Proposed Title: Exploration of Examples and Research of Services for Online Students

Abstract:

The convenience and popularity of online programs in higher education have been expanding and contribute to increased demand for online student services and resources. Resources and services are necessary for online students' successful registration for courses, access to academic services and support, attainment of learning objectives of courses and programs, and completion of academic programs. This review of research and examples of services around the world provides institutions of higher education with information on how to improve and increase the availability of services for students enrolled in online programs. In turn, institutions will have the tools to address the evolving issue of attrition rates. This review of literature addresses the need for analysis of services for students enrolled in online programs.

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Exploration of Examples and Research of Services for Online Students

The convenience and popularity of online education have been expanding and contribute to increased demand for online student services. These services are necessary for students' successful registration for courses, access to academic services and support, and completion of academic programs. A review of exemplary practices of online services around the world can improve and increase availability of services for students enrolled in online programs. This review of literature addresses the need for analysis, reviews existing literature and research on the topic and evaluates instances of exemplary and innovative offerings of services for students enrolled in online programs.

Growing Online Student Population and Online Programs

In recent years, the total enrollment of post-secondary courses has declined but registration in online offerings has increased. According to recent federal data released in the Babson Survey Research Group's report in 2018, undergraduate students who enrolled in at least one online course increased 5.6 percent in fall of 2016 from fall of 2015; the year of 2016 is the 14th consecutive year which online enrollments have seen growth ("Grade Increase," 2018). Due to growing interest and demand for online courses, there must be adequate and accessible services available to online learners. As more programs become offered online, prospective students have many online programs to choose from. The technology-driven essence of online programs allows students to select programs from local institutions or from programs of other states, regions, or countries (Gray, 2013). Highland Community College in Kansas experienced exponential enrollment growth in its online courses. This institution attributes its expansion to several factors including the ease of use of online resources and accessible online services such as online academic advisors (Crowder, 2010).

Retention of Students

Retention of students, in all modalities of instruction, is a common concern of educational institutions. Attrition rates can be linked to the quality of education, thus, if attrition rates are high, it may damage the reputation of an institution (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Retention is also a concern among the student population. If a student drops from a course or program, he or she loses confidence in his or her ability to complete the academic program in addition to the financial loss of the tuition and fees and time spent working on coursework (Tinto, 2006). The quality of the educational experience for online learners is equally as important for students who are enrolled in traditional face-to-face courses and programs.

When students are physically present on campus, institutions have more opportunities to address their concerns as it is easier to monitor students' needs. Therefore, it is important for institutions to focus on several areas for online students in order to mitigate retention concerns. Academic institutions must: (1) develop and implement institutional policies and requirements for support services for new undergraduate online learners; (2) provide resources and support for low-performing online learners enrolled in courses which require higher-order or analytical applications; (3) utilize analytics to examine withdrawal, drop and failure rates among various demographics of the students population; and (4) connect with online learners once they withdraw, drop or fail a course in order to address the causes of such actions (Cochran, et al., 2014, p.46).

It is incumbent upon institutions to enforce policies for online learners in a way that is accessible to the students' physical needs and lifestyles. Due to the nature of the online courses and programs and their mode of instruction, individuals who are required to contact students based on these strategies and policies would need to utilize online communication methods. The

retention of students enrolled in online courses and programs is affected by the institutional support to students. Research has found that online students require services and support from the institution for admissions, registration, tutoring, programs and policies (Gaytan, 2013). Gaytan (2013) explains that "administrators must understand that online students must have effective and efficient online support services, such as online course registration, online financial aid counseling, online tutoring, online training and orientation modules, and online remediation for at-risk students" (p. 152). Ensuring that institutional departments provide services to all students, will meet the personalized academic needs of online learners.

