC) was created by the State of New Jersey in response to a Carnegie report calling for the development of non-traditional, high-quality, accessible educational opportunities for adults. The College originated from the idea that mature adults needed diverse and alternative educational opportunities designed especially for their needs. Students have to be 21 to be admitted and the average age is 38. The College offers no classroom (campus-based) instruction, so students earn degrees through a variety of distance education methods such as documenting college-level knowledge (portfolio) or coursework from other institutions, or completing independent (guided) study or online courses. Students can earn credit through guided study, online, e-Pack (self study), and PBS televised or video courses. Students can also earn credit through alternative means such as testing, portfolio assessment, learning in the workplace, and licenses/certificates.

In 1985 TESC started offering very early online learning and guided study courses and leased numerous courses through PBS's online courses. Today, Thomas Edison State College offers 14 Associate, Baccalaureate, and Master's degrees to students in every state and more than 80 countries around the world. There are over 9000 students currently registered, with approximately half taking college coursework through the College. A third of these students are in the military since TESC has contracts with eArmyU and Navy College Program Distance Learning Partnership and tend to be

younger than the average TESC student. TESC is state funded; students pay an in- or out-of-state service fee for administrative services and an in- or out-of-state tuition fee per credit if also taking classes. There are two tuition options: the Comprehensive Tuition Plan allows the student to pay an annual tuition that includes all credit earning methods, evaluation, and academic advising, while the Enrolled Options Plan is for students who only require specific services. About 60% of the students are New Jersey residents and many out-of-state students enroll from nearby states or states with large military bases such as New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, California, and South Carolina. The gender breakdown is about 50% male and 50% female. A new 12-week online or 16-week guided study semester begins every month with 130 classes taught each semester for about 12,000 enrollments per year.

The College is organized into three divisions: Academic Affairs, Public Affairs, and Finance and Administration. The unit that provides the majority of student service functions is Learner Services in the Division of Academic Affairs. The approximately 30 staff members are responsible for financial aid, services for students with disabilities, transcript evaluation, academic advisement, portfolio assessment, and a call center. The participant noted that the Registrar is in a different unit; however, “a lot of what they do goes directly to what we do but we’re not in the same reporting structure.”

University of Texas TeleCampus (<http://www.telecampus.utsystem.edu/>)

The UT TeleCampus (UTTC) is the support center for online learning within the University of Texas System’s fifteen component campuses and is part of the UT System administration. The idea behind the TeleCampus developed in 1996 and received funding from the state Board of Regents in 1997. Two years were spent building the UTTC so the

first programs started in Fall 1999. The participant noted that time was spent upfront creating the student services: “Our goal was to put in student services first. [We were] very adamant about not putting courses online until we had a support structure.”

The UTTC currently offers 10 graduate programs, an undergraduate completion program, and general education and other undergraduate courses. The online courses and degree programs can be completed entirely at a distance and meet the same high-quality academic standards as their onsite equivalents. The target audience was originally the working adult (“something that anyone could get to for whatever reason, whether they didn’t want to come to campus or couldn’t go to campus”) but more traditional age students are also choosing to study online.

The average age is in the 30’s but is coming down, and the majority of students work, especially at the graduate level. Across all programs, the gender breakdown is about half male and half female. Eighty-five percent of the students are Texas residents and are spread throughout the state. Students select a home campus, which tends to be the one closest in proximity to them, and the campuses are responsible for admitting students, providing faculty, and awarding credits and degrees. The UTTC is primarily known for offering collaborative programs to which several UT campuses contribute courses. For these programs, students still choose a home campus and also take courses through “host” campuses. Approximately 2000 students enroll in approximately 3000 courses per semester; about 180 courses are currently available (140 graduate and 40 undergraduate).

The UTTC coordinates everything that is online, such as providing admission, registration, and financial aid information, and classroom and academic resources.

Students may pay a distance learning fee to their home institution and the institution pays a fee to the UTTC based on how many courses are being taught for that institution.

Funding is also received by the System administration and through contract work for the campuses. The UTTC has a staff of 24 in five primary departments: Administration, Technology and Course Development, Communications and Marketing, Program Support, and Student and Faculty Support.

Washington State University Distance Degree Programs (<http://www.distance.wsu.edu/>)

A Decade of Excellence. Washington State University's distance learning degree and course options are offered through Distance Degree Programs (DDP), a division of Extended University Services, which has a Dean who reports to the Provost. WSU started Distance Degree Programs in the Fall of 1992, with one distance program, a BA in Social Sciences. This program utilized pre-produced video to offer the program completely asynchronous with the intent to reach rural students and so students never had to come to campus. The phones were staffed with a couple of generalists who could assist students by answering a variety of questions. Currently, DDP offers six degree-completion programs and three types of courses: online, pre-produced video, and flexible enrollment (independent study). Students generally have to take a combination of all three types to earn a degree. DDP provides all the asynchronous distance courses, all the support services for delivering those courses, and support services for faculty and students.

In 1998, the DDP conducted a survey to see what percentage of their students had computers and access to the Internet and found that about 85% had access to a computer either at home or at work, and about 80% of those had access to the Internet. Thus, DDP decided this was a high enough percentage to start "moving courses to the web."

Currently 40 online courses are offered, and in Fall 2002, 1700 students enrolled in 3900 video and online courses. An additional 1000 students enrolled in 1400 flexible enrollment (independent study) courses.

Approximately 25% of the students are male and 75% are female, and the average age is 36. Seventy-five percent of the students are Washington residents but are spread throughout the state and are not in close proximity to the campus. Most of them work and have families and take two classes per semester.

The programs are primarily state funded and the process of receiving funds is to apply to the central administration like the other departments on campus. However, this will soon change because the university is only funded by the state for so many students, so if some DDP programs are offered on a self-sustaining basis, the university can enroll more students. The DDP has about 30 full-time staff members, including a student services coordinator.

Weber State University Online (<http://wsuonline.weber.edu/>)

Anywhere you want to go, from where you are. WSU Online is the virtual campus for Weber State University and is part of Continuing Education, which reports to the Provost. The department offers independent study, enhanced (on-campus utilizing technology tools), hybrid (part on-campus and part online), and online courses. The online program started in Fall of 1997 with 20 courses and less than 200 students. Currently WSU Online offers approximately 230 courses for 600 sections per semester. In Fall 2002, 4385 students made up almost 7200 online course enrollments. About 15% of these students are enrolled in an online degree program, while the others are on-

campus students taking an online class. The WSU Online participant made this observation about the growth of the program:

Our culture here because it is a commuter institution, most students are looking for alternate ways to do things, to take classes, and they're very Internet aware, so when we started offering the courses on the Internet then the word spread really quickly. In 5 years enrollment has increased from 200 students to 7000 students and that's with no advertising.

About nine staff members make up the department; a student outreach support services group provides enrollment services (e.g. admissions, registration, cashiering) and three staff members provide services such as advising and online tutoring. Since approximately 80% of the online students are also concurrently enrolled in campus courses, some support services are offered through the campus offices.

WSU Online is funded through student fees. Students taking online courses in addition to on-campus courses pay an in- or out-of-state tuition. Students enrolled only in online courses are charged a flat tuition rate, which is approximately the same as the on-campus, in-state rate. All of the student fees for online classes are "diverted into a special fund to support the online program rather than going into the general student fee fund." These fees pay staff salaries and technology costs.

Chapter Summary

I utilized a collective case study method for an in-depth look at distance learning programs providing exemplary student services. I interviewed participants and conducted a document analysis of websites from five programs. This methodology and data collection is particularly appropriate because the goal was to provide insight into the provision of student services for distance learners: "Illustration as to how a phenomenon occurs in the circumstances of several exemplars can provide valuable and trustworthy

knowledge” (Stake, 2000, p. 444). While there are inherent limitations, such as a lack of generalizability, I assured trustworthiness of the study through a variety of methods, such as member checks, triangulation, and an audit trail, and include a detailed description of the five sites (see Table 1).

Table 1

Student and Program Characteristics

	WC	TESC	UTTC	DDP	WSU Online
Gender	50.6%M – 49.4%F	50%M – 50%F	50%M – 50%F across all programs	25%M – 75%F	51%M – 49%F
Age	Range of 25-44	Average is 38	Average is in the 30's but is coming down	Average is 36	Average is 26 (80% are under 30)
In- or out-of-state	Less than ½ in	60% in	85% in	75% in	Majority in
Proximity	Students from 50 states and 40+ countries	Students from 50 states and 80+ countries - most from NJ, NY, PA, TX, CA, SC (states with military bases)	All over Texas	Throughout Washington state, most not nearby	80% within driving distance
# of students	3-4000 last year	9000 currently registered, 4500 taking TESC classes	~2000/semester	~3100 video + online, ~1900 IS* = total for Summer + Fall 2002	4385 in Fall 2002
Enrollments	5900 last year	~12,000/year	~3000/semester	6400 video + online, 2600 IS* = total for Summer + Fall 2002	7200 in Fall 2002
Course methods	Online, IS* with optional technology	Online, guided study, self-study, portfolio, testing, enrollment at other institutions	Online	Online, pre- produced video, flexible enrollment (like IS* but courses are online)	Online, IS*, “enhanced”, hybrid

	WC	TESC	UTTC	DDP	WSU Online
# of courses	~750 sections/year	130 x 12 semesters/year (new semester starts every month)	~180 (140 graduate, 40 undergraduate)	40 online	~230 courses for 600 sections/semester (different sections for in- and out-of-state students)
Programs	Complete degrees & certificates	Degree completion (14 programs)	10 graduate programs; 1 undergraduate completion program & general education courses	Degree completion (6 programs)	Complete degrees
Fees	No state funding – students pay amount per credit determined by course level	Service fee/year + per credit tuition (different for in- and out-of-state)	Students pay tuition and may pay fee to UT institution & institution pays DL fee to UTTC; campuses can waive student fees for DL students	Students pay in- or out-of-state tuition and student activity fee	Flat rate unless also on-campus (then pay campus tuition)
Funding	Self-sufficient by tuition generation	State funding (tuition) + service fee	Funding from the Board of Regents; institutions pay assessment based on # of courses	Apply to central administration like other departments (but will soon change to be more self-sufficient)	Student fees for online courses diverted to special fund to support WSU Online

Note. *IS = independent study

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the student services that exemplary programs offer, and the structure and process of these programs. To address this purpose, I proposed several research questions regarding the support services that are currently being provided, services that could be provided, the organization of such services, the role of student affairs departments in providing services, and potential models for implementation. I utilized qualitative methods, specifically, a collective case study of five distance learning programs identified as exemplary in providing student services. To gather data, I interviewed program directors or student service coordinators of these programs and conducted document analysis of information available on the program websites.

Interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, and documents were evaluated utilizing service checklists based on the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) (WCET, 2000) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) (CAS, 2000) guidelines for online student services. Several themes emerged that parallel the research questions, and the findings are presented under these themes. I categorized them as follows:

- (1) Services
- (2) Methods of service provision
- (3) Relationships with campus units
- (4) Structure and process issues

The chapter concludes with a section highlighting innovative practices.

Services

This section identifies the services these programs were providing and/or services the participants deemed important in helping students be successful. The 14 services identified by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) served as a framework for data collection and analysis. Based on these guidelines, I designed a services grid for the purpose of identifying services that were and were not being provided to distance learners through the program websites. In addition, I examined the interview transcripts for services the participants mentioned and emphasized or were providing through the utilization of other methods.

Each program provided a majority of the services recommended in the WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines (see Table 2). The website analysis indicated 8 of the 14 services were easily and readily accessible to students on all five program sites. These services were information for prospective students, admissions, financial aid, registration, academic advising, technical support, library services, and bookstore. In addition, components of orientation services and services to promote a sense of community were available on all sites, though generally not listed under these particular categories. Most of the sites provided a toll-free number rather than listing particular services or accommodations for services for students with disabilities. Instructional support and tutoring was available through a few of the programs. Components of career services were limited, but links to self-help tools and job search engines could be found on all of the sites. Information about personal counseling was found on only one site, and it was difficult to find.

Table 2

Service Provision

Services in WCET Guide	DDP	TESC	WSU-Online	WC	UTTC
Info for Prospective Students	+	+	+	+	+
Admissions	+	+	+	+	+
Financial Aid	+	+	+	+	+
Registration	+	+	+	+	+
Orientation Services	+	√, ~	√	+	√
Academic Advising	+	+	+	+	+
Technical Support	√	√	+	+	+
Career Services	+	√, ~	√	√, ~	√, ~
Library Services	+	+	+	+	+
Services for Students with Disabilities	√	√	√	√	√
Personal Counseling	√				
Instructional Support and Tutoring	+		√	~	+
Bookstore	+	+	+	+	√
Services to Promote Sense of Community	+	√	√	√	√

Note. √ = service provided at basic level; + = service provided at advanced level;
~ = plans to provide service or further develop service in the near future

The services emphasized by all or most of the participants were registration, advising, financial aid, tutoring, and career services. Even if their program didn't provide the particular service, participants viewed these services as important for supporting students. For the purpose of this discussion, I classified the fourteen services from the WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines under the three subcategories:

- Administrative services (including admissions, financial aid, and registration)
- Academic services (including information for prospective students, orientation services, academic advising, technical support, career services, library services, services for students with disabilities, personal counseling, instructional support and tutoring, and bookstore)
- Community-building services

This classification fits with the general understanding in student affairs of the types of services provided to students.

Administrative Services

Each program provided the services generally considered as core student affairs administrative services: admissions, financial aid, and registration. The procedures were often the same for on-campus and distance students, and since these services were online, could be completed with little or no assistance.

Generally, distance students in these programs followed the same application procedures as on-campus students, and the larger campus entity was responsible for admissions. In most of the programs, there was some type of integrated registration system (either the same as the campus-based system or linked into it). TESC was the exception, since it is, in itself, a college, and not a component of a larger institution.

Since federal financial aid policies are currently different for distance than for resident instruction, several of the programs had a financial aid staff or someone in the on-campus financial aid office designated to work with students studying at a distance. The WC had a link to Financial Aid on every page of its website because staff found it was one of the top questions of prospective and enrolled students. Additionally, staff were looking into new ways of helping their students afford their education:

We're getting more and more into non-Title IV funding and guiding students to places where they can take out educational loans at lower interest rates ... many students don't understand that there is some alternative educational financing available out there. So we're just educating them as to how they may go about finding that. But that's something we realize we have to do more of, and that is help students afford their education.

The participants from DDP and TESC programs mentioned the importance of having financial aid consortium agreements with other institutions. Since these programs offer degree completion programs, their students may simultaneously enroll at other institutions: "So if you are taking your lower division courses at a community college and your upper division courses at WSU [Washington State University], to continue to get financial aid from WSU, you have to have a consortium agreement."

Academic Services

Many academic services were also being provided. While some of these services may not usually be identified as student affairs components, when students are studying from a distance, these services become classified as student services. Information for prospective students, academic advising, technical support, library services, and bookstore were readily available.

The participants emphasized the importance of providing information for prospective students to ensure they know what is involved with distance learning and the particular program.

Give them as much information upfront so that they know what they're getting into, they're prepared and they're ready to go, so there aren't any surprises.
(TESC)

The websites had a plethora of information about the institutions, academic programs, and what to expect from distance learning. The sites also provided FAQ's, contacts for getting additional information, and opportunities to assess readiness for distance learning such as DDP's quiz *Is Distance Learning for You?* and the WC's introductory course, WC 101.

Participants also focused on academic advising as an essential service. In response to a question about services that distance learners need, one participant replied, "I've conducted surveys with them [students] and most of them are concerned about advising. So advising has been our priority, to make sure we are offering it for our true distance learners" (WSU Online). When discussing student usage patterns of services, one participant's first response was, "They all really use their advisors" (DDP). Another participant noted the importance of advising in providing distance students with a connection to the institution or program:

Advising, I think, is a real key component for us, and it's really their link ... you know when you read the research and they talk about the need to develop a connection with a faculty person or somebody at the school? That's really where I think our advisors play a key role. And they help keep the students motivated, provide that kind of friendly voice ... (TESC)

Technical Support was accessible in multiple ways. Self-help links to FAQ's or Help were found on all but one site, and contact information for technical support could

quickly be found on all sites. Contacts included phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and a few also offered live chat.

They request technical support more than anything. I mean, they forget passwords, you know, usually it's not technical in the sense that there's really something broken. It's usually 'this plug-in's not working', my password's not working', 'I forgot my log in', things like that more than anything. (UTTC)

All of the websites prominently featured library services and a few of the participants emphasized the importance of good library services. The WC, through a grant from AT&T, developed an interface between the library and the WC.