Examples of Services for Online Learners

Library Access

Access to library resources is necessary for online learners to succeed in their courses and programs. Institutions must provide access to library resources, books, support and literature in an accessible and online format. Northern Essex Community College provides online learners with a resource website which provides them with information pertaining to accessing online resources, locating resources housed physically or virtually by the institution's library, and information on utilizing the online library databases ("Library Services for Online Learning," n.d.).

Libraries are common fixtures at academic institutions around the world. They provide a place for students to study and research, and they provide a place to concentrate with limited distractions. The benefits of accessible libraries are abundant. Research has found a positive correlation between the number of resources borrowed from libraries and students' academic success (Soria et al., 2017). Studies have also found that students relate libraries to school work and believe that they are part of a true academic experience. Libraries, as campus study spaces, foster learning behaviors important to students (Regalado & Smale, 2015).

Libraries provide students with valuable resources to support the success of their academic goals. As Soria et al. (2017) explains, "Most academic libraries feature the types of resources and materials (such as books and academic journals), study spaces, and group study rooms to support students' success and integration" (p. 9). Studies have found that students who have borrowed resources from libraries are likely to be engaged in the academic endeavors, to develop critical thinking and reading/writing skills, and take part in scholarly activities (Soria et al., 2017).

<div align="center">Technology Support</div>

Technology support services provide students with assistance and resources for the use of campus networks, academic technologies, various software applications and hardware. First-year college students may need more assistance with login credentials, information on available resources and explanations of technology policies. Students, as Eichelberger and Imler (2015) explain, "may be familiar with academic technology, but as a whole, they are not experts, and many students have significant gaps in their skills that can affect their ability to succeed in their courses" (p. 337). Technology support services and resources are needed to assist students with academic activities that require the use of technologies.

Generally, campus technology help desks are made available to students in various ways. Students are able to email support staff, to call a dedicated phone number for support, and to visit physical locations for face-to-face assistance. Help desk staff also often provide technology assistance within computer laboratories (Bulchand-Gidumal & Melian-Gonzalez, 2009). Providing students with multiple means of accessing technology support services is necessary as the use of academic technologies, software and hardware are being utilized.

Kuwait University realized a need to implement an online training platform for students to practice and develop necessary computer software application skills and technical skills. This competence is utilized throughout students' academic careers at the university. Safar (2012) explains that research indicates that online training opportunities are profitable to Kuwait University for a number of reasons including: increasing academic performance, efficiency, motivation level, productivity, and number of individuals trained and decreasing assessment anxiety for many learners/trainers (p. 439). Furthermore, Safar (2012) suggests that self-paced and standardized delivery methods of training material significantly reduces the demand for technical support and assistance which financially benefits the institution.

Kuwait University's online technology training services are capable of catering to various learning styles and preferences including visual, verbal and auditory, reflective and observational mediums and of all skill levels (Hartel, 2010). Tools such as blogging sites, one-minute paper or video assignments where students can reflect on the most valuable content learned from training sessions, and the development of digital portfolios that include skills acquired through training are examples of incorporating visual, verbal, auditory, reflective and observational exercises (Whenham, 2019). KU's efforts to increase students' information literacy skills set the stage for other universities around the world. As Safar (2012) explains, institutions of higher education should:

> implement a well-planned and defined media awareness campaign, provide faculty with training on how to implement the online training system for their students, focus on content quality, usability and instructional design methodology, and facilitate training for higher level administration for program buy-in. (p.457)

Such services assist the instructors with improving their teaching practices which will improve the chances for academic success of online learners.

Health Services

Mental health issues must be addressed for students on campus as well as for online

learners. The University of South Florida realized a need for mental-health-literacy training for

their students (Jackson, 2019). The university developed and provides an orientation for their

students and faculty; both populations are aware of the signs, symptoms, support services

available and ways to deal with others who are showing signs of having serious mental-health

issues (Jackson, 2019). Universities would be remiss to not make similar resources to online

learners who may be experiencing the same challenges. Online orientations on mental health

issues made available to online learners would ensure that institutions are serving the needs of all

learners enrolled in all academic programs while including students who are in enrolled in all

course modalities.

Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) instituted online guidance counseling services to

students, tailored to their online student population. OAU effectively researched their students'

needs and determined that an online medium was necessary to address academic areas, career

planning assistance, as well as health services and mental health counseling (Adebowale &

Popoola, 2011). OAU's online services addressed concerns of students who may have been

reluctant to seek out traditional face-to-face services. Online counseling allows for faster

progress as students and counselors are able to pinpoint the causes of issues and spend less time

socializing on unrelated topics (Ainsworth, 2004). By offering these services in an online

modality, counseling specialists are easily accessible and can help students at OAU address

personal challenges in considerable depth.

Obafemi Awolo University consulted with technical experts and counseling professionals

to effectively implement online guidance counseling services to their students. Adebowale and

Popoola (2011) researched the "availability and adequacy of human and material resources needed for effective online guidance and counseling services in the University" (p. 67). This allowed OAU to develop institutional procedures and guidelines for these services. The university's student population felt that the online services provided gave them "the opportunity to communicate freely with mental health professionals, to discuss issues that students might now want to discuss in face-to-face contact, since [there] would be greater identity protection" (Adebowale & Popoola, 2011, p. 76). OAU's approach to address the world's mental health epidemic at the local, institutional level provides for accessible professional help for online learners.

College campus healthcare clinics provide medical and behavioral health services to students. Research has found that about 1500 health services exist on college campuses in the United States (Turner, 2015). Turner (2015) explains that health services are especially necessary on college campuses as "congregate living, learning, and socializing promotes the spread of communicable illnesses, including respiratory pathogens such as mumps, meningococci, measles and many other viruses and bacteria…" (p. 536). For these reasons, health services are imperative for maintaining the well-being of all students.

Tutoring

Tutoring services available on college campuses provide academic assistance with comprehension and coursework of various disciplines for students. Monash University (MU), in Melbourne, Australia, developed an online writing resource center to assist college students with academic writing, reading, listening, speaking, grammar and test taking strategies ("Essential Skills for Academic Success," n.d.). Students enrolled in online courses benefit from the web-based resource platform's ability to conform to particular learning styles. The university's

students are able to access the resource platform and progress through the content in a guided or

self-guided path. MU's online resources center provides online learners with a venue for

accessing learning skills services, programs, and support services in order to adjust to the

institution's population of independent and online learners (Smith, 2011). Clerehan (2003)

explains that students are "not only involved in independent learning, but also interact and

socialize with other students, this promoting a sense of ownership" (p. 20). Within the online

resource center, students are able to virtually interact in innovative ways.

An impressive enhancement to Monash University's online resource center is a design

which accommodates English as a Second Language (ESL) students. MU is an institution whose

student population consists of almost half from countries outside of Australia. Clerehan (2003)

explains that "with such a large and diverse student population, systematic language and learning

support can make a difference to students' progress and grades...the mission [of the university is]

to integrate language and learning support into faculty teaching-for the benefit of all students"

(p.16). Monash University made the imperative decision to incorporate a "continuous

improvement quality cycle" in order to meet the needs of students with varying learning styles

and skills (Smith, 2011).

According to Bornstein (1993), tutors practice interpersonal skills, in order to build

relationships, by "establishing rapport, building trust, motivating students, sharing each other's

cultures, being a role model, appreciating cultural differences and understanding and coping with

student frustrations" (p. 60). Tutoring services may be provided individually or in a group

setting. Additionally, tutors address students' concerns related to "doing homework assignments,

understanding directions, increasing self-confidence, working independently, thinking critically,

understanding key ideas and expressing themselves in class" (Bornstein, 1993). Assisting

students with academic support services in various modalities meets the needs of students with various accessibility needs and learning styles.