The Penn State library is just huge – the website is mammoth, and with this grant a couple of faculty in the library called together all the resources kind of on one page for the distance students, and it's been very successful. In fact when campus-based students take one of our courses and realize how easy it is to interact with the library through our site they continue to use our site.

Another participant remarked:

On our digital library, the students access that through a proxy server and we license digital resources that are necessary for the programs that we offer. Once you're enrolled in a [particular institution] course, you can get to all of the digital library services that we offer, and we have a digital librarian on staff who works with students and takes requests and so forth. (UTTC)

This same participant later discussed how they hired a digital librarian to better serve distance students' needs:

We do an end-of-course survey just for the [institution] and two years ago we got feedback from students about the digital library. We thought we were being instructive about how to access it, but they were struggling with it. And so with that information, we decided we'd hire a full time digital librarian that would be available to them and that's made a huge difference. (UTTC)

All of the websites also featured links to virtual Bookstores. Bookstores were either hosted by the corresponding institution, or by a private online book company hosting a specific site for the distance program. In addition, two of the programs hosted an online textbook exchange so students could buy and sell used course materials.

The other academic services, orientation services, career services, services for students with disabilities, and instructional support and tutoring were not as commonly or formally provided, or as well developed. However, this didn't necessarily reflect that they were considered to be less important.

None of the programs provided formal or required orientation services, as is typical of campus programs, but the websites contained elements of a general orientation, such as offering tips for success in an online environment and providing links to policies and requirements. In addition, orientation services and information for prospective students overlapped quite a bit; for example, WSU Online's Demo Course could help a student assess readiness for online learning and also prepare a student to take a distance course. Two of the participants discussed the importance of providing such orientation services:

What I've been wanting to do for a while is take them through the Freshman Year Experience, do that and modify it for the adult re-entry ... their needs are completely different than the freshman year, but taking those kind of modules and adjusting them, and not offering it for credit and not even charging for it, but just having the modules out there, and they can go through all of them or they can go through some of them and have an advisor kind of connected to the section.
(TESC)

We put in some orientations because a couple of students had some problems and from that we decided orientations would be a good idea. (DDP)

Some of the programs also sent items through the mail such as a welcome packet or a "getting started" CD. However, a few of the participants revealed that students often found orientation materials confusing. In the past, the WC sent students an orientation packet but "students didn't know what it was for," so now have incorporated a week of orientation into the courses. Another participant mentioned that the staff have decided not to provide an orientation but to design a student handbook that students can use

throughout their programs: “We have made a decision not to create a student orientation – the idea being that you go through it and never go back” (UTTC). Another participant stated:

We send them an enrollment package when they first enroll with these three big books in it and I think they get overwhelmed and they don’t really read it, but if they could get it in small chunks I think that it would work for them. (TESC)

The participants believed career services to be important and all of the program websites had links to some type of online career resources. Overall, the services were not comprehensive or well-developed and the web links were difficult to find on three of the sites. DDP recently added a half time career counselor who is paid through student government funds, and the program website hosted links to campus career information. WSU Online utilized the campus career site, which offers an online “Ask a Counselor” submission form. TESC’s Alumni Services offered career services through an outsourced company that provides access to career consultants by phone. Participants in the other programs discussed plans to add more services:

We’re trying to shore that up a little bit and if not do the counseling ourselves, at least get some links for them to other places. (TESC)

That’s one of those things that’s on the list of things that student services plans to do, but we’re not quite there yet. (UTTC)

Career assistance is highly requested by the WC students, so staff were working with the campus career services office to include this aspect on their website.

Most of the websites provided a link to Services for Students with Disabilities or “accommodations” or “accessibility,” but referred the user to a contact person rather than listing particular services or accommodations. This was a service that fell to the larger institution, except at TESC (since it is the institution, not a subsection of one) where an

advisor is designated as a part time Coordinator for these services. Though not too many students utilized these services, the participants still felt it was important to provide them. Since distance education often touts accessibility as one of its virtues, even if the services weren't well utilized it was still viewed as important to provide them.

We've probably had about 50 students, tops, who have self-identified themselves as disabled and she [coordinator] helps negotiate the accommodations that they need in their courses or in their testing or in their advising – you know anything that they need – so we do provide full services but we don't have a whole lot of call for it. (TESC)

We've put a lot of time and effort into accessibility, and we have very few students who have actually requested that. ... We have our streaming video captions and those types of things. We've actually only had one student that's requested that. That doesn't mean we're not going to continue to caption our videos, but that's something that hasn't really been requested a lot. (WSU Online)

Additionally, in a check for accessibility, I found the program websites almost fully compliant with web accessibility guidelines (CAST, 2003).

Three of the five programs provided instructional support and tutoring and participants believed this to be an important support service because students utilized or requested it. One of the participants had conducted student surveys, and found that after advising, “tutoring was the next concern” (WSU Online). Another noted that tutoring was the third most requested service, after technical support and the library (UTTC). Two of the programs offered access to online tutoring 24x7 by utilizing an online company specializing in online asynchronous and synchronous tutoring in a variety of subjects (Smarthinking.com). One program provided this service in conjunction with the tutoring services on campus; the distance program provided the technology platform and the tutoring office provided the tutors. In terms of student usage one of the participants commented, “We'd actually like to see more of them use it ... but, you know, just like on

campus, some of the very students that really need to use it don't" (UTTC). She also noted that students sometimes consider "tutoring" negative, so it is now referred to as "academic support" and usage has increased: "Believe it or not, we've seen an increase in the number of people using it. I'm sure it's a direct result of people not feeling like it's something bad, or puts them down" (UTTC). One of the other programs, while not offering actual tutoring, did provide links to external resources on the website. The participant from this program believed tutoring and instructional services to be important even though the institution didn't offer them:

Our students, some of them would like more tutoring; we don't offer any developmental courses and there's an assumption that students come to the table ready to roll but that's not really the reality, so we try to feed them to local community colleges, those sorts of things. (TESC)

The other program not offering tutoring was examining other methods of instructional support: "We're looking at how to help students at-risk" (WC), and plans to offer online study skills workshops and a peer mentor program.

Personal Counseling was almost nonexistent and didn't appear to be considered an important service to provide. On the one website that had links to counseling information (including a 24-hour crisis hotline), the information was difficult to find. Only two participants mentioned counseling in the interviews; one to say this service was provided by the campus-based office and one to say this wasn't something the institution needed to be responsible for providing:

Health kinds of issues that you might put online, some kind of personal counseling, either emotional counseling or marriage counseling, those kinds of things, people are going to look for, not to their online institution to provide that kind of stuff, they're going to look at their community, their jobs, their local services in their community, their church, and we've just decided that that's not what we're going to do. (WC)

Community-building Services

While opportunities to connect with faculty and other students are common in online courses, community building has not been as available outside of the “classroom.” Through the use of technology, however, these programs are able to provide their distance students with various services to promote a sense of community. Opportunities to access and connect with program staff via e-mail, phone, and in some cases chat, were readily available through all of the programs. In addition, though they weren’t necessarily labeled as such and no consistency could be found between programs, various student-to-student community-building services could be found on the program websites.

For example, the WC offered an “Our Community” section on the website, which highlighted a student, faculty or staff member in a “Community Profile,” interesting facts about the WC, membership information for the Penn State Alumni Association, and an e-Student Union with links to campus information such as student organizations, museums and galleries, and career development opportunities. TESC offered moderated discussion boards, to which students could post messages to connect with others on just about anything they wanted. The UTTC sent accepted students “goodies” with the UTTC logo, has provided students with a graduation webcast, and published a regular newsletter. DDP published a newsletter, produced a CD yearbook, and sponsored an online student government, which utilized chat for office hours. WSU Online utilized the campus based community-building services since most of the students were also on-campus students.

A few of the participants also mentioned plans to enhance community-building opportunities for students; one program is starting a peer mentor program and a student

government, another is starting a peer mentor program and a student advisory board, and another is creating an online degree community:

We are in the process of designing an online degree community for students that are completing a degree. Their degree is completely online [so] they can go in and talk to other students and see the degree requirements and see how they shape up and those types of things. And that's something students have asked for ... one part of it will be a chat area that they can go into anytime. (WSU Online)

These programs also fostered a student connection to the programs and institutions through various other means, such as providing access to membership in the alumni association, having the online bookstore feature merchandise with program or institution logos, and sending “goodies” to the students.

Some of the participants, however, recognized a lack of student interest or need for such services. When asked about how much students are asking for any kind of online community with other students, one participant responded, “Some do and some could care less; we’re going to provide it and see what happens ... the majority say they want it; now whether they use it will be something to be seen” (WC). When discussing student usage patterns, one participant noted that distance students tend to engage in services at the same frequency that on-campus students do: “Not many students participate in [particular community-building service], but, you know, that’s pretty typical for on-campus students as well” (DDP). WSU Online had attempted a student government but it was not successful: “We asked students if they wanted it and they didn’t; they didn’t participate so that’s something that we have decided not to run.” Some of these students reported they “just don’t have time for that kind of thing; that they just want to get in and take their classes and get out.”

Summary

In general, the goal of these exemplary programs is to provide levels of service comparable to on-campus services and to provide them in a convenient format: “We want to have the same types of support for online students that our on-campus students get” (WSU Online), and “What we try to do is provide students similar kinds of services that they would get in a traditional campus environment but allow them not to have to go from place to place” (TESC). These programs provide numerous services to their students and they each provide the majority of components suggested by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines. Ample administrative and several academic services were provided by all of the programs. The services generally viewed by student affairs professionals as being more developmental in nature, career services, personal counseling, and services to promote a sense of community, were the least developed. However, community-building services were quickly being added. One particular comment sums up the discussions in the interviews regarding services: “We’re really trying to get into more of ... the student affairs types of things, some of the things that you might see on campus” (WC).

Methods of Providing Services

To answer the question of how services should be organized and presented, a significant portion of the analysis consisted of examining each of the five program websites. I searched for common links, terms, and services throughout the sites to determine what the programs prominently featured, how designers organized information, and how and when students could access services. Additionally, in examining the websites and in discussing various methods with participants, issues of

self-service, communications, service availability, and outsourcing emerged and warrant discussion. Therefore, this section begins with an examination of website structure and design elements, then is followed by a discussion of these issues. Self-service represents any service a student can complete without assistance, while communications explores how students connect with staff members and/or other students when necessary or desired for a particular service. Though my original intent was to focus on online services, other methods used to serve students emerged in the examination of the websites and in the interviews, such as toll-free numbers or call centers, and video-conferencing. Service availability defines when students have access to various services, and outsourcing refers to anything the program is providing by utilizing an entity outside of the program or institution.

Website Structure and Design

Several common elements were found on the index pages of all five programs. In general the sites included some type of introductory information such as “About Us” or “Getting Started” or “FAQ’s”, news items about the programs or institutions, and information for current students (often a login link). Academic information on the degrees, programs, and courses, and a search function, were also available on every index page. Student services links were present; on a couple of sites, student services were compiled under the actual heading of “Student Services” and linked off the index page. On the others, various links such as library, application, registration, student government, and advising could be found on the index pages. All but one of the sites had approximately twenty links to pertinent information on the index page and then to

additional links on following pages. The remaining site provided every available link on the index page but organized them under several categories with drop-down menus.

Overall, these websites adhered to many of the ten “Tips for Designing Web-Based Student Services” in the WCET guidelines (2000). The institution home pages prominently featured distance learning opportunities. Website designs were consistent and links to relevant pages were provided throughout the sites. Terminology was easy to understand and the sites focused on serving student needs by providing relevant services and information and not just fancy graphics. The sites also provided access to a “real person” on every page, generally through a phone number and an e-mail link, and sometimes through chat. Services were user-oriented and process- not provider-driven, e.g., sites were organized for various user groups, and the index page provided direct access to important services. Students were able to conduct much of their business online, such as applying, registering, paying fees, and purchasing books. One participant commented, “They can do everything online from registration to graduation” (WSU Online). However, services such as self-advising and degree tracking were limited. Links to external sites were found throughout the various sites, especially for financial aid and career information, but not many could be found providing information on services such as instructional support, counseling, and career assessment. While the sites were very accessible to users with disabilities, none fully adhered to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines or Section 508 Guidelines.

Pat Shea of the WCET identified a continuum of stages institutions go through in trying to put their services online. Of the five stages, the programs in this study are mostly in stage three, meaning they have developed beyond providing static information

and basic form-submission to offering some personalized services; several are entering or have plans to enter stage four which requires the use of portals. In stage five, individualized services that bridge functional areas are available; institutions harness “the power of the Web to integrate their services and use artificial intelligence to provide students with better service than ever before” (Johnstone, 2002). This level is difficult to obtain, and none of these programs has reached it yet.

However, the program websites were constantly evolving; just within the 6 months of data collection there were developments on the websites. Almost every time I logged onto the sites, something had been changed or added, and sometimes not just tweaking of existing pages but entire new sections. For example, the WC added “Our Community” which serves as an e-Student Union, WSU Online really developed a career services page, and DDP added a “Student Stories” section featuring short video clips of students and graduates talking about themselves and their experiences with the DDP.

Self-service

Technology allows for fully automated basic administrative services so students can access information and take care of business functions online without the help of a staff member. Library services, bookstore, registration, admissions, and financial aid are examples of components of nearly complete self-service. The sites also provided FAQ sections to assist students in finding answers to their questions without having to contact anyone.

We’re not able to do a lot of outreach, so it becomes that we do, we try to get the web site to be as good, have as much information on it as possible as many forms and things so they don’t need to call somebody that they can get that on the web.
(TESC)

I think what we're doing right now is we're trying to get more online services and that's been the shift in the past couple of years, trying to create this sort of virtual student union for them. (TESC)

Practically everything we do is on the web, we don't publish student handbooks, we don't publish catalogs; everything is on the web. (DDP)

In addition to the available text-based information, four of the sites had video clips with audio of various types of information that really gave users a more connected feel to the program by introducing them to a real person and letting them hear someone's voice.

UTTC and DDP offered short Welcome videos by the program directors. DDP also offered an eleven-minute video featuring student stories on "Getting Here From There".

TESC provided video FAQ's which included information about the institution, academic programs, and distance learning. The WC featured a clip of a speech by the President of the university discussing the vision of the World Campus.

Communications

Though self-service methods are efficient, some services require communications with a staff member or another student. E-mail and telephone correspondence were commonly used in all programs, especially for providing general information, advising, and technical support. TESC reported getting about 1000 e-mails per month, and the WC reported receiving over 90,000 calls/year.

All of the programs offered some type of call center staffed by generalists who could answer a variety of questions, or had staff available by toll-free number to address student inquiries.

There's a 1-800 telephone number. We don't want to take the ability away for students to call us up and talk to us. (WC)

Our website, when you go there, is very extensive ... they can find out a lot about a program, but many people still want to pick up the phone. (UTTC)

E-mail was also commonly utilized, and was viewed as perhaps an even better and more frequently used communication tool:

We probably get the majority of our calls in the first few weeks of school or right before the semester begins. Then it slows down tremendously and then most of what we get is through e-mail. Most of our students communicate primarily through e-mail once they're admitted to a program. (UTTC)

I think that more than I would even expect, e-mail is a better communication tool, sometimes even better than the phone because if you're a night owl you can send your e-mail at two o'clock in the morning, I can do all my research and answer you accurately and pleasantly at ten o'clock in the morning. It's kind of our greatest strength. (TESC)

The WC reported a 24-hour response time for e-mails and TESC strives for the same, but currently the response time is more like 48 hours.

Chat was also suggested by several of the participants as a good feature to have, especially if the student doesn't have a separate phone line. Like phone service, this is a good method to answer inquiries, and to provide advising and technical support.

We are hoping to pilot chat this year with advising so that students have the ability to interact over e-mail and the live chat environment. (WC)

We do have chat with tech support and students like that a lot because many students have just one phone line and a modem into their homes so they can't be on the course site and on the phone at the same time, so we have instituted chat with great success through the help-desk. (WC)

We have been using for the past year and a half approximately, a live online chat software ... the student comes in and has an individual chat with one of the advisors and asks any questions that they want to. ... So it's nice that we have the live person answer the questions but they [students] don't have to get off their computer if they don't have a separate phone line. (WSU Online)

Furthermore, while communication tools between students are common in courses, they are generally not as available out-of-class. Several of these programs provided these communication tools as a way for students to build community. DDP used chat for student government office hours, TESC offered moderated discussion groups to

which students could link from their student portals, and WSU Online had plans for an online degree community.

The participants did not recommend in-person services due to the expense and low student participation.

We've done some in-person workshops, which are not a good idea here. We do some in-person information sessions, which I don't think are a good idea. You know, we need to get our message out in a more distance way and that's really been my push. We shouldn't feel like the students have to see a physical site in order for them to understand it. ... I feel like I just have very limited resources; you know I don't want to bring two staff people in for a day and have them talk to fifteen students and have them prepare for this workshop, when I'm thinking about all the students they could have been serving while they were preparing for that. (TESC)

When we first started they [advisors] did make trips around the state once each semester, but we've cut that out because not that many students went and it was very expensive. (DDP)

We're not bringing people together face-to-face ... but doing it online and doing it through discussion boards or affinity groups for programs or even live chat. (UTTC)

Little was done by mail either. Some of the programs offered paper applications and registration materials as an alternative to online, and some materials were sent by mail, but most business was conducted utilizing faster (and cheaper) methods of communication. The DDP published a newsletter in online and paper format but will eventually go to a completely online publication: "We still send it out in paper form, but I don't know how much longer that will go on." One of the participants jokingly said: "I call it 'customer service gone wild'. They send you an e-mail and in 20 minutes they start looking for a reply. If they don't have a reply in an hour or two they send it again ... this electronic environment has made just-in-time and rapid response just how you need to serve people. They expect it" (WC).

One program, the DDP, offered some video-conferencing for advising and career counseling. The DDP has extension centers around the state, so students can go to a center nearest them and utilize this technology. This is not a format that could be so easily employed at institutions without that statewide set-up.

Service Availability

Several of the programs offered extended hours (i.e. outside of 8am-5pm, Monday-Friday) for some services. Two of the five programs offered regular extended hours and believed this to be important in serving students. The UTTC offered extended hours for technical support.

It was very important for us to get to 24 by 7 technical support because we do have students all over the world in different time zones, so that's different than what we would have on campus.

The WC offered extended hours on the call center for pre-admissions counseling and for technical support:

We run two shifts because we're open till midnight, well the call center's open till 11:30 but tech support's open till midnight. We run that evening shift from Sunday through Thursday, and tech support runs their evening shift from Monday through Friday, so there's only one night we don't have people here and that's Saturday night.

The other three programs offered minimal extended hours or none at all, and had mixed thoughts about the need to provide them. TESC had a phone center with admissions staff available 8am-6pm Monday – Friday, and had advisors available till 6:00pm one night a week and one Saturday per month. However these hours were not that well utilized:

We have evening hours, not really evening, but until 6:00, one night a week and it was a big, big push to have that, and we have very light traffic on that evening phone center. So we have a lot of requests for more hours, and yet we wonder 'do they really want them or not?'

Furthermore, the participant noted that it didn't make sense to have only one service available: "It should be an either all or none thing ... most people aren't going to wait a month for anything anymore."

Comments from other participants further explain this issue:

We tried having extended hours and weekend hours and we didn't get anybody to call, so we quit doing that. I know people say we should do that, but even with computer support we didn't get *any* calls except between 8 and 5. (DDP)

We have found that when we have tried to do extended hours they're not utilized except for during the first couple of weeks during the semester and during registration times. (WSU Online)

In addition, one of the participants from a program providing regular extended hours commented, "Well, the traffic is heavier during the day, but once students discover that we're here and they can talk to a live person at night they tend to use it" (WC).

Outsourcing

It is interesting to note that, instead of creating a service or collaborating with campus staff to offer a service, all but one of these programs had chosen to outsource at least one service to a corporate entity. Two programs outsourced online tutoring and one outsourced technical support so it could be provided 24x7. Two programs used a corporate online bookstore and one utilized the state library system. In another program, the alumni association provided career counseling through an outsourced company.

Summary

To provide services, these programs utilized a combination of self-service and interpersonal tools. Posting information on the websites and utilizing e-mail and phone correspondence were the most common forms of service. Several programs utilized chat and one offered some video-conferencing. Several programs offered extended hours for

certain services, but not all of them believed this service to be necessary; several participants noted that extended hours were not well utilized, but one participant thought it was essential since students were in different time zones. Programs had also outsourced various programs.

Relationships with Campus Units

In this category, I examined the relationships program staff had with other campus units, especially focusing on the role the campus-based student affairs units played in providing services or supporting distance students. For four of these programs, relationships reflect linkages with the campus-based student affairs and academic departments, while one program is a complete institution so relationships refer to linkages with other units in the college. Thus, when the discussion focuses on links to the campus-based student affairs unit, four of the five programs can be represented.

Participants viewed relationships and communication with campus units as important. When asked about their primary responsibilities, several of the participants mentioned relationship-building roles, making statements such as, “The other thing that I do is provide a bridge to the other units” (TESC), “I have worked really closely with the directors of each of those offices” (DDP), and “My overarching responsibility is to integrate the WC into the fabric of the university” (WC).

Several participants mentioned the importance of establishing relationships to facilitate services for distance students:

I think you have to establish a good personal relationship with people in the other offices, and we’ve worked really hard to do that. (DDP)

I have a good relationship with the academic dean, and we can do what we need to do for the student. (TESC)

We have excellent, excellent relationships and assistance from the libraries. (WC)

Furthermore, two of the participants reported creating liaison programs with campus-based units to facilitate better communication and service for their distance students:

We've developed our liaison system where there is one person in each office that is qualified and trained to deal with distance education students ... so we use this liaison system to provide very specific services to our students and it's a lot less frustrating for our students and we have a lot less error. (UTTC)

We worked really closely since the very beginning with all the administrative offices on campus. So we've had liaisons, somebody that's worked, has interacted with that office ... to make sure that distance students are well served and feel welcome. (DDP)

It was common for the campus units to be responsible for providing basic administrative functions for students enrolled in distance programs, such as admissions, registration, and financial aid. Generally for these services, distance students followed the same processes and utilized the same systems as on-campus students.

All students applied and were admitted to degree programs by the campus admissions office.

The students have to apply for admission with the campus where they plan to get their degree just like a traditional student. (UTTC)

We work with the admissions office; the students fill out the same admissions application and we help facilitate if there are any problems. (DDP)

They [admissions] assign the student an advisor and they encourage the student to speak to their advisor before they register. (WC)

In terms of registration, for semester-based courses, DDP students registered on the campus mainframe. WSU Online actually designed an online registration system for their students, which then became the campus registration system for all students. The WC is currently working on integrating their systems with the university systems because

“We grew up separately in parallel student information systems, and there’s a team now looking at how we bridge the systems.”

Students also applied and received financial aid through the campus Financial Aid offices, and a couple of the programs had a representative from the campus office designated to specifically address needs of distance students:

We have a financial aid person that’s designated by the financial aid office to handle the really difficult situations, but most of the financial aid people are now trained to understand that distance students really aren’t that different. (DDP)

We have a staff member who is equally shared between the two of us because, as you may or may not know, the rules for student aid and Title IV funding in distance education are different from resident instruction rules, and so we have one staff person that bridges the gap between the two offices and right now she deals with the WC students and that’s worked out pretty well. (WC)

In addition to these services, links to online information and services provided by campus-based offices were common on program websites. Every program website hosted links to campus-based career services and disability services units, several linked to an alumni association, and one linked to counseling services. The WC’s “Our Community” section featured links to websites of numerous campus based organizations, campus facilities, and museum and gallery exhibits. One linked to an online writing lab provided by the campus unit while another collaborated with the campus academic support department to provide online tutoring in math. Since the majority of WSU Online students were also on-campus students some of the student services were provided by the on-campus departments, but the distance student services staff were working with campus offices to increase their web presence:

The career services, counseling services – those types of things – we are offering through the on-campus student services, but we are trying to work partnerships with them to offer more online services.

Furthermore, some of the participants reported working with the campus staff to ensure campus units were developing online services to help their distance students receive the assistance they needed:

We're working very closely with them [career services] to develop this career aspect in the e-Student Union. (WC)

We're working with the campus departments to offer more of their services online. They have web pages and they have services that they offer, but not all of their services are available online so we are working with them to design more of their services to be available online. (WSU Online)

A great example of collaboration was WSU Online's cooperative agreement to provide online tutoring services: "Our tutoring office wanted to still be able to hire students to actually do the tutoring; our agreement with them is we provide the software for online tutoring and they provide the tutors, so it's a nice agreement." In addition, when discussing advising, one participant said, "It's kind of a team effort" (UTTC); the distance learning program and the campus advisors both assist the students.

Overall, comments about relationships indicated that relationships had been fostered by distance learning staff and not by campus-based staff. The campus-based student affairs units had not taken a large role in serving students who study from a distance. Except for providing basic administrative functions that served all students, few special services had been developed. Additionally, even though relationships were positive and viewed as important, overall, the programs seemed fairly self-contained; the participants didn't make too much mention of needing assistance from campus offices outside of the administrative functions and the occasional website link.

Structure and Process Issues

The primary underlying goal of this research was to examine these exemplary programs to be able to provide some type of model to serve as a practical guide for programs wanting to design or improve distance student support programs. However, the cases in the study are so different in terms of organizational structure, funding, and academic programs that no clear model really emerged. Furthermore, while UTTC and the WC were developed as completely online endeavors, the other three programs added online components to existing distance learning programs. The participant from the UTTC reflected that she was very fortunate to be able to get the support structure in place before offering courses because she was “very adamant about not putting courses online until we had a support structure. ... our goal was to put student services in first.” Most programs will not have that opportunity, because most distance learning endeavors are created from existing structures. A task force prototyped what the WC would be before it was created, but didn’t focus on services; it was “mostly having to do with the academic areas of the university.” Thus, the WC had plans to add numerous services within a span of a few months, and the participant noted, “Well, we’ve had five years of planning to get to the point of what we’re going to do this coming year.”

Though no clear model emerged, several structure and process issues did, and should be considered in determining provision of services for distance students. I classified these issues as organizational structure, funding, policies, decision-making, program growth, and overlap of distance and resident education.

Organizational Structure

Except for UTTC, which was recently established by a state administration to serve multiple system institutions, these programs derived from a history of providing some type of correspondence education. A couple of the programs started as online programs, but then merged with other distance education programs under a larger umbrella. WSU Online is part of continuing education, which reports to the Provost. “We have changed our structure in that we no longer work as a separate identity; independent study isn’t a separate office from distance learning.” The WC falls under the Associate Vice President for Distance Education and began as a completely online endeavor but now encompasses all distance learning opportunities: “[the WC] started out all online, and we’re now, WC is our name-brand for everything that we do.” DDP started with pre-produced and 2-way video programs and developed online methods as the technology advanced and students had more access to computers and the Internet; the DDP is part of Extended University Services, which has a Dean who reports to the Provost. TESC was established as a completely distance institution to offer non-traditional means of completing a college education. Online options were added as technology developed. Thus, while these programs provide online education, they also provide other methods of distance education, such as independent study and video courses.

The high level reporting structures, including direct reports to Provosts, an Associate Vice President, and a state system Board of Regents, and the creation of a state institution with the sole purpose of providing alternative delivery methods, indicated these programs were viewed as an integral part of the institutional functioning and had a high priority level. The WC was even created on recommendations from “a task force

from the highest levels of the university that was charged by the President to take a look at distance education.”

Another issue related to organizational structure was the experience and background of the distance learning staff who were responsible for creating and providing student services. Two of the participants had a background in advising, but the others did not have a formal background in providing student services and learned through experience working with students in the distance environment. Participants made comments attesting to this, such as:

I just learned it as I went along and had to deal with things that came up. (DDP)

It was just the next logical step for me ... I have always really enjoyed working with students ... so that's how I ended up here. (WC)

I guess I had just learned everything I knew about student support services from the other work we had done in providing support for students who were at [institution] branch campuses.” (DDP)

One particular comment emphasized the lack of student affairs training for many staff members working in distance learning:

I really didn't have any student services background. I don't know that many people that really come in with it, unless they have been on campus for some time. As a matter of fact ... even though we put student services first, and really pride ourselves on student support, there's really only one person on the staff, maybe two now, that came from a campus that were in that kind of position when they got here. (UTTC)

Though staff members in these programs may have little, if any, formal background experience or educational training in the field of student affairs, participants all had a good sense of what their distance students needed and wanted.

Funding

Funding was another indication of the level of importance of these programs. Though many distance programs are self-sufficient operations or are subsumed under an academic department, four of these five programs received state funding. TESC is a state institution, thus received state funding through in- and out-of-state tuition and service fees. UTTC was funded through the state administration, campus assessment fees, and self-generated revenue from contract work with the institutions. UTTC does not directly charge students a fee, but students may pay a distance learning fee to their home institution. At Weber State, a special fund was created to support WSU Online. Students paid in- or out-of-state tuition and student fees for any online credit hours they took were diverted into this fund to pay for staff salaries and technical equipment and support. The out-of-state, online-only courses were self-sufficient, so students in this classification paid a flat rate directly to WSU Online that was comparable to in-state tuition:

They get a huge tuition break ... because our out-of-state courses are self-supporting and so if we have a 3-credit hour class that we charge \$1200 for, we're not gonna have anyone take it, so we charge approximately the same amount for a 3-credit class as the in-state students are taking on-campus.

Students enrolled in DDP also paid an in- or out-of-state tuition and DDP applied for funding from the central administration like any other department. However, this will soon be changing and DDP will charge a separate tuition to support the program. The institution is only state funded for a certain number of students and can enroll more students on-campus if distance programs become self-sufficient, but “the fact that we were state funded describes how these programs were seen, or have been seen, as something that’s part of what Washington State does, not as something that’s kind of separate from what the university does.”

Though the WC is sometimes touted as “the 25th campus of Penn State”, it was developed with grant money and received no state funding. The WC charged tuition based on credit level and was the only program that was completely self-sufficient (even resident students were charged this tuition): “Over the 5 years, we’ve had more than 5 million dollars for program development ... but the staff and other things that we’re doing we have paid for by tuition generation.”

Policies

Another institutional issue that emerged regarded student policies. Several participants stated there were no special policies for distance students and emphasized that they wanted their students to have the same level of service as on-campus students have.

Our goal at the beginning was that any WSU policy that didn’t work for branch campus students or distance students needed to be changed for the whole university, so we only had one WSU policy that covered all students. ... We’ve worked really closely with the all the departments in the central administration to make sure that these students are seen as regular WSU students. And we haven’t set up any special policies or rules for these students. They’re expected to be just like any other WSU student. (DDP)

My overarching responsibility is to integrate the WC into the fabric of the university as far as the processes and procedures and policies go.... our policies are university policies and not WC policies, and that’s not how it is in many organizations. (WC)

What we try to do is provide students similar kind of services that they would get in a traditional campus environment but allow them not to have to go from place to place - try to be as seamless as possible. (TESC)

Participants also emphasized the academic rigor of the programs and having them viewed as equivalent to campus-based instruction. In fact, students were under the same admissions requirements as the on-campus students (excluding TESC since it is an

institution, not a subset of a larger entity). Students in degree programs had to apply to the institution and be admitted like on-campus students.

We don't want our students treated differently. We don't want to be known as, let's say, the campus of exceptions, 'ah, well, you've got a problem with the academic policies on campus, oh well take courses through the WC and you'll get around that.' ... they are the same programs that are taught on campus, the same courses, they appear on the transcript with no different notation. We just want the students to follow the same business and academic processes that occur on campus. (WC)

... Our true commitment to distance learning, that it's not an add-on ... they're [students'] credits aren't thought of as less-than ... I think that provides them some feelings that this is legitimate. (TESC)

Decision-making

Though I used the services recommended by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) as a framework, none of the participants mentioned using these or any other formal guidelines in determining what services to provide. When asked if they followed any particular model or guidelines when determining services to provide their students, the participants did not report following the WCET (2000) or CAS (2000) guidelines. However, they had an awareness of these types of services and were providing them. In a follow-up e-mail asking them about this, only one participant replied, but she stated that while she was not familiar with CAS, she and her staff were very familiar with WCET and used these guidelines as an evaluation tool. Participants, instead, mentioned basing their decisions about services on a variety of other methods, such as having a history of providing services to distance learners in correspondence programs, looking to other institutions, and surveying their students. It appeared that, just as student affairs functions evolved over time, so were these distance services.