Online tutoring platforms allow the students, who are learning English as a second language, to interact with educators who are native speakers of the English language. As Lin and Yang (2013) explain, "Incorporating computer technology into writing courses has become important in higher education, because it is widely agreed in the research literature that computer technology makes learning in online communities possible and thus facilitates foreign language teaching and learning" (p. 80). The online tutoring platform promotes a cross-cultural learning community which has proven to be an effective learning model; meaningful social interaction facilitates effective learning and development for students at all levels (Lin & Yang, 2011).

<div align="center">Offices of Specialized Services</div>

Disability support services at institutions of higher education provide accommodations to students with disabilities to ensure access to course content and university services. The number of students with disabilities has dramatically increased in recent years. According to Abreu et al., (2016) "55% [of students with disabilities] of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) sample reporting post-secondary enrollment after high-school" (p.323). Students with disabilities often utilize services for assistance with time management, organization, enhance executive functioning skills, intervening and communicating with professors and information regarding campus life (Abreu et al., 2016).

Federal law, specifically the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, prohibits institutions (and all state and local governments), to discriminate against students with disabilities. Section 505 of this act requires that institutions "are required to provide appropriate academic adjustments. These adjustments will be considered only on request and are intended to

ensure equal educational opportunity" (Katsiyannis et al., 2009, p. 37). This requirement

necessitates the existence of an Office of Specialized Services on all post-secondary school

campuses.

Accommodations for online learners, according to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

of 1973 ("Occupational Safety and Health Administration," n.d.) require that all institutions of

higher education provide students with disabilities equal access to course content by way of

application software, website design, video transcriptions, and properly formatted electronic

documents. Institutions must ensure that online courses are accessible, while instructors and

instructional designers must ensure that online courses are designed in an accessible format.

Online course facilitators must ensure that website and online course content can be navigated

with a keyboard, images have alternative text, web links have descriptive text, headings in

documents and textual content utilize hierarchical heading and captions and transcriptions are

provided for videos and audio content (Burgstahler, 2017). Resources, support and policies for

accessibility and accommodations legally must be provided by institutions' departments of

specialized services.

A professional organization, named "The Disability Advisors Working Network"

(DAWN), was developed to address the academic and career placement needs for students with

disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland (www.dawn.ie). This platform provides educators

access to valuable information regarding best practices for educating students with disabilities,

and interaction with professionals to assist with educating and placing students in careers.

According to Howlin et al. (2014), DAWN provides "a wealth of information regarding types of

disabilities and suitable accommodations but [does] not specify a framework for the completion

of needs assessments for students on work placements" (p. 559).

The Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN) in Ireland addresses and supports the need for institutions of higher education to design accessible academic content and to ensure that the educational and career placement strategies are inclusive of all students (Hargreaves et al., 2014). All institutions of higher education across the globe should strive to create and share an online platform, like DAWN, to provide access to valuable resources for students with disabilities and for communication with professionals involved with higher education and disability services. DAWN provides students with the following resources to ensure a smooth transition to college life: (1) pre-entry communication with colleges, students, parents and K-12 schools; (2) access to mentors and role models for program, course and students' life in college; and (3) counseling and advisement to ensure that students will succeed in the first year of college enrollment ("Disability Advisors Working Network," n.d.).

Student Activities and Communities

Various activities and events on campus engage students with the campus community. These activities provide students with a sense of belonging and connectedness while they are away from home and their families or encountering new academic or social challenges. Walsh (2009) explains that "extra-curricular events are an important part of liberal learning and a way for students to gain exposure to a range of ideas, and to enhance their awareness of history and current events through face-to-face interaction" (Walsh, 2009, para. 12).

Research suggests that social aspects of college life are related to the overall satisfaction with the college experience as a whole. Sirgy et al. (2010) argues that "the greater the satisfaction with the academic aspects of college life as well as satisfaction with the social aspects of the college the greater the satisfaction with college life overall" (p. 378). Opportunities

for extra-curricular activities on college campuses are necessary to enhance the overall satisfaction with the college experience.