The participants had a history of providing services to students from a distance, via methods that pre-date the Internet, so had knowledge and assumptions that impacted decision-making about services that may not be needed by their students. For example:

We don't do a lot of career counseling because what we've found is most of our students are already doing that [their chosen career]. (TESC)

Most of our students are employed and they look to their employer for ... those [health] kinds of things. (WC)

Several participants also looked to other distance learning programs for ideas on what to provide:

... [We're] looking at what other schools are doing. (WC)

Keep[ing] up with whatever is going on elsewhere to make sure that we're doing what other people are doing ... other institutions, yeah, or commercial ventures, wherever we can pull ideas from to offer things to our students ... we're always trying to find other people who are doing things that would be nice to do for our online students, and if we find something that we can implement, whether we build it ourselves or we can contract or whatever, we'll do it. (WSU Online)

I'm sure that some of what we do is we pick up what somebody else has done and we, you know, think 'oh well that would work for us, we need to do that.' I've found in this field we all get ideas from each other. (UTTC)

Participants noted the importance of involving their staff members, especially staff that worked directly with students on a regular basis:

They [call center staff] have great ideas ... they're the ones answering the phones. (UTTC)

We actually do an annual retreat and ... we did some team building and we just came up with this long list of who we wanted to be, what we wanted to look like in 5 years, and they [ideas] fell into all these different categories, student services being one of them. (UTTC)

We've been working hard on our own staff development ... so they're better able to serve the students. (TESC)

I think the key to our success is that we try to involve our staff in figuring out the best ways to serve students and so everybody is really committed to these students

and very involved and feel very positive, have a lot of ownership in this program, and I think that's made a huge difference. (DDP)

Participants did mention looking to campus-based services for some guidance about what to provide:

We looked at what kind of services are on a traditional campus. (WC)

It was just sort of intuitive, I guess, because the majority of the people that are here ... have come from a campus or have been students on a campus. (UTTC)

We want to have the same types of support for online students that our on-campus students get. (WSU Online)

Additionally, the importance of student input was evident. One participant mentioned conducting focus groups, but wanted to get students more involved and formalize their input, so was planning to start a student government:

We felt like the students needed to have a voice ... we want to bring them together and they will actually be the voice that goes back and lets the students know 'hey we were griping about this and I've taken it forward and now they're acting on it'. So we really want to give them an opportunity to be more involved. (UTTC)

Other participants mentioned conducting student interest surveys or including questions about student services on course evaluations and enhancing services based on the feedback received:

We did a survey this year of what students wanted and some of the top things that they talked about was some career counseling and assistance in that area, so we've put our resources into that. They also want a newsletter, so we're starting that. (WC)

We ask them specific questions about the different areas and then they have an open-ended section where they can tell us if they either have something that didn't work or if they want to tell us something good ... that's where we find out what they're aware of and sometimes we'll change how we identify things on a website so that they see it right up front. (UTTC)

I've conducted surveys with them and most of them are concerned about advising, so the advising has been our priority. (WSU Online)

Tracking student usage patterns was also cited. WSU Online did away with student government because students didn't participate, DDP quit having advisors travel around the state because not enough students attended sessions to justify the cost, and TESC stopped offering in-person workshops because the staff time could be better utilized to serve more students electronically. Comments about how to best use resources, such as "the return on investment just wasn't there for the time and effort that it would be" (WC) and "you really kind of get very cost-benefit about every kind of service you provide because we're just really in a crunch ... we can kinda do the bread-and-butter stuff first before we do the bells-and-whistles" (TESC), further illustrate this.

Though no clear pattern emerged, the basic underlying philosophy was to provide students an array of services to address their needs and interests. A couple of comments from the participants illustrate this point:

We certainly try to implement anything that students think is a good idea. (DDP)

We kinda joke 'we like to be all things to all people', we like having those options for them. (TESC)

Jokingly we said ... we were going to be the 'Nordstrom's [department store] of student services.'" (DDP)

In sum, programs didn't follow any particular guidelines when creating and organizing services, but did offer services recommended by published guidelines. Though some pre-planning occurred, some services were being created as the needs arose. In general, the programs provided the basic administrative and academic support mechanisms to get the program started; one participant referred to this as the "bread-and-butter stuff" (TESC) another as "the necessities" (WC). Then, once students were enrolled, they added and refined the more developmental, community-building services

as needs arose and requests were made (the “bells-and-whistles”) (TESC). “It’s a continual evaluation and looking at what other schools are doing, looking at what our students say they want, and then balancing that against the resources and the return on investment and deciding what we want to do.” (WC)

Program Growth

All of the participants discussed increased numbers of courses and student enrollments. These programs were experiencing tremendous growth, as illustrated by the following comments:

We’ve got more students than we can handle. (DDP)

We’ve never advertised our online program, because we have not had to. ... when we started offering the courses on the Internet then the word spread really quickly. In 5 years we’ve gone from 200 students to 7000 students. ... We can’t keep up with our growth. It’s our biggest problem. And we can’t imagine if we started advertising. (WSU Online)

Our enrollment increased last year by 12%, which is really underreported because of the way we count. It’s a significant increase and ... it was overwhelming. (TESC)

Furthermore, participants discussed the need to add new staff to address this growth and provide services to students, and several lamented the fact that the budget wouldn’t allow for it:

... That’s the complete staff to run this huge online program, so you can see that we’re having trouble keeping up with it. So there’s other things that we would like to do and more student support services that we would love to start offering and we’d love to come up with more innovative things and offer a lot of different things, we just don’t have the staff and the resources right now to do it. (WSU Online)

We’re somewhat limited as far as adding staff, particularly because of space and then also because the state has just hit a huge budget cut, so we’re cross training a lot of people to make sure we have people to answer the phones. (UTTC)

Because we're staffed at what we think is very lean, we're not able to do a lot of outreach (TESC)

We've increased staff a lot because our general student population back in the '80's was, many of our students were the on-campus students that were taking a course or two, and now we have students in the certificate and degree programs. (WC)

It [adding services] takes a lot longer than we originally thought because we're a staff of 24 with 3000 enrollments; we're pretty busy. So trying to squeeze in building some of these other capabilities, instead of taking a couple months it could take 6 months. (UTTC)

Overlap of Distance and Resident Education

While distance education generally serves more of a non-traditional student population, some of the programs were seeing increased enrollment from more traditional students:

Enrollment in them [online courses] is not completely open; there are caps on some of the courses so we won't allow on-campus students in them because they could take up spaces for distance students. (DDP)

Not everyone who is enrolled in our programs is what we consider a, what used to be nontraditional. It may be your traditional student that's just chosen that they want to do something online. (UTTC)

Our target audience, at first, really was the working adult because we were trying to put something up there that anyone could get to for whatever reason; whether they just didn't want to go to campus or couldn't go to campus, we are seeing the demographics of that change some, that not everyone who is enrolled in our programs is what we consider a, what used to be nontraditional. It may be your traditional student that's just chosen that they want to do something online. (UTTC)

They're a little younger than our usual student, not as much college background, there's some growing pains but I think they're getting the hang of it. (TESC)

Additionally, campus-based programs were utilizing more technology. In addition to running the online program, WSU Online was also responsible for assisting with technology-enhanced campus-based courses and "hybrid" courses, which had in-class

and online components. The WC online core courses may soon be used by Penn State to teach resident students: “It’s just too difficult to schedule 42,000 students taking Psych II.” The following reflection sums up this theme of the merging of distance and resident education:

The view, I think, of the university now is that online education is education. I think you’re going to see it blur between resident instruction and distance education. The last two years the blurring has been incredible ... you’ve got your resident students working in the classroom and in an online environment. ... The online courses are going to be used interchangeably on campus. ... So it’s blurring and it’s all education, and faculty are learning to move back and forth between the mediums. (WC)

In addition to course methods, student services provided for distance students were also helpful to on-campus students. One participant found that on-campus students utilized her chat function for advising: “I don’t know how the students even find us, but ... we’re actually answering a lot of generic questions that are not just for online students” (WSU Online). Another participant noted: “When campus-based students take one of our courses and realize how easy it is to interact with the library through our site, they continue to use our site” (WC). While another stated: “We actually designed the [registration] system because of the online program but made it available to all students upon creation” (WSU Online). One participant summed up this “evolution” of support services with the following observation:

A lot of what we thought really was critical for our online learners now the campuses are starting to purchase for their learners who are on campus just so they can have 24 by 7 access. So what started out as kind of ‘our’ stuff is now everybody’s stuff. So it’s kind of an evolution for the whole field. There’s a convergence between what we’ve been doing for online and what they’ve been doing for on-campus. It’s kind of all starting to come together, because the on-campus students are demanding access just like the online students get. (UTTC)

Summary

While one of the goals of this research was to design an implementation model, the programs varied too much to provide this. However, several structure and process issues emerged. This section focused on discussing institutional issues such as organizational structure, funding, and policies. Also discussed were issues related to decision-making processes, enrollment increases, and the overlap of distance programs with traditional campus-based programs.

Retention and Course Completion Rates

To gather background information on the programs, one question asked to all participants regarded retention rates. While I did not intend to explore this issue, nor was it part of the original purpose, rich data emerged that warrant discussion. The participants reported that it is difficult to define retention for this population of students; most of them are enrolled part-time and have jobs and families, and they may stop-out throughout their programs. One participant even observed, “Philosophically the college has never felt like adult students should be measured by any kind of traditional retention guidelines or statistics” (TESC). Another stated:

I don’t know about my retention rate. That’s something that we’re really going to get into this year and that is defining what retention is for an online, adult student. ... In residence for 4-year degrees you publish the rate of students that graduate in 4 years, the rate of students that graduate in 5 years, the rate of students that graduate in 6 years. What is the right time frame [for an online, adult student]? (WC)

Since retention is not well defined for distance programs, and is not reported like in traditional institutions, programs may not have collected the data necessary to

determine retention rates. Also, there was a lack of data because the online programs were too new to have much meaningful data.

We actually just had our first 10 graduates this semester. ... so now that we've actually had students graduate we can start going back and looking at our retention rate. (WC)

In terms of degree completion we don't, we haven't historically, kept that kind of data ... Our students are finishing their degrees more quickly and we're trying to decide why that is, but the way that we've traditionally counted students doesn't help us really get at how long the student's staying with us, why they are leaving, if they're leaving how many of them are coming back, and that's what we're in the process of working on right now. (TESC)

Therefore, discussion about this issue reverted to the topic of course completion rates, which were fairly well tracked at these programs. One participant reported rates "pretty within the national standards" (TESC) while the others reported quite high course completion rates – up to almost 98% in two of the programs. One participant had recently compared completion rates of online and on-campus general education classes taught by the same instructor and found comparable rates: "The drop-rate was pretty similar between the online classes and the in-person classes" (WSU Online).

The conversations then turned to what the participants perceived as important in retaining students. Participants discussed issues of self-motivation and having information upfront about online courses.

In order to be successful in our courses and in this kind of education you really have to be independent and self-motivated. (TESC)

That's the thing that we're hearing the most about is that for an online class you need a lot of self-motivation whereas the on-campus class you show up to class and you're reminded what to do. (WSU Online)

The best way to retain students is to get students who are ready for this kind of education to begin with. (TESC)

Give people as much information ... [so] they can prepare themselves to participate well in the course. (WC)

A couple of the participants also suggested cost as a factor: “When we talk about things we want to do to increase retention it always sort of comes back to fees” (TESC), and “I think most schools, when they do surveys of why student’s don’t register for courses, they [students] say ‘well, I can’t afford it’” (WC). One participant attributed retention to the service level that is provided:

I would suspect that if a student gets so frustrated with trying to use a service and they just finally go ‘oh heck with this, I’ll go to [another institution]. ... The students today, I just think if they don’t get what they need from you and the services to support it, they’ll just go somewhere else. So we just try very hard to have that kind of high touch involved in our program but at the same time scale it and it’s not always easy. But that’s sort of how we built everything; everything is around what the students want, what the students need. I think that’s another reason why we keep them. (UTTCC)

In sum, the issue of retention emerged as a finding, though it was not an intended part of the purpose of this study. Retention for online learners is difficult to define and was not an overwhelming concern of participants. More importantly, it seemed, was course completion rates. These programs boasted average or better than average completion rates.

Innovative Practices

While all five of these programs were recognized as exemplary in providing student services, this section highlights particularly innovative practices currently used to assist students and enhance their distance learning experience, particularly services outside of the basic administrative core services that most programs provide. These examples are given from a student affairs perspective. Whereas other services provided by these programs may also be classified “innovative”, such as library services or

technical support, the intent is to focus on services most typically found under the auspices of a campus-based student affairs department.

Orientation Courses

Penn State World Campus (WC) offers World Campus 101 (WC 101), which is designed to orient new and prospective students to the WC learning environment. The online course is divided into five modules:

- (1) *What's it like to be a WC student?* gives an overview of what it's like to learn online, what the courses will be like, and what skills are needed to be successful.
- (2) *Using online course materials* reviews how to access and find online materials and how to use web functions
- (3) *Interacting with your instructor and fellow students* reviews expectations of instructors, "Netiquette", and how to use accounts, bulletin boards, and shared files
- (4) *Using academic resources in your courses* provides tips on how to find and use library and web-based resources
- (5) *Getting help when you need it* provides information about various student services and how to contact staff to receive assistance

WC 101 modules include real life examples and activities and quizzes to make learning fun.

Weber State University Online (WSU Online) provides a Demo Course to "give you a good feel for the kinds of things you will find in a WSU online course" (WSU Online website). The demo begins with instructions on how to obtain the student ID and

PIN numbers and how to log in to a course. The course features links to the Instructor's Office, Syllabus, Assignments, Online Discussion, Examinations, WebPortfolio, Chat, and Gradebook. The instructor is introduced by some personal and professional information, a picture, and contact information. A detailed syllabus with a coursework schedule and examples of different types of assignments are included. In several places, the website notes that "Many WSU Online courses are structured just like campus courses. Students are required to report in for class two or three times a week, just like a campus course." The examination section includes a sample online test with scoring, and information on how to use an off-campus proctor. There is also access into a demo discussion and chat room to learn how to use these functions and see how they operate.

e-Student Union

The WC offers an "Our Community" section on the website so students can "learn more about our online community of lifelong learners, and how you can be a part of it!" (WC website). A Community Profile highlights a WC student, faculty or staff member, and past profiles are available in an archive. The Student Commons serves as an e-Student Union; links are provided to campus information such as news and information sources, student organizations, facilities, museums and galleries. A section about the Alumni Association outlines membership benefits, such as a professional networking program, and encourages students to join. Other sections provide interesting facts about the WC, leadership perspectives about the vision and direction of the WC from the President of Penn State and the Executive Director of the WC, and information about advisory board and steering committee members. This e-Student Union will further develop to include online workshops for career counseling, resume critique, and study

skills, chat capabilities to connect with advisors and other students, and a peer mentor program.

That's where everything is going to be, the peer mentor program, the chat with the advisors, the workshops, everything that you can think of is going to be in there, the game room, some digital stuff from the art gallery, the stuff from some of the museums on campus, things like that ... we're hoping that the students go into all their courses and everything through this e-Student Union, that when they log on that's what comes up, the e-Student Union.

Online Student Government

Washington State University Distance Degree Programs (DDP) started the first distance student government (ASWSU-DDP) at a traditional institution in September 1998. "The branch campuses of WSU all have student governments so this was just seen as a logical extension of what WSU already has." The purpose of ASWSU-DDP is to "specifically represent the unique and particular interests, needs, and welfare" of WSU's DDP students (DDP website). The Vision Statement that guides the ASWSU-DDP leaders is:

We the elected officers of the ASWSU-DDP, choose to lead in order to serve our colleagues in our mutual quest for continued education. By establishing and maintaining all means of communication, we seek to make ASWSU-DDP accessible and relevant for our fellow students, to promote the WSU community and our own communities. We strive to accurately represent and honor the diversity of our unique student body by listening to and addressing issues brought before us in an efficient and timely manner. Our guiding principles for our decisions are truthfulness, integrity, honesty, trust, and respect. (DDP Website)

Students have the opportunity to get involved by serving as an officer or a senator, serving on a committee, or participating in the mentor program. There is also an option to request funds to organize nonacademic events and activities, such as hosting an Open House at one of the regional Learning Centers.

There is a link to Student Government on the index page of the DDP website, so information about the organization is readily available, and the ASWSU-DDP hosts a very developed website. The Communications Center includes message boards with direct access to the student leaders, a student lounge, and a textbook exchange. Chat rooms are available for student-to-student conversations, study groups, and student government meetings and office hours. The Resources section features useful links to online services such as counseling services with a 24-hour crisis line, an online writing lab, the student handbook, and a career counselor. Other links connect students to the institution through a virtual tour, Cougar shopping, and the alumni association. Financial aid and scholarship information, online student magazines and media, and policies and procedures are also available. “They have a chat room; they have online office hours; they have elections, campaigning online which is pretty neat.”

The ASWSU-DDP also plans in-person events:

It also plans activities for students: a graduation reception and an open house in the fall where students can come to campus if they want, and what we call a “Rendezvous” in the spring, which is usually on the west side of the state. It’s just a chance for students to get together, and we usually have career counselors there, and a favorite professor for students to interact with.

Additionally, the ASWSU-DDP regularly conducts a student needs and interests survey. Results from these surveys have been used to justify hiring a part-time career counselor and implementing the Request for Funds program. Just like a campus-based student government, student leaders decide how to use student fees to best serve students: “Just like the other student governments make decisions on how to use their student fees, that’s one of the things that this student government does.” Due to student interest, the

ASWSU-DDP officers voted to utilize student fees to hire a part-time career counselor who works with students through e-mail and phone and some video-conferencing.

Overall, not a lot of students directly participate in the student government, but many students take advantage of the numerous services and resources provided by the ASWSU-DDP.

University of Texas TeleCampus (UTTC) also has plans to start a student government and the WC is starting a student advisory board. WSU Online tried to have a student government, but students didn't participate.

Outside-of-Class Communities

Thomas Edison State College (TESC) offers a moderated discussion board for students to connect outside of coursework. Open Discussions is an open area for students, alumni, faculty and staff to post messages. Several messages are posted each day and often focus on trying to connect with others in the same geographic area and asking for or giving advice or suggestions about various academic and administrative issues.

We have on our website an open, well it's moderated, student discussion board and sometimes student will say "I'm taking this class this semester, do you want to study together?" and we encourage that so they may do it informally and independently.

A Textbook Swap is also provided, which allows students to arrange to buy and sell used textbooks online.

DDP's student government provides a Communications Center on its website which includes message boards with direct access to the student leaders, a student lounge where students post messages, and an online textbook exchange. Chat rooms are also available for student-to-student conversations, study groups, and student government meetings and office hours.

Newsletter

UTTC and DDP both produce a semester newsletter available in online and print versions. The latest edition of UT4Me featured information about new programs, student survey results, student demographics, a faculty spotlight, and a Q&A about disability issues. The latest issue of DDP's newsletter highlighted a list of graduates with the degree earned, course developments, a column about Advising and one about Financial Aid, an introduction to new staff, a faculty profile, student award winners, and a list of honor roll students. The newsletter also featured information about the student government and upcoming events, several articles on various subjects written by students, staff, and alums, and information on programs and policies.

Online Tutoring

WSU Online has teamed up with the on-campus Tutoring Center to provide synchronous and asynchronous online tutoring. The WSU Online office provides the technology and the tutoring office provides the tutors. A web-based commercial platform, NetTutor (NetTutor.com), is used, which features chat functions and a white-board. Students access the system from the WSU website. Live online math tutoring is available Monday-Thursday from 5pm-9pm with two separate chat areas – one for developmental math and one for algebra. In addition, students can post questions anytime. The tutors answer questions in the queue during their shift and send an e-mail notification to the student once the answer is posted.

UTTC and DDP outsource tutoring through Smarthinking.com. This is a company that provides real-time and asynchronous tutoring in writing, math, statistics, accounting, economics, and psychology, and study resources such as sample problems, diagnostic

tests, study skills, and writing manuals. Students communicate with e-structors through virtual whiteboard technology, which requires no special hardware or software. UTTC provides unlimited free tutoring, and DDP offers one free hour per semester and students have the option to pay for additional tutoring. Students at DDP also have access to an Online Writing Lab (OWL) provided by the campus writing center.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented findings of the study from data collected through interviews with program directors or student services coordinators and from program websites. The WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) recommendations served as guidelines for investigating services that these programs provided and those that participants deemed important. Findings indicated that these programs were providing fairly comprehensive services to students, with administrative services the easiest to access and career and personal counseling the most difficult to access. Additionally, the programs utilized a variety of methods to provide services to students, especially websites, e-mail, chat, and call centers. Participants fostered good relationships with campus units; however, campus-based student affairs departments had not played a large role in supporting distance learners. Additionally, while not a goal of this study, the issues of retention and course completion emerged.

While the intent was to design an implementation model based on the findings, the programs differed too much to allow for this. However, several structure and process issues emerged that could be considered when designing services for students. This chapter ends with a section highlighting several innovative practices that these programs provided, which could serve as models of good practice. The findings presented in this

chapter serve as a basis for discussion of implications and suggestions in the following and final chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe student services provided by distance learning programs identified by a group of experts as exemplary in providing such services, and the structure and process of these programs. These five programs offered complete online courses and/or academic programs, and comprehensive online student services. I addressed several research questions regarding services, methods, campus relationships, and structure and process issues. The study was qualitative in nature and utilized a collective case study approach for an exploratory investigation of service provision. I utilized the constant comparative method to analyze interview data collected from program directors and student services coordinators and conducted a document analysis of the program websites utilizing checklists based on recommendations for online services published by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) (WCET, 2000) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) (CAS, 2000).

The findings were reported in Chapter 4 as themes that paralleled the research questions. The themes discussed were:

- Services
 - Administrative Services
 - Academic Services
 - Community-building Services

- Methods of Providing Services
 - Website Structure and Design
 - Self-service
 - Communications
 - Service Availability
 - Outsourcing
- Relationships With Campus Units
- Structure and Process Issues
 - Organizational Structure
 - Funding
 - Policies
 - Decision-making
 - Program Growth
 - Overlap of Distance and Resident Education

A fifth category, retention and course completion rates, also emerged, though it was not part of the original purpose of the study. Since the use of a small sample limits generalizability, the reader must determine applicability of these findings to her or his particular situation.

In spite of this limitation, these findings have implications for student affairs and distance learning professionals. As noted in Chapter 2, the research on student services in distance learning is limited. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by identifying and describing the types of services and methods of provision offered by exemplary programs, highlighting innovative practices in online student services, and

identifying structure and process issues to consider when planning service programs for distance learners.

The purpose of this chapter is to present these findings in light of the literature in student affairs and distance learning, to discuss the implications for student affairs and distance learning professionals, and to make recommendations for future study. This discussion is organized around the four categories that cross over the research questions and the overarching purpose: (a) services, (b) methods of service provision, (c) campus relationships, (d) structure and process issues.

Services

Two recent student affairs documents have called for identification of the services necessary to promote student success in distance learning (NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999). Thus, one goal of this research was to identify and describe student services that could be provided to enrich distance learners' educational experience. To answer this, I examined services offered by distance learning programs identified as exemplary in providing these types of services. The fourteen services recommended by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) served as a framework for examining services these programs provided and for discussing with participants the services they deemed important.

The core administrative services, admissions, registration, and financial aid, were all readily available. These programs also offered elements of several of the services designed to assist students with their academic endeavors, such as information for prospective students, academic advising, technical support, library services, bookstore, and orientation services. Other academic services, including career services, services for

students with disabilities, instructional support and tutoring, and personal counseling were neither as well developed nor as consistently provided. However, services to promote a sense of community were available in all the programs through a variety of means. I found that these programs each provided at least 10 of the recommended services in an interactive and/or personalized manner and offered at least basic information for 12 of the 14 services. Three of the programs offered some element of 13 or all 14 of the services.

These findings indicate the programs under examination were providing services that meet most if not all of the needs of their students, which contrasts with existing literature. Unlike Jackson's (2000) conclusion that needs of distance learners were not being met and Bayless's (2001) findings that distance students had the same out-of-class needs as campus-based students, but services to address these needs were not being adequately provided, these programs were doing a good job of providing services to meet the needs of their students.

In addition, in the only comprehensive study examining the provision of services to distance learners, respondents from over 400 distance learning programs rated their programs on similar categories of student services to those recommended by the WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines. Though one of the goals of the study was to identify a limited number of programs that offered comprehensive out-of-class student services to serve as models for other programs, not one emerged as having a comprehensive support program (Dirr, 1999b). In contrast, the programs represented in the current study can certainly serve as models for other programs wishing to provide such services to their students.

Consistent with existing literature, however, were findings that administrative services, such as admissions and registration, were the easiest to access, while personal and career counseling were the least accessible. There are two possible explanations for these findings. First, some students and service providers may embrace a consumerism philosophy, not a developmental one. Findings from this study indicated that the evolution of distance services seems to be mirroring the evolution of the student affairs profession, only at a much more rapid rate. In the beginnings of American higher education, the faculty role included assisting students with issues outside of the realm of the course. Then a specialized administrator role was created to assist students with administrative tasks and other out-of-class issues. As student services evolved, the approach was to supply services and programs that supported the academic program, consumerism being the underlying tenet. Student affairs philosophy has further evolved and now emphasizes student development or student learning, with the underlying goal being the development of the whole person (Rhatigan, 2000). Currently, most services for distance learners follow the consumerism or student services philosophy, but findings of this study indicate efforts to address student development and student learning are being developed. Second, in addition to the philosophical underpinnings, the technology is still evolving that will further allow for such services to be better developed. A discussion of this and of the methods utilized in these programs ensues in the next section.

While the intent of this study was to present a holistic view of the composite service levels of these exemplary programs, some issues became salient at the micro level because the participants emphasized or de-emphasized a particular service or because the

literature addresses a particular issue. Therefore the remainder of this section is dedicated to discussing individual services.

When asked what students most utilized or requested, participants emphasized services such as advising, tutoring, career services, technical support, and providing students information upfront. This is in line with a recent project designed to examine services important to provide beyond the basic administrative services (aptly named *Beyond the Administrative Core*) (Shea & Armitage, 2003) that focused on academic advising, orientation, career planning, counseling, financial aid, tutoring, and library services. Thus, it is encouraging that several of the services identified as important by participants in this study overlapped with current literature addressing the “usually neglected services” (Shea & Armitage, 2003) for distance learners.

For instance, the issue of providing students with information upfront to help them be successful was emphasized by most of the participants. This information takes the form of information for prospective students, pre-enrollment information, orientation to the distance learning environment, and orientation to the program or the institution.

One participant summed this up:

[We] give people as much information as we can to get them to the point where they can make a good decision about coming to the [institution] as a student and that they can prepare themselves to participate well in the course. (WC)

This is consistent with Tallman’s (1994) finding that the helpfulness of the orientation manual was an important variable in satisfaction with provision and quality of services. It is interesting to note, however, that though participants believed providing information upfront to be important in facilitating students’ success, none of the programs required a formal orientation. In addition, the majority of information had to do with academic

issues, while information on non-academic issues was less accessible. Schwitzer, Ancis, & Brown (2001) propose that distance learning orientations are most effective when they include a component advising students about necessary non-academic skills. One participant reflected, “Orientation is one area I’m not sure we’ve done a good or the right job with” (WC).

Participants also identified instructional support and tutoring as important. Three of the programs provide online tutoring and one participant mentioned that her program didn’t provide it but it was a service that students requested. One program currently offers a peer mentor program and another has plans to start one as well as to create online study skills workshops. Providing tips on issues like “how to be a successful distance learner” or “time management in distance courses” can also fall under this category and several of these programs offer something along those lines. It is heartening to see this level of support for distance students. From personal experience in this functional area, this level of service is not always provided on-campus. But, a still broader conception of instructional support could include services such as online courses and workshops on various academic issues and study strategies, or at a minimum, posting static information on these issues.

Participants also reported student interest in career services. Each program website hosted links to self-help tools and job search engines; however, the programs offered limited personalized services. Only one program provided access to an actual career counselor, one program had a link to a submission form on the website of the campus-based unit to “Ask a Counselor,” and one program outsourced to a company that provided access to career consultants by phone. This level of service provision, however,

is an improvement over findings from just a few years ago, which indicated availability of career services as minimal (Bayless, 2001; Dirr, 1999b). A couple of the participants made comments that seemed to indicate career services should primarily address placement issues; when asked about services students are requesting, one participant replied, “The thing we’re seeing more of is career resources and that’s because we’re far enough down this path to be getting some graduates” (UTTC). Another participant replied, “We don’t do a lot of career counseling because what we’ve found is they’re already doing that [chosen career]” (TESC). However, students may also need career exploration and planning opportunities. Since students are requesting career services, determining what they need and expect is worth investigating. In addition, several issues require consideration, such as being wary of the abundance of nonprofessional assessments available on amateur websites, ensuring that professionals are trained to operate properly in an online environment, and providing comprehensive assessment with appropriate test interpretation (Barak, 2003).

Notably absent from the discussions and the websites were personal counseling services. Only one program provided any type of personal counseling from a distance; this was through a link to the campus-based unit, which featured a 24-hour crisis line. This finding is not surprising; the limited studies that have examined service provision to distance learners have also found a lack of counseling services (Bayless, 2001; Dirr, 1999b). Furthermore, even though WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines recommend providing this service, studies have failed to identify counseling as important for distance learners (Bayless, 2001; Jackson, 2000). As Bayless concluded, though, this may be a service relatively few students require so it has not emerged as an important issue.

Several challenges and issues exist in providing counseling services from a distance, such as privacy and ethical considerations, training and licensing for counselors in an online environment, and limiting access to confidential information (Carlson, 2002; Shea & Armitage, 2003). In general, most campus counseling services have a limited web presence beyond general information and contact information. One of the participants felt counseling and other health services did not need to be provided because students didn't expect this from their distance learning program; they could get these services from work or community. This may be a common assumption when working with a primarily adult learner population; however, these students may actually have a need for this service if they are adjusting to returning to school, balancing school with other life responsibilities, or lacking interpersonal interactions because they are disconnected from other students. In addition, campus-based students choosing to take online courses may have issues of isolation that need to be addressed. These issues and the value and feasibility of providing counseling from a distance are worth further investigation.

One final area for discussion is the provision of services to promote a sense of community. The positive impact of these types of activities for campus-based students has been well documented in the student development literature; a high level of involvement and integration into the fabric of the institution have been shown to enhance development and increase retention (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Online interaction is common through coursework, but the few research studies examining social support services outside of the class found distance learning programs lacking in these services (Bayless, 2001; Dirr 1999b). The findings in this study, however, indicated these programs are providing such community-building efforts; while there is no consistency

between the programs on how this is done, each one provided opportunities for students to connect to the institution, the program, and/or to other students. Examples of this are student discussion boards, student government, peer mentoring, alumni association, and newsletters. Though community-building services are understandably the most difficult to provide in an online learning environment, these programs show it is possible.

However, comments made by the participants such as, “[students] just want to get in and take their classes and get out” (WSU Online), or “even though we think that they want interaction, not all of them do” (TESC), may indicate that these students may not require or want opportunities to interact with others outside of class, or that they may not take advantage of them if offered. These particular services may also be more important for particular students such as traditional students, undergraduate students with little college experience, or women (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). The impact of community-building services and the need for or interest in them requires further investigation.

In conclusion, the findings in this study indicate these programs are providing fairly comprehensive student services to their distance learners. This adds to the literature by identifying exemplary programs and the services they provide to their students. While two prominent student affairs documents (NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999) call for the identification of new or different services that may need to be created to serve distance learners, results of this study did not identify any. These findings are consistent with Bayless’s (2001) and May’s (2002) results that distance students have similar needs as campus-based students, and guidelines in the distance learning literature stating that existing services need to be provided but “tweaked” for an online environment. EDUCAUSE’s 2003 Current Issues Survey identified online student services as one of

the top 10 issues for IT professionals, and questioned how distance programs could expand online services in advisement, counseling, tutoring, and community-building (Crawford & Rudy, 2003). Findings from this study, especially the innovative examples highlighted in Chapter 4, provide a good place to start for some of these issues.

In addition, while it is beyond the scope of this study to determine any sort of impact of providing distance learners with comprehensive services, it is interesting to note that the course completion rate of students enrolled in these programs is at least at the national standard, with most programs boasting quite high completion rates. Schwitzer, et al. (2001) indicated, “Higher learner satisfaction is expected to produce higher levels of student motivation, greater commitment to the program, and in turn, better retention” (p. 39). One can presuppose that providing a comprehensive student service program would result in higher levels of student satisfaction, thereby resulting in higher levels of course completion and/or program retention.

Methods of Providing Services

How to provide support services to students who may never set foot on campus is a challenge facing institutions. Many documents have called for determining the best way to provide services (e.g., May, 2002; NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999). Furthermore, an annual survey of IT professionals revealed that online student services made the top 10 list of issues requiring attention for institutional success (Crawford & Rudy, 2003). Thus, another objective of this research was to examine effective ways of providing out-of-class services to students. While the intent was to focus on web-based methods such as websites, e-mail, and chat, data indicated that other methods were also important, especially a call center.

Students expect to have access to services through self-service, one-stop shopping, and just-in-time response methods (Dirr, 1999a; Shea & Armitage, 2003). “They’re pretty demanding; they have very high expectations of us and what kind of service we can provide to them and they want things quick” (TESC). To meet student expectations for services, the programs in this study utilized a combination of web-based services and phone for the majority of service, and used in-person, mail, and video-conferencing to a very minor extent. This is consistent with Jackson’s (2000) findings in which panel members in a Delphi study recommended a multi-modal approach to providing services to distance learners.