Online communities for students provide a venue for connecting students with their peers (from their own academic programs, grade level, student government, and extracurricular groups). The inclusion of such communities would provide online learners with a sense of belonging throughout their academic careers. An online community would present students with a structured venue for: connecting peers with similar and connected interests and academic goals, develop, capture and share experiences related to their academic progress, promote collaboration and team-building within the student population, influence institutional policies and strategies pertaining to online student life and challenges related to the online learning experience (Serrat, 2017).

Other Important Services for Online Learners' Success

Bookstores

Campus bookstores are a staple at most colleges and universities. They provide access to the necessary books and materials required to complete course work. College-level bookstores sign contracts with institutions' administration which require the retailers to ensure affordability for the student body. Campus bookstores also manage the financial aid processes so that students can allocate aid to required educational material (Raible & deNoyelles, 2015). Although most college campuses have private bookstores, faculty and students have the option to acquire and adopt educational materials from outside vendors, and online sources in order to utilize course materials from all possible repositories (Raible & deNoyelles, 2015).

Digital textbooks (e-books) and other online publisher content are widely available in various disciplines, but the demand for printed text books remains. Chulkov and Van Alstine (2013) explain in their research that "students that used a printed textbook were more likely to

report using the book for exploring captions and charts. Furthermore, most students strongly

preferred the experience of using a printed textbook" (p. 216). As long as students have a

preference of print over electronic material the demand for campus bookstores remains.

Advising

Student access to academic advising services is crucial for student retention. Advisors

provide students with scheduling assistance, information on academic services and program

requirements. Advising centers maintain student portfolios that document students' personal and

professional growth plans and provide professional feedback (Dahl, 2004).

Effective online advising for online learners encompasses a system of technologies and

protocols which ensure that students receive responses, answers, and assistance within a 24 to

48-hour time period from when a student inquiry was made (Schroeder and Terras, 2015).

Students expect that they receive "clear, complete and timely information regarding curriculum

requirements" from their academic advisors in order for their roadmap to course and program

completion to be clear (Lorenzo, 2015).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Student services have been available to students at all levels from the advent of

education, but due to increased online learning demand, fortification of services for online

students is crucial. These services range from providing assistance with enrolling in specific

courses to providing access to academic libraries. Communication and technology enhancements

have expanded the capabilities of educational administrations to reach out to address student

needs and focus on service design (Pittman, 2012). Academic services will need to be adapted to

adequately serve students as familiarity with various student populations, teaching

methodologies and educational resources increases. As online course enrollments rise, new

online programs emerge, and as more students utilize various technologies, the creation and

adoption of innovative online services are essential.

The exemplary practices shared provide top-level administrators, faculty, and

professional staff in higher education with possible interventions, tools and references for

enhancing or creating resources for online students. Providing online learners with an array of

accessible resources and services will improve student productivity, satisfaction, well-being and

the quality of educational programming and student lifestyles.

College-level libraries must be accessible by all learners, including those who are

completing courses and programs on campus or online. Library resources, such as textbooks,

journals, newspapers and book must be accessible through an online database. Multimedia

content must also be able to be retrieved by students from libraries' websites. Support resources

and personnel must be available to students by way of email, phone, online virtual chats to

ensure that online learners have the same support as those who visit the circulation and reference

librarians in the physical library space. These resources must be made available in an online

medium, such as the library's website, where students can easily access all of the necessary

information for effectively accessing on-demand content.

Students may prefer to purchase or rent their required textbooks and other materials from

online vendors, traditional face-to-face students have access to a centrally located bookstore on

college and university campuses. Institutions must confirm that textbooks and materials are

available to online learners from their websites. This will ensure that all students have access to

the same content and services as traditional students are privileged to have access to.