Obviously, a web presence is very important. Several participants mentioned the importance of having a good website so students can access the information they need, and one participant mentioned making changes to improve the website because it was too involved: “We’re going through a redesign on the website because we feel like it’s too much” (UTTC).

Online services generally evolve through stages of increasing functionality, starting with providing static information, then adding interactive components, personalized services, Web portals, and finally integrating services with artificial intelligence (Johnstone, 2002). The program websites in this study were thorough in at least providing information for 12 of the recommended 14 services, either directly on the program website or through links to institutional or external sites. FAQ pages were an effective method of providing content and contact information. The sites also allowed for basic administrative functions to be handled, such as completing and submitting paperwork, which is consistent with most institutions. Online methods have replaced

paper-and-pencil methods for a variety of services, such as applications, registration, and bursaring activities. In 2002, of participating institutions in the Campus Computing Project, 90% provided online admissions applications and over 70% offered online registration (Green, 2002). The NASPA report on distance learning (2000) noted that “most administrative processes of Student Affairs can be done well and easily adapted to distance learning and some can be done BETTER” (p. 7).

These web-based services increase access and convenience for students and satisfy student expectations for “anytime, anywhere” self-service. Not only do such services address the students’ desire “for more and more services online” (TESC), but they also reduce staff workloads for routine services, which allows staff more time to focus on individualized services (Shea & Armitage, 2003). In fact, data collected by the WC indicate 77% of their students apply for enrollment directly from the website without contacting Student Services for information (McGrath, Middleton, & Crissman, 2001), thus staff time could be dedicated to other activities.

In addition, these programs offer, and have plans to offer, some interactive elements and individualized and personalized services, such as access to records and personalized web sites or student portals for establishing relationships with the institution and other students. More advanced web design allows for developmental activities and learning experiences similar to opportunities available on-campus and even better access to administrative services and just-in-time information. Most campus-based services are designed from the institution’s point of view – services are arranged under functional areas and students access them by going to particular buildings on campus. The web allows for the design and delivery of services from the student’s point of view – services

can be customized and personalized by crossing and blending service boundaries to provide a full context for each student (Shea and Armitage, 2003). "Instead of thinking in the vertical silos you have to think horizontally across the organization ... and that's a necessary and important paradigm shift that really needs to take place if these services are going to be provided in a way that makes sense" (G. Kleeman, personal communication, March 4, 2003).

Sometimes students need to communicate with an institutional representative. WCET web design guidelines (2000) suggest program websites provide access to a "real person" on every page. The programs in this study all adhere to that by listing an e-mail address and a phone number on each webpage. A few also provide a chat link for various services. The programs all provide toll-free access, most through some type of call center. The *Beyond the Administrative Core* project provides a section on the Role of Call Centers suggesting the importance of providing a one-stop-shop (Shea & Armitage, 2003). In addition, the participants in Jackson's (2000) study highly ranked a one-stop-shopping point of contact as an essential student service. The administrators of the Distance Learning Network for the State of Maine realized the value of a call center when they created a hypothetical student and attempted to complete various tasks. Upon finding that they had to make separate phone calls to complete each task and often called the wrong office and had to be transferred, they realized the need for a single point of contact. Thus they implemented a "Teleservice Center" to help provide students with basic services and it was an "immediate success" (Connick, p. 2, 2001).

In addition to call centers, the importance of e-mail and chat functions was also evident, especially for a student using a dial-up modem without a separate phone line.

Therefore a student has to disconnect from the website to make a phone call. A solution to this issue is to provide an e-mail link for asynchronous communication or chat for synchronous communication. The participants reported that almost all of their communication was done by e-mail or phone. Chat was utilized for a few functions, and participants discussed plans to expand this method because it is an effective way for students to connect with staff and other students by allowing for synchronous one-to-one or one-to-many interaction; thus, chat or some type of discussion board allows for an online method of community-building. The positive impact of community-building is well documented in the student affairs literature; much research indicates that students learn more and have higher rates of persistence when their in-class experience is complemented by out-of-class experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While this research reflects the outcomes of campus-based services, it can be reasonably assumed that the same is true for distance services – the experiences are the same, only the medium has changed.

Though only one program utilized video-conferencing as a communication method, it is another effective way to communicate from a distance. This is a particularly good method to use in providing services that may be better suited to face-to-face communication, such as advising, career counseling, and personal counseling. In fact, virtual counseling was the topic of a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Carlson, Nov 15, 2002), which proposed that video technology will have implications for counseling in the future. In addition, the author of a recent article on Internet career assessments suggested that Internet-based conferencing systems and the use of Web cams will be included in future reviews (Barak, 2003). While online counseling is fraught with

issues of privacy, liability, and timeliness, these issues disappear with video-technology, which can allow for real time counseling sessions. Live interpersonal interaction among students would also be possible. Perhaps once video technology is more advanced and affordable, this method can be better utilized for a multitude of services.

In addition to these various service methods, issues of service availability and outsourcing emerged. Providing well-developed, online, self-service processes can allow for 24x7 access for students to gather information or complete forms. However, services requiring communication with an institutional representative require the program to provide staff at extended hours. A few of the programs offered regular extended hours for technical support, tutoring, advising, and/or the call center, but it is interesting to note that the participants disagreed over the necessity of this level of service. The participants who thought offering extended hours unnecessary cited that their experience had shown them extended hours hadn't been well utilized. However, one participant cited having to serve students all over the world in different time zones so was very adamant about the need for this service. The issues of extended hours of availability and 24x7 service are beyond the scope of this study but are interesting topics for future study. As online programs continue to develop and increase in student enrollments, this may become an issue or a student expectation, especially when serving students in various time zones.

The last issue to discuss in this section is outsourcing. Most of the programs outsourced at least one service. Examples of services that had been outsourced are the bookstore, tutoring, technical support, and career services. While there are no statistics available on the prevalence of outsourcing, numerous companies have been created to provide various educational services. Just as on-campus operations are outsourcing

services such as food services and housing, online programs look for efficient and cost-effective means of providing various services to their students. However, concerns about quality are often raised when services generally thought of as the institution's responsibility are provided by an outside vendor; an assumption of higher education is that "external providers of educational services ... are inherently bad or of lower quality" (Twigg, p. 3, 2001). Until recently, institutions have outsourced mostly business and administrative functions but now have options to "unbundle student support services" (Dirr, 1999a), such as counseling, tutoring, and career services. With the plethora of companies being created and the number of services that can potentially be outsourced, quality assurance criteria need to be developed.

Distributed learning is characterized by the ability to disaggregate and reaggregate practically every aspect of the higher education enterprise. Vastly expanded opportunities for outsourcing ... tend to make people nervous. ... We need to develop criteria to enable institutions to make good outsourcing choices. (Twigg, p. 11, 2001)

One participant recommended being careful when entering into contracts and noted the responsibility the program has in ensuring the vendor serves the students appropriately:

If we hadn't found somebody out there who could do it the way we thought it should be done, we would have done it ourselves; but there was somebody out there who would do it the way that we wanted it done. But we are very, very careful about entering into contracts with people. ... So we take those vendor relationships very seriously and know that we have a responsibility in making them work. (UTTC)

The findings in this section add to the literature by identifying methods of service provision these exemplary programs utilize to address their distance students' needs, such as self-service, one-stop-shops or call centers, FAQ's, and chat. These findings also require consideration of the necessity of providing services in terms of hours of availability and the quality of outsourcing.

Campus Relationships

A third goal of this study was to examine the role campus-based student affairs units play in serving students studying from a distance. This is a topic that has received little attention in the literature but is important to consider especially in light of the aforementioned statistics indicating the incredible rate of growth of distance education and the high percentage of e-learning students who are also campus-based students (Lewis, Snow, & Farris, 1999; Shea & Armitage, 2003; Waits & Lewis, 2003). Additionally, several recent documents call for the provision of distance services equivalent to those provided on campus (CAS, 2000; C-RAC, 2000; Shea & Armitage, 2003; WCET, 2000).

Consistent with Jackson's (2000) conclusion that student affairs divisions have done little to meet the needs of distance learners, campus-based units were not integrally involved in providing many of the services to distance students in these programs. The campus-based unit generally provided only the basic administrative services, such as admissions, registration, and financial aid. The distance program websites also linked to campus resources for services such as career services, services for students with disabilities, and the alumni association, but these services had not been specially designed for distance students. Thus, the findings of this study indicated campus-based offices played a minor role in supporting distance students in these programs.

For the most part, relationships with campus units had been fostered by distance learning staff; campus-based student affairs units had not taken the lead in forming partnerships but did seem willing to provide assistance in serving students. Two of the participants reported creating liaison programs with campus-based units to facilitate

better communication and service for their distance students. Two of the participants also reported working with campus-based staff to ensure that online services were being developed to help their distance students receive assistance. This is an important process since often there is a lack of coordination between distance learning and student affairs when creating services:

Many institutions have placed a variety of student affairs services on-line ... Yet these systems have not necessarily been produced in concert with those responsible for delivering distance education courses. Needs assessment of any sort is seldom done ... there has been a lag between knowing what the students desire and what is offered. (Elling & Brown, p. 92, 2001)

The findings in this study regarding student affairs support for distance learning are not surprising in light of the fact that a recent ACPA membership survey (2000) indicated 52% of the respondents had little or no interest in distance learning as a topic for professional development. Student affairs professionals are hesitant to serve students when they are not face-to-face, perhaps resulting from a belief that the learning and interaction are not as significant in a distance learning environment. However, as more advanced technologies provide opportunities to engage the learner, it is more likely that online services can be created that will result in similar outcomes such as higher satisfaction and retention (Astin, 1993; Schwitzer, Ancis & Brown, 2001; Tinto, 1993) as those found in in-person interactions. Unfortunately, many student affairs professionals may be ill equipped to create virtual learning support due to a lack of technical know-how (NASPA, 2000). This issue will be further discussed in the implications section.

Another factor that may hamper relationships is that though most distance education programs are embedded within traditional institutions (Dirr, 1999a), they are typically housed in continuing or extended education programs. Often self-sufficient in

terms of funding, these units frequently operate separately from other institutional functions and are not integrated into the same structures (Dirr, 1999a; G. Kleeman, personal communication, March 4, 2003; Schwitzer, et al., 2001). Thus, student affairs units may not feel a responsibility to support distance students because they are neither expected to nor rewarded for doing so:

Oftentimes your distance education or your extended education programs are not funded through state funds ... which means that the student services associated with those courses should also be self-supported, and of course, they're not, and so there's not incentive for the student affairs folks to take on that responsibility because the reward structure doesn't reward them. (personal communication, G. Kleeman, March 4, 2003)

It should be noted, though, that all but one of the programs in this study received state funding, and students in a few of the programs paid student fees. So while campus-based units in this study were not overly involved, it could be that these units were providing more than other institutions.

Furthermore, some of the services identified by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) as student services may not be considered student affairs responsibilities on campus, such as the bookstore and the library, while some of the services may fall under student affairs on some campuses but not others, such as tutoring and advising. Thus, this category of campus relationships also encompasses other relationships that need to be fostered to serve student needs.

Structure and Process Issues

Though my original intent was to add to the literature by providing a practical guide that institutions could use in designing appropriate services for distance learners, the structure and process of the programs in this study varied too much to speculate on an implementation or procedural model. When looking at my first three research questions,

it is reasonable to surmise that tying together findings that answer the questions (i.e. tie together what services are provided, how they are provided, and who is responsible for providing them) could result in an implementation model to serve as a guide for institutions wishing to initiate or enhance services to distance learners. On the surface, these appear to tie together nicely. However, numerous other structure and process issues emerged that must be taken under consideration for a more holistic approach. These issues were: (a) organizational structure, (b) funding, (c) policies, (d) decision-making, (e) program growth, and (f) overlap of distance and resident education.

Since most institutions have yet to solidify a distance learning plan (Green, 2000; Rivera & Kostopoulos, 2001), consideration of structure and process issues, such as organizational structure, funding, and policies, can assist institutional leaders in planning efforts. Though structurally different at the macro level, it can be noted that similarities existed among the programs in this study on various institutional issues: the programs reported to high-level positions, most received some sort of state funding, and academic and student policies were generally the same as campus-based policies. While it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the impact of the structures of these programs, it can be speculated that these particular factors may contribute to the inclusion of the distance program as an integral part of the institution, thereby allowing for a more comprehensive provision of student services.

As was the case with these programs (excluding TESC since it is a complete institution, not a separate program), the majority of institutions offering complete distance degree programs do so as an extension or subsidiary of their campus-based programs (Dirr, 1999a). Thus, programs may try to mirror on-campus service structures

when designing services for distance students. In fact, the recommended guidelines by WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) divide services into various functional areas. However, since student services in distance learning is a new and evolving area, traditional rules of organization might not apply. The functional area model of student affairs may not transfer well to the distance environment and/or may not be the most efficient method of providing services.

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of utilizing student input in planning services and reported a “learn as we go” attitude. In a recent study examining satisfaction with services, May (2002) suggested that institutional decision-making about the provision of student services will affect the success of distance learners. Thus, examining the various decision-making processes these participants utilize may assist others in designing appropriate support initiatives.

Students expect one-stop-shopping and just-in-time information, and technologies, such as student portals, are beginning to allow for the cross-functioning and blending of information and services. Moreover, the appropriate use of technological advances has the potential to not only expand and enhance services for distance learners, but to also improve current student affairs practices for campus-based students.

Thinking through the process of efficiently integrating student support services with instruction in a distance education environment has a great deal of potential to help us find ways to reconceptualize the on-campus relationships. The worst thing that could happen is that the on-campus schism would be replicated in the distance mode. (NASPA, p. 10, 2000)

Since there is a real blurring between distance and resident education, especially with the increasing numbers of campus-based students enrolling in e-learning, new methods can serve to address needs of all students. Educational systems will be impacted

by virtual developments, resulting in “web-centric” education that is “as much concerned with enhancing classroom-based learning ... [as with] learning that occurs in off-campus venues” (Farrell, pp. 142-3, 2001). In addition, these web-centric systems will be more learner-centered allowing for access to online resources equivalent to or superior than resources on-campus and for tailoring the learning experience according to personal needs (Farrell, 2001).

In conclusion, consideration of these issues may be especially important when taking into account the body of literature suggesting that the real barriers to serving students from a distance are institutional or administrative issues, not necessarily technological barriers (e.g., Dirr, 1999a; NASPA, 2000; Shea & Armitage, 2003).

Although technology plays a key role, indeed that is the easy part. This progression really reflects an enormous shift in the way institutions have traditionally operated and there is a plethora of policy, turf, financial, and cultural issues to address with each advance. (Shea & Armitage, 2003)

Implications

While adding new elements to the literature on student services for distance learners and raising issues for further discussion, the findings of this study also have implications for practice in distance education and in student affairs. However, limitations must again be acknowledged. I utilized qualitative methods for an in-depth exploration of the types of student services being provided to distance learners and methods used to provide them; my intent was not to generate hypotheses or to examine a particular outcome. In addition, the small sample size limits generalizability to other programs; the reader will have to determine applicability of the themes and issues that emerged in the findings. Finally, while the majority of practitioners in these exemplary programs were not student affairs professionals and none of the programs were housed in

a students affairs unit, this study was written from a student affairs perspective with a student affairs audience in mind. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide professionals in both fields with information applicable to everyday practice.

First, campus-based student affairs units have not taken an active role in supporting distance learners. As a result, distance education staffs have had to design services to address student needs. This can result in a duplication of effort and inefficient use of resources. Additionally, most professionals working in distance learning do not have formal training in student development – even when they are responsible for providing student services. Currently, the services provided to distance learners reflect a consumer philosophy rather than a developmental one, and the services espoused by student affairs as being important in enhancing development are those that are least likely to be provided from a distance. Thus, to foster relationships and perhaps improve service to all students, professionals from both units should engage in cross-training to share expertise. As the experts on student development, student affairs professionals could share their knowledge about developmental processes and the impact/outcomes of student participation in particular services/activities. Alternately, as the experts in technology, the distance learning professionals could share their expertise on new technological advances and how to utilize them to offer innovative ways to serve students.

Second, questions about student characteristics and completion and retention rates of distance learners have been raised in this study and in other literature (NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999). Since the campus-based units are generally responsible for admissions and registrar functions, student affairs staff could better utilize database systems to collect and track this data and share it with distance program staffs.

Third, the increase in numbers of traditional campus-based students enrolling in online education courses is creating a more diverse distance learning population. Campus-based students are estimated to comprise 80% of enrollment in e-learning (Shea & Armitage, 2003), and participants in this study reported increasing numbers of traditional students enrolling in their programs. Students enrolling in these courses may miss out on the on-campus intentional interventions and personal interactions shown to be essential to student development. Alternatively, they may demand these services, but offered through the same methods as the courses – online. If an important outcome of participating in on-campus activities is to assist students in reaching higher stages of development, similar activities should be created that can be accessed from a distance. Coupled with this is the interest by distance learners to have access to online services comparable to campus-based services. The speed with which technology is advancing has broken down some of the barriers cited in order to justify not providing services such as personal and career counseling. Web design continues to develop, allowing for increasing interactivity, and video-conferencing allows for face-to-face interaction from a distance. Collaborative efforts can be made to experiment with these methods and serve both campus-based and distance students. Student affairs professionals could provide distance learning professionals with information generally presented in face-to-face interactions, such as materials for study strategies or resume writing workshops. Distance learning professionals could use this information to create interactive online quizzes or even synchronous online workshops utilizing chat.

Fourth, when serving distance learners, student services encompass a much broader view than may exist on a traditional campus. There is a blurring between student

and academic components as evidenced by the WCET (2000) and CAS (2000) guidelines. Additionally, when discussing essential services, participants in this study made no distinction between typical student affairs services like career services and advising, and services generally seen outside of the realm of student affairs, such as library services and technical support. Generalist student service positions, which blur these functions, are common in distance learning. The *Beyond the Administrative Core* project (Shea & Armitage, 2003) includes a section on de-jobbing that discusses structural issues and job re-engineering and how this can result in satisfied students. In addition, more advanced web design, such as portals, allows for the creation of services from the student viewpoint; the functional area breakdowns typical in a campus-based setting may be too restrictive in an online setting, so presenting cross-functional information would make more sense. Advancing technology requires a re-conceptualization of what it means to serve students. G. Kleeman (personal communication, March 4, 2003) suggests that a paradigm shift to thinking horizontally instead of vertically is called for to appropriately serve students in an online environment:

Instead of thinking in the vertical silos you have to think horizontally across the organization and you need to start thinking about presenting web services not as student affairs, or not as financial aid, but as the University of XYZ.

Finally, providing services for an online population of students is a potential new field for student affairs professionals. As the distance education enterprise continues to grow, student service professionals will be in higher demand. Student affairs preparation programs and professional organizations need to become better equipped to be able to provide training and knowledge to prepare graduate students and professionals to succeed in student service positions in distance learning. A recent survey of student affairs

preparation programs found that 89% did not have a written goal statement about the inclusion of technology in the curriculum (Bowman & Cuyjet, 1999), and leading professional organizations have barely scratched the surface in addressing these issues. Undoubtedly, most student affairs practitioners entered the field because they enjoy being on a college campus and working face-to-face with students. However, new technologies allow for options to serve students in comparable but more innovative ways.

Future Research

The findings from this research provide useful insights into services that can be provided to distance learners to enrich their educational experiences and also suggest appropriate methods to provide these services. However, the research could be expanded in a variety of ways. First, additional research needs to be conducted involving a broader sample to be able to attribute more generalizability. Dirr's comprehensive study of service provision, published in 1999, could be replicated to determine if additional programs mirror the programs selected for this study in providing a comprehensive suite of services, and to examine changes in service levels after several years (Dirr, 1999b). A similar study could also be conducted utilizing programs in dual-mode and for-profit ventures to examine similarities and differences in service provision at various types of institutions. Second, including student input could add to this study to gain a better understanding of student perceptions of essential services and how they best like services to be provided. Third, this study focused on distance learning programs identified as providing exemplary student services; a similar study could be conducted, but examining student affairs divisions that are instrumental in assisting distance learning programs in providing services. This could serve to better examine the relationship between the two

units and to determine how various institutional issues that emerged in this study, such as organizational structure, funding, and student policies, might be addressed at such institutions. Fourth, while this study examined services as a comprehensive whole, research into specific service areas could be undertaken to determine the best methods to provide a particular service.

In addition, two issues emerged that warrant further research. Participants disagreed on the necessity of providing services to distance learners 24x7. Exploration of the value of such coverage is necessary and what services should be covered at this level could add to the literature. Also, studies to examine the quality of various services that have been outsourced could help programs make appropriate outsourcing decisions.

Furthermore, a relatively untouched area of research is the examination of developmental issues in an online learning environment. Presumably because distance learners have not generally fit the mold of the traditional student, the literature has yet to address the theoretical aspects. However, more and more traditional students are engaging in online education, so an exploration of how student development theories flush out in an online environment can be initiated. What is the impact of an online experience previously only available in a face-to-face experience? Are there different ways students process information and gain knowledge? How can environmental factors and the impact of online interactions be assessed? If one of the goals of student affairs is to foster positive development of students, then the exploration of the impact of the online student experience is necessary.

Though two major student affairs documents (NASPA, 2000; Upcraft & Terenzini, 1999) propose a need to identify the characteristics of distance learners, the

distance learning literature identifies the “typical” student as generally 25 or older, with a job, and some previous college experience. However, the literature is also beginning to identify a trend of more traditional students engaging in distance learning, especially in online learning. The findings of this study suggest that both kinds of students are enrolled in online courses: the majority of students fit the typical characteristics of a distance learner, but the participants noted that there has been a recent increase in traditional student enrollment. Thus, identifying and classifying these students may not be an issue; the more important question may be what do distance learners want and expect from the college experience?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the findings of the study in terms of existing literature and potential implications, and also offered recommendations for practice and future research. Considerations of the issues outlined in this study can assist professionals in determining service provision for distance learners and hopefully lead to the design of efficient and effective services that will enrich distance learners’ educational experiences and potentially impact their success.

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APPENDIX A

WCET GUIDE TO DEVELOPING ONLINE STUDENT SERVICES

Full html document available at:

<http://www.wcet.info/resources/publications/guide/guide.htm>

Full pdf document (38 pages) available at:

<http://www.wcet.info/resources/publications/guide1003/guide.pdf>

Introduction: About the “Guide to Developing Online Student Services”

The Guide is designed to help higher education institutions develop effective online approaches to providing student support services. Based on reviews of hundreds of institutional Web sites undertaken for a Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project on student services for distance learners, the Guide provides:

- General tips for designing effective online student services
- Brief discussions on a range of student support services, especially the needs of online and distant learners; and
- Guidelines for basic good practice in delivering these services via the Internet.

This Guide, like the project from which it has emerged, expands the traditional definition of student services to include other support services that directly affect the student's learning experience, such as the library, bookstore, and support for using instructional technologies.

Over the past several years there has been a growing use of Internet technologies to serve students both off and on campus. While institutions previously had tended to

neglect student services in their rush to develop and deliver instruction online, they have recently begun to pay attention to the need to provide services, as well as courses and programs, in this form. Colleges and universities are increasingly recognizing the need to develop Web-based, anywhere, anytime, access to traditional student services, but they often need help in envisioning what services to provide and how to design them. For this reason, this Guide focuses specifically on how to provide student services via the Internet.

The Guide will remain on the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications' Web page for one year only—from October, 2000 to September, 2001. This decision was made because of the impossibility of ensuring that the selected examples will remain current over a longer period of time.

Are Online Services Only for Distance Learners?

No, the online services addressed here are not limited to use by distance learners. However, the Guide is based on the assumption that an institution should design its online services to be available to a student for whom a trip to campus is not feasible. If a student has sought the anywhere, anytime convenience offered by online courses and programs, he or she should not have to travel to campus for administrative or other support services. In many instances, colleges and universities have found that online services developed specifically to serve distance learners have been requested and widely used by on-campus learners as well. In today's technology-infused learning environment, delivering student services via the Internet benefits both on- and off-campus students.

The Western Cooperative's Student Services Project

This Guide is the final product of a three-year project of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications entitled “Putting Principles into Practice: Promoting Effective Support Services for Students in Distance Education Programs.” The project has focused on improving student services (defined broadly) for distance learners. Supported by the U. S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), project activities have included:

1. Surveying colleges and universities that are accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and the two divisions of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges to determine how they provide student services at a distance
2. Identifying, through results of the written survey, follow-up phone interviews, and reviews of Web sites, some exemplary practices in serving students at a distance
3. Disseminating information on providing student services at a distance
4. Brokering consulting services and technical assistance from those at institutions that have developed a strong approach to serving students at a distance to administrators at other colleges and universities who would like assistance in improving their own services.

The project identified a number of institutions that have developed successful approaches to providing some services at a distance. Successful methods vary from site-based approaches to the use of a variety of technologies, including automated phone information systems, the Internet, toll-free phone lines, CD-ROMs, desktop video, and streaming video.

The "Putting Principles into Practice" project, which created this document, has ended. However, there is a successor project, ["Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-based Student Services for Online Learners."](#) This project continues to examine institutional implementations of online student services. For more information, contact Pat Shea (pshea@wiche.edu) or Erica Henningsen (ehenningsen@wiche.edu).

How Example Web Pages Were Selected

The example Web pages in this Guide were chosen from among institutions in the West and Midwest that responded to a 1997 Western Cooperative survey on services for distance learners. (The survey was co-sponsored by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and the senior and junior divisions of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.) Limiting the examples based on this criterion has made it possible to highlight a variety of good practices identified through the Western Cooperative's student services project. It has also meant, on the other hand, that some institutions that are currently leaders in providing effective services via the Internet are not included among the good practice exemplars.

Featured here are good practices. It is important to recognize that they are not necessarily the best practices in the country designed to deliver student services via the Internet. Good practice exemplars presented here range from the provision of basic, necessary information to highly interactive web-enabled processes. The latter approach is clearly preferable in terms of serving students, but this Guide is also intended to assist the many institutions that are just beginning to put services online and in need of basic guidance.

Examples have been selected from large and small, public and private, two- and four-year colleges, and comprehensive universities. The effort has been to highlight good practices of as many institutions as possible among those included in our original study. Some examples are from colleges and universities that exhibit highly sophisticated approaches to online services, and others are from schools that were selected only to demonstrate basic elements of good practice in the specific service aspect under discussion. Some have developed their Internet-based services themselves, while others have relied on products marketed by for-profit companies.

The student support services addressed here include the most common student services provided for on-campus students as well as some additional services likely to be useful to those studying online or off-campus. There is no attempt to ensure that the Guide covers *all* services that might be available on campus. The following services are covered in the Guide:

- Information for Prospective Students
- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Registration
- Orientation Services
- Academic Advising
- Technical Support
- Career Services
- Library Services
- Services for Students with Disabilities

- Personal Counseling
- Instructional Support and Tutoring
- Bookstore
- Services to Promote a Sense of Community

What this Document Is Designed To Do

Colleges and universities are at such different points in their development of such services that it is difficult to provide general guidance on designing online student services. While some schools are just beginning to put static information about available services on the Web, others now provide flexible, self-service options to their students, and still other schools are now moving toward a complete software model of the institution. This Guide is intended to help institutions that are at any stage of this continuum, but it may be especially useful to those that are just beginning to deliver services online.

The final section, “Two Comprehensive Web-Based Student Services Systems,” highlights examples of institutions that are making an important shift from a “provider” perspective to a “customer-centered” orientation in online service provision. The institutions featured in this section are also moving beyond the basic, but necessary, stage of using the Web only to provide student services *information* and *electronic forms*. Instead, these schools are creating decision support systems that offer students a variety of opportunities for self-help and customize services for individual students.

A number of software companies are now developing products that assist institutions in making this significant transition. In fact, new commercial ventures are springing up almost weekly. This Guide makes no attempt to identify the packages

available commercially nor does it imply an endorsement of any specific products. Each institution should research carefully whether it makes more sense to contract with a vendor to develop any or all of its online services or to do so on its own.

Each bulleted point under every student service category is illustrated by a single Web page. Note that this is not a live link to the site, but a link to cached version of the Web page at a point in time. This was done to preserve the page as an example. To get a better idea of how the Web page actually functions and a better sense of the services provided on the site, readers should go to the Internet and view the page in its original format. You can link to the original pages by going to the "Sites Selected as Examples" section of this document and selecting the "Alphabetical List with URL's."

Although services are addressed one by one in separate sections in this Guide, the goal of Internet-based, student-centered service provision should be to create cross-process design that automatically links related functions. The traditional silos that tend to separate services from one another should be no more the ruling organizational structure on the Web than in models for the effective provision of student-centered services on campus.

In summary:

- This Guide emphasizes basic good practice guidelines. It points to what an institution's Web page should, at a minimum, provide for each specific support service.
- The heading "Features to Consider" under most individual service discussions highlights either interesting options or recommended elements for institutions to

consider as they move to improve their provision of student services in an online environment.

- The section on "Two Comprehensive Web-Based Student Services Systems " points to examples of a range of online services provided by two institutions--one in the West and the other in the Midwest.

It is also important to note that this document addresses only the front-end Web or Internet user interface; it does not discuss database design or structure or other behind-the-scenes technology. In addition, the Guide does not endorse any specific software vendor's products. Technical solutions are up to individual institutions or to any commercial vendor with which the institution might choose to contract. This Guide simply describes the desired end result from a student's--or prospective student's--perspective.

Some Tips for Designing Web-Based Student Services

(1) Feature online and distance learning opportunities prominently on your home page.

Even if your institution's distance learning or online programs are located administratively under a separate division, such as Continuing or Distance Education, it is important to provide a clear and direct link on the institution's home page. Many colleges and universities neglect to display these offerings prominently—although it is crucial to do so both from a marketing perspective and from the perspective of users seeking distance and online learning opportunities.

(2) Be consistent in design throughout the site. Create guidelines to ensure that all parts of your site have the same look and feel. Follow existing recommendations for effective Web site design, many of which are themselves available on the Web.

- (3) *Remember to create links to and from other relevant pages throughout your institution's Web site.* Pasting a brochure on the Web or putting information online in the same form it appears on print creates isolated pieces of information rather than integration of services. Think of ways to integrate services by linking from one to another whenever it makes sense, and place the links where users will be sure to see them. It is important to recognize the ways in which services are intertwined and to facilitate related transactions. Ideally, for example, a student ought to be able to register, apply for financial aid, and pay tuition and fees as part of the same transaction.
- (4) *Keep your focus on meeting students' needs.* Although today's Internet tools make possible a variety of near-dazzling effects, remember to develop your site with your students' needs at the forefront of your design.
- (5) *Provide quick access to "a real person" on every page.* Ensure that students can contact and receive help from someone if they cannot answer all their own questions through your online information and services. Provide contact information (phone numbers, fax number, and e-mail address). Make it a required policy to answer all such queries within a limited time frame that is clearly stated.
- (6) *Use terms that students understand.* Terms such as "matriculation," "Bursar's Office," and financial aid terminology are often confusing to students. Even if your institution uses these standard terms, try to find other language to help students navigate your site easily.
- (7) *Link to external sites when they would be helpful.* Investigate external resources that are already available via the Web and provide links to them when it is more effective

to do so than to develop original material for your site. There are many excellent resources already available via the Internet; link to these rather than spending resources to duplicate what they provide.

(8) Make services user-oriented and process-driven rather than provider-oriented.

Consider the perspective of all potential users (e.g., prospective students, current students, faculty, staff, alumni, and site visitors) and provide entry points for each. In addition, provide direct access on the opening page to important functions and services.

(9) Enable students to do as much business online as possible. Empower students to initiate and complete many transactions themselves.

(10) Be sure that your Web pages are themselves accessible to users with disabilities.

Follow the ([World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\) guidelines](#)).

APPENDIX B

CAS GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Part 14. Educational Support Services

The required program of distributed educational services must include at least the following:

Part 14.A Information for Prospective Students

Information must be provided in anticipation that the prospective distance student will need to make decisions about whether to undertake study in this form.

This information must include the following . . .

Subpart 14.AA *Pre-admission*. Information must be no less comprehensive than that available to students during campus visits prior to admission. Information about what it is like to be a distance learner in general, and what it is like to be a distance learner specifically at the institution offering the services, must be accessible and effectively communicated.

Web pages may be a good vehicle for making information available to distance learners.

Subpart 14.AB *Enrollment*. Certain materials and processes must be described and provided through other suitable and readily accessible formats.

Among these may be the catalog, academic advising, registration, the student handbook, and information related to services provided specifically for, and expectations of, distance learners.

Policies applicable to all students, such as the academic dishonesty policy and other information mandated by law, must be distributed and include information concerning how the institution manages such issues for students studying via distance education.