Technical support for online learners must be accessible by students in around the clock,

every day throughout the year. Online learners must be able to receive technical support via

email, online chat, telephone and whenever a problem arises in order to keep their academic

progress on track and to reduce the amount of time that potential barriers interfere with their

coursework. If more than one department at an institution provides technical support for

students, all contact information from each department must be provided to online learners in

one centralized location in an online format. For example, within online course templates, which

online instructors utilize to deliver course content, a clearly labeled content area dedicated to

technical support should be incorporated to provide online learners with the necessary contact

information to refer to.

Similar to modern forms of virtual appointments with healthcare providers offered by

many health insurance companies, institutions should offer on-demand health services and

information to online learners in a synchronous and online platform. Online students

experiencing health-related issues, which may affect their progress in academic programs, must

be able to communicate with nurses and healthcare professionals just as traditional face-to-face

students are able to. Through a university's health services website, online students should be

able to schedule an online appointment to speak confidentially with a nurse in order to receive

guidance and support in relation to any health-related concern.

Tutoring services are often provided to student on physical campuses throughout the

world. Online learners deserve the same attention that traditional students receive in order to

support their academic goals and needs. Virtual, individual and group tutoring sessions must be

made available to online learners throughout each academic semester. Scheduled virtual tutoring

sessions should be available to students through a web conferencing tool so that students can

receive the same personalized academic support they would receive if they accessed this service

in a physical space such as a tutoring center. Web-conferencing tools provide tutors and students

with the ability to speak to each other through their personal phones or computer microphones,

share documents which are the focus of a tutoring session and allow for annotation of a shared

computer screen. These capabilities are necessary for an effective online tutoring session for the

online student population.

Academic advisement services are expected by all students just as tutoring services are.

Academic advisers must be made accessible to online students on an online modality where they

can contact and schedule virtual appointments through web-conferencing software. Providing

this service to online learners will ensure that they will have the necessary information, support

and guidance with regard to their course and degree maps and to ensure that they will complete

their academic programs in the expected and shortest possible time frame.

Students with physical and learning disabilities require specific support, resources and

attention. Online students with physical and learning disabilities require the same support but in

an online format. These learners must be able to communicate, with individuals who provide

support for tools and information on policies regarding academic accommodations, access to

software applications and information on policies related to specialized services. Online learners

must have an ADA compliant website dedicated to providing them with downloadable software

applications, such as screen-reading applications, to be installed on their personal computers.

Information on how to access alternate forms of online content must also be outlined in this

centralized website. More importantly, online instructors must be provided with training on how

to deal with common accessibility and accommodation issues which may arise with students

with disabilities in their online courses. By law, students with disabilities must be provided with

the same academic experience that students without disabilities are able to experience. Policies

must be in place and regularly shared with faculty to ensure that procedures are properly adhered to.

Student activities on physical college and university campuses provide students with a sense of belonging, support and an opportunity to connect and build relationships with their peers. Many campuses offer specialized activities and groups dedicated to specific groups of students, such as communities for commuting students. Similarly, activities and student groups must be made available to online learners to ensure that they have an outlet to share their experiences and talents, connect with individuals with the same interests and to build a network of peers as a support system. An online community should be created by way of social networks or an online platform housed and maintained by university staff.

Institutions should reach out to other institutions who have successfully implemented such services for online students in order to understand the feasibility of implementing similar projects in their own educational systems. Tutoring, technical support, library resources, health and wellness resources, and campus activities are expected from traditional face-to-face courses; the same is true for online learners' expectations and should be addressed and implemented by institutions who offer online programs and/or courses.

Providing services to online learners will require a degree of available resources (human and budget) in order to successfully implement and maintain such initiatives. This requirement will need the support and buy-in from top-level administration in order to initiate a roll out of a system of accessible services for online learners. College and university administrations understand the competitive nature of higher education, therefore, they should provide the support and necessary resources for encouraging online learners' academic persistence, well-being and positive experience at their institutions.

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