Subpart 14.AC *Academic Program Information*. Prospective students must have access to full descriptive materials about all courses and programs. Requirements of students, including all course prerequisites and technical competence and equipment, must be stated clearly.

Information should:

- Be easily identified and highly visible and clearly organized on web pages
- Provide a credible presentation of the institution and its distance learning programs
- Provide prospective students with an opportunity to assess their personal readiness for distance learning

- Provide students the tools to assess their hardware and software requirements and capabilities
- Include costs, transferability, course sequencing, and equipment requirements; and,
- Contact sources

14.B Admission

Applications for admission must be provided in a manner that is practical and that can be completed without undue assistance. These applications must be processed in a manner equitable with that of resident students. Application and admission counseling must be made available to distance learners.

The admission process should be described in a detailed, step-by-step fashion. Admission requirements should be specified clearly. Criteria used in admission decisions should be specified clearly. Applications should be provided in several forms (e.g., printed, online), along with clear instructions. Deadlines should be specific and explicit.

14.C Financial Aid

Information about financial aid must be provided to distance students and the application process must be described clearly. Eligibility requirements must be specifically outlined including all institutional financial aid policies. Deadlines for application for financial aid must be clearly stated. Student enrollment in multiple institutions must be recognized and applications for financial aid properly administered.

Distance students applying for financial aid should be provided . . .

- General information about financial aid
- Clearly described types of financial aid available
- Specified costs of attendance
- Information about average percent of financial need met
- Other relevant forms
- Online information when appropriate, but also available in print form

14.D Registration

Distance students must be provided registration services for each new term or course in a clear, timely, and user-friendly manner. Registration services must accommodate students enrolled in courses and programs taught asynchronously.

Registration policies and process should be clearly described. Alternative registration methods (e.g., online, print, fax, walk-in) should be identified and provided.

14.E Orientation Services

Orientation to the institution and to the processes of learning required of new distance students must be offered.

The orientation program should be interactive. As with the delivery of instructional services, orientation may employ a variety of methods of communication and should be accessible. The orientation process should be interactive and must provide opportunities for student-to-student where possible and faculty (or other staff) member-to-student exchanges. Any qualified member of the faculty or staff may deliver this interactive orientation.

All requirements for new distance students must be specified in the orientation program. All services available to new students must be specified.

Prospective learners should be provided a sense of the nature of distance learning along with tips for success.

Academic integrity and related policy issues must be covered in orientation. All applicable student codes must be communicated.

14.F Academic Advising

Academic advising must be readily available throughout the academic year and convenient to both students and advisors.

The academic advising program developed for distance students should be designed around their particular needs.

Advising services must be commensurate with services provided to on campus students in course selection and registration. Additional services to assist students in goal setting and educational and life planning must be provided as needed.

The academic advising services should include . . .

- One-on-one access to advisors by phone, Internet, or other communication tools
- All general education and major requirements
- Self-help pointers to educational planning and course selection
- Articulation information between programs and institutions
- Advising guidelines, such as curriculum guides
- Access to personal academic records (e.g., courses taken and completed, grades, GPA)

14.G Technical Support The institution must provide information concerning the equipment, software, and type of Internet service provider students will need to participate fully in their courses and programs.

The institution must take steps to insure that students have the technical skills necessary to participate fully in the academic program and must provide an introduction to the specific applications students will need. Technical support must be available at times convenient to the students enrolled in distance education courses and programs.

Technical support should include . . .

- Eligibility for technical support
- Tutorials for dealing with common technical difficulties
- Self-help tools
- A help line/help service

14.H Career Services

Career services must be provided for distance students appropriate to their needs. Their eligibility to receive them must be made clear.

Information about career service processes should be accessible to all students in a form consistent with the format of interaction.

These services may include, but are not limited to, self-exploration, self-assessment, goal setting, decision-making, educational planning, career planning, career information, co-op education, and job search services. Self-help tools for career decision-making and on-line searches for positions should be provided.

Opportunities for experiential learning, such as internships, service learning, cooperative education, and part-time jobs, should be effectively marketed and accessible for distance learners.

14.I Library Service

The institution must provide an orientation to library services, which includes effective on-line search strategies geared to the programs of study offered at a distance. Service expectations must be defined.

Access to reference materials, periodicals, and books needed to fulfill course requirements must be readily available. Courses with unique or significant needs for library access must provide this information as part of the introduction to the course. Reference services must be available to individual students.

Library services should include ...

- Reference support
- Convenient access to document delivery services
- Online tutorials on conducting library research
- Procedures that allow students to obtain necessary books and materials within a reasonable time period should be operable.

14.J Services for Students with Disabilities

Accessible services to distance students with disabilities must be provided. The institution's policies concerning reasonable and appropriate accommodations must be provided to the student.

Web pages should conform to World Wide Web (W3C) Content Accessibility Guidelines that explain how to make web pages content accessible to people with disabilities. These guidelines emphasize the importance of providing text equivalents of non-text content such as images, pre-recorded audio, and video.

Assistance in the availability and use of assistive technology must be provided.

14.K Personal Counseling

Counseling services essential to assist distance students to achieve their goals must be provided.

Reasonable efforts should be made to extend comparable counseling services to distance education students. Counseling services, especially in their traditional forms that require face-to-face interaction, cannot be delivered in most distance education formats; however, services that effectively use electronic technologies should be offered when appropriate.

Counseling services for distance education students must be offered in accordance with applicable ethical standards, including ethical guidelines and standards for practice for counseling online. Counselors must develop or adopt ethical standards for their services. These counseling services should include ...

- Descriptions of available counseling services

- for those experiencing a mental health crisis, contact with a personal counselor on campus, referrals to local emergency care resources, and phone numbers for crisis hotlines
- Self-help tools, including online links to appropriate Internet sites and information about finding local referrals and assistance.

14.L Academic Support Services

Information concerning academic support services must be made available.

Distance Learning students should have opportunities for developing learning strategies and getting assistance with content comprehension. Tutoring services, supplemental instruction, and other academic support services should be available to all distance education students. These services should conform to the CAS Standards for Learning Assistance Programs in terms of their quality.

14.M Instructional Materials

Convenient delivery of instructional materials must be provided to all distance students. Where campus bookstores are available, their services should include ...

- Merchandise displayed visually
- Relevant policies about bookstore operations
- Online methods for locating course textbooks and materials
- Alternative methods for ordering books and supplies.

14.N Promoting Identity with the Institution

Distance learners must be provided a reasonable opportunity to connect with other students and their instructors. Means of regular communication among students and their instructors must be provided.

Regular communication with distance learners, such as in newsletters, should be offered.

Frequent announcements to distance learners through such means as web pages should be provided. Efforts to create virtual communities among distance learners should be made, when appropriate.

Creative use of electronic or other messages that would likely promote an enhanced sense of community such as bulletin boards, special events, institutional news briefs, and opportunities in special interest groups or projects may be provided.

14.O Other Student Services

Additional student services deemed to be necessary or appropriate to the circumstances of each institution's distance education programs must be provided.

Traditional campus services such as leadership development programs and housing services may not be necessarily appropriate or necessary to distance students. Where indicated, however, they should be provided in forms equivalent to those on campus.

Information about health and wellness programs should be made available to distance education students. Referrals to local health-care providers and prescriptions by mail may be examples of services to be provided.

Information about student activities, including organizations, leisure and recreational activities, and cultural and entertainment events may be provided to distance education students when possible.

APPENDIX C

E-MAIL TO “EXPERTS” REQUESTING CONTACT INFORMATION OF STAFF

MEMBERS INVOLVED WITH EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS

Dear (name):

Through a literature review and recommendations from education professionals, you have been identified as a knowledgeable person or expert in the area of student services for distance learners. I am currently designing my dissertation prospectus on this topic. The design is qualitative and I plan to interview staff members who are currently working at institutions that provide exemplar out-of-class support services for distance learners (especially online services).

I would be very appreciative if you would identify practitioners who have been instrumental in the design, implementation, and/or maintenance of student services for distance learners and could e-mail me their contact information. If you know of anyone else who might be able to assist in identifying potential research participants, please let me know that too! I will collect suggestions from a group of experts and ask the practitioners who are recommended by at least two to participate in the study.

The goal of this study is to examine the structure and process of exemplar programs to develop practical guidelines for administrators wishing to initiate or enhance services for their students. For the purposes of this study, student support services describe a variety of non-academic interactions that the student has with an institution. Exemplar or model programs will be those that provide multiple student services to distance learners beyond the more common class registration, collection of fees, and providing applications for admissions or financial aid. Some of the services that exemplary programs might offer could include counseling, community development, career services, tutorial assistance, or student activities.

Thank you for your time. Please inform me if you would like results of this study, and I will gladly send you a copy once the project is complete.

Sincerely,

Stephanie R. Marsh
Department of Counseling and Human Development
University of Georgia

APPENDIX D

E-MAIL REQUESTING PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

Dear (name):

You have been identified by a group of experts as being a professional who has extensive experience in the area of student services for distance learners and as currently working in a program known for its exemplar out-of-class services for distance students. My dissertation is on this topic and I would like to invite you to serve as a participant in the research.

If you agree to participate, your participation will be organized around your schedule and should not require more than an hour or two. Participation will entail completion of a short questionnaire about your background and the services your institution provides. You will also be asked to participate in a telephone interview and perhaps a follow-up telephone call or e-mail correspondence for clarification. If you so request, your identity and the identity of your institution can be held confidential. Otherwise, those identifications will be included in the dissertation.

The goal of this research is to examine the structure and process of developing and administering student support services for distance learners. I am also interested in the practicalities of developing programs and in learning about successes and shortfalls. Ultimately, I propose to develop a practical guide for administrators wishing to initiate or enhance services for their distance learners.

Please check one and reply via e-mail to srm@uga.edu:

- ☐ I agree to participate in your study.
- ☐ I decline to participate in your study.

Thank you so much and I look forward to receiving your response.

Stephanie R. Marsh
Department of Counseling and Human Development
University of Georgia

APPENDIX E

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in the research “Student Support Services for Distance Learners” conducted by Stephanie Marsh from the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Merrily Dunn (706) 542-1812. I understand I do not have to participate. I can stop participating without reason or penalty. I can have the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of the study is to address a gap in the literature by providing practical examples and models to guide institutions in the creation and provision of student services for distance learners.

I will not benefit directly from this research. However, my participation in this research may lead to information that could assist institutions in improving their services or creating new services for distance learners.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to participate in an audio-taped phone interview planned to fit my schedule, and possibly a follow-up phone interview or e-mail correspondence for clarification. My participation should require approximately an hour.

No discomforts or stresses are expected. No risks are expected.

I have the right to review/edit the audio-tape of my interview. The researcher will have access to this tape and it will be erased upon completion of the project.

My identity and the results of this participation will be made public.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research and can be reached at (706) 542-3565 or srm@uga.edu.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I will be sent a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____ Signature of Participant	_____ Date	_____ Signature of Investigator	_____ Date
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For questions or problems about your rights please call or write: Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- Please describe your experience with distance learning and student support services.
- What is the history of distance learning at your institution? What about online learning?
 - Probes: how long been providing? types of distance learning?
- Stats:
 - In the past academic year, how many sections of undergraduate online courses were offered? Graduate courses?
 - About how many students were registered for an online course in the past year?
 - What percentage of these students are enrolled in a degree program?
 - Of this percentage, how many plan to complete most or all of their degree online?
 - Can you describe some general characteristics of students choosing to study online? (e.g., age, gender, residency, part/full time)
- Please describe the organizational structure of distance learning. How do student support services fit in?

- Probes: funding sources; who is responsible; how the work gets done; where it's housed; experience level of staff
- How are services provided to distance students?
 - Probe: Were existing services “tweaked” or were new services created (especially online services)? Have there been any completely new services created based on distance learners needs?
- Please describe usage patterns.
 - Probes: what services do students most utilize? request? what *hasn't* worked?
- Did you follow any particular model when creating your services?
- What types of differences have you noticed between students who complete courses or programs and those who do not?
 - Probe: Any thoughts on drop-outs? What could be done to increase retention?
- Anything you would like to add that we haven't touched on?

APPENDIX G

WEBSITE ANALYSIS GRID

Services in WCET Guide	WC	TESC	UTTC	DDP	WSU Online
Information for Prospective Students	Degrees/Certificates ; About Distance Ed; Student Services; News	Link for Prospective Students on Index	Overview; Programs/Degrees on Index	Link for “Prospective Students” on Index	Getting Started on Index ; course offerings
Admissions	Degrees & Certificates > listing – admissions info under each program and Apply Now	Prospective Students > Programs & Application Online application	Student Services > Admissions, Registration, and Course Access	Link on Index (Apply Now) links to WSU Admissions & Prospective Students > Get More Info > DDP info then link to WSU Admissions (same application procedure as on-campus students)	Considering Attending? > WSU campus info / campus admissions

Financial Aid	F/A Information link on Index (and every page)	Current Students > F/A Packet Prospective Student > Tuition & Fees > F/A	Student Services > F/A > info on consortium agreement, links to campus offices and DL F/A reps	DDP handbook & FAQ's then apply through WSU F/A office <F/A staff member designated for DL's; most F/A staff can help>	Difficult to find Online Degrees/Courses > F/A (F/A info) Getting Started > FAQ's > F/A Issues (but just gives tuition and costs)
Registration	For WC Students > Register (online, print, phone)	Current Students > Register	Student Services > Admissions, Registration, and Course Access	DDP FAQ's & directions MyDDP <links into WSU mainframe to register?> also online registration form for first time DDP'ers	Getting Started > Registration Policies
Orientation Services	Student Services > Orientation to Student Resources What to Look for in an Online University WC101 (what it's like to study online)	None found (~Enrollment Info; About Us)	Nothing formal pdf Student Services brochure; UTTC Fact Book; UTTC Learning Environment; Overview > FAQ's (with self-assessment test)	Informal online – Is DL for You? DDP Quiz	Informal Student Services > Advice & What Makes a Successful Online Student “Getting Started” CD by mail (instructions and browser software)

Academic Advising	Student Services > Academic Advising “self advising” through eLion	Current Students > Contacts > toll free # or e-mail or appointments OR Contacts >	Programs/Degrees > list > of programs > choose program > program info and links to institutional contacts (advisors)	Difficult to find Prospective Students > Get More Info > Info & Advising) 4 advisors listed under staff; advising registration holds in FAQ’s	Student Services OR Online Services > Advising Center
Technical Support	Student Services > Technical Support (phone and online chat M-F till midnight; self help on the web with FAQ’s)	Current Students > Contacts > Technical Center (phone & e-mail)	Link to Technical Support on Index (FAQ’s, contact info)	Help > SCS Help	Knowledge Base on Index (24x7 access to technical support – link to chat) Getting Started > FAQ’s (several about technical issues)
Career Services	Student Services > Career Services Career Resources through academic program sites	Difficult to find Alumni & Friends > Alumni Services > DBM Career Services	Difficult to find Student Services > resource page > links	Difficult to find Student Gov’t > Resources > Career Services (½ time career counselor paid by SGA)	Student Services OR Online Services > Career Services (links and “ask a counselor” form

Library Services	Student Services > Library Resources	Current Students > NJ state library system	Student Services > Digital Library > Library Service (UTTC Digital Library & links to UT campus libraries)	Link on Index (Distance Library Services)	Link to Library from Index
Services for Students with Disabilities	Accommodation link on Index (lists phone # and e-mail and links to Independent Learners' Guide – info on disability services) (Disability Services link not working)	Difficult to find About Us > Accreditation (at end) Students with Disabilities (gives phone/TTY #)	Student Services > gives contact info	Link on Index (Accessibility)	Not linked to campus office?
Personal Counseling	Not found	None found	Not found	Student Gov't > Resources > Counseling/FAQ's/ Self-Help	None listed – not linked to campus office

Instructional Support and Tutoring	Not found	None found	Student Services > Free Online Tutoring > ST.com	Learning Centers across the state Difficult to find Table of Contents / What's New > Tutoring Student Gov't > Resources > OWL	Student Services OR Online Services > Online Tutoring (link doesn't work)
Bookstore	For WC Students > MBS Direct	Current Students > Textbook Swap & MBS Direct	Student Services > Bookstores > links to UT campus stores and commercial stores	Courses > Course Basics > Course Materials > SBS	Link to WSU Bookstore on Index
Services to Promote Sense of Community	Community Profile; Our Community; Campus News on Index	Moderated Discussions; Alumni Affinity Groups	UT4Me Newsletter; Student Enrichment Program in Bachelor's completion program; Outstanding UTTC student award	Student Government (student lounge, study groups, mentor program, committee info, alumni assoc); newsletter	Links to campus but none specifically for WSU Online