

Q&A Session for Creating Successful Online Student Service Programs Part II

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Q: Do you have any statistics on how many online students are really interested in online activities? Will they join and use them?

A: The best places to find data relating to distance education are www.wcet.info, www.gao.gov, www.detc.org, and www.chea.org. All of these organizations provide information about distance education, statistics, and best practices. This data will only give you a direction in which to proceed. To really determine if your students will use online services, you need to survey your own student population. Continual assessment is the only way to insure that you are bringing up the right student services and that students are using them.

Q: Will this power point be available at a later date?

A: I believe this PowerPoint is available on the Academic Impressions website:
http://www.academicimpressions.com/preconference/1105_online_studentsPT3.ppt

Q: Are you aware of any writing groups or online literary magazines for students in online programs?

A: A good page for online literary magazines is http://www.newpages.com/npguides/litmags_online.htm. This page has an alphabetical list of magazines from around the world. You can also find a good selection of journals at <http://ejournals.ebsco.com/>. This site requires that your institution purchase access for your students, so it is not a free service.

Q: where do baby boomers fit into traditional vs. non traditional models?

A: I would place baby boomers in the non-traditional category based on age (over 24), being mid-career, and possessing less free time. This particular generation can benefit from online education and online services because their time is limited, meaning they are typically unable to be present on campus for long periods of time. If this generation can access classes and services on their own time and in their own locations, then they may be able to fit education into their busy schedules.

Q: Are there surveys available listing student's interests and needs from university websites?

A: Please refer to the first question/answer above. These websites (www.wcet.info, www.gao.gov, www.detc.org, and www.chea.org) have a lot of good information and data regarding online students. I would suspect that individual institutions also have good information, but often times that information is not posted on websites (though it should be).

Q: Do you have demographic information --specifically ethnicity -- on the online population

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from the Pew Internet and American Life Project?

A: Look online at <http://www.pewinternet.org> and specifically at <http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/c/2/topics.asp>. The second link will take you to articles regarding demographics of online use.

Q: Do you think that online student services improve interpersonal skills?

A: This depends on how the services are set up and how much time online student services save students. In terms of set-up, if the services are interactive with continuous feedback, then students can certainly build interpersonal skills. If sound and video are incorporated into the services, then that only improves the service and skill development.

Services where students simply point and click will not help students improve their interpersonal skills. However, these services might save the student time. If a student no longer has to sit in long lines to be able to navigate the administrative black hole, then they have more time to interact with faculty and other students.

Therefore, the goal to setting up online student services is to make them interactive (when they need to be) and time-saving (whenever possible). These two features can give students opportunities to build their interpersonal skills.

Q: What/Who is WCET?

A: WCET stands for the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications; they go by this slogan now, “The Cooperative advancing the effective use of technology in higher education.” Their website is <http://www.wcet.info/>.

Q: Are you going to address incorporating audio (podcasting or whatever) in on-line community building? I am wondering if I should get up to speed on this tech. Thanks

A: I do not address podcasting in this presentation, but I refer to components of podcasting. When I talk about webcasting speakers, sporting events, or the commencement ceremony, I am essentially talking about podcasting. Podcasting simply allows institutions to distribute live or taped audio and video over the internet for users to watch/listen live or download and watch/listen later. Look at Wikipedia’s definition for podcasting. It provides a lot of information and many external links. This should give you a flavor of the concept and give you some ideas for implementing podcasting at your institution.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting>.

Q: How should investments in online community dovetail with investments in on-campus community? Are there some redundancies created?

A: There will be redundancies, but as I mentioned in the presentation, the lines between online students and an on-campus students are blurring. This means that investments you make for on-campus community building can and will be accessed by those online and investments you make

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for online community building can and will be accessed by those on-campus. Look at Facebook. It makes no distinction between online and on-campus student, yet both populations are able to access and use Facebook.

In short, yes, there will be redundancies, but in order to provide the same level of service to both populations, you need to have some redundancy. Redundancy is okay in some cases because it ultimately provides more options for people to access and use a particular service.

Q: Can you point to research that correlates online community to retention?

A: As stated throughout this presentation, the following sites have great information regarding online students: www.wcet.info, www.gao.gov, www.detc.org, and www.chea.org. While there may not be direct data regarding online community and retention, logically it makes sense. If a student is not able to make connections to other students, faculty, or staff, they will not have a network they can rely on and may feel isolated. If a student is isolated or feels like they are alone, they may be less likely to persist.

This would be an excellent thesis, dissertation, or research topic. One could look at a school that builds a great sense of online community and compare it to one that simply offers online courses. What is the retention rate for online students? Great question, but I do not have any direct data.

Q: We use SCT's Luminous (Pipeline) portal technology, but we face challenges in getting students to use it as a central resource, even have a hard time getting them to check their Pipeline email. How can we encourage more use of the portal, to create SoC?

A: The best way to get students to use a portal (or any new technology for that matter) is to promote the product. All faculty, staff, and administrators should be using the portal and should be able to readily describe what it can do for a student. They then should be talking about the portal whenever they talk with students about related issues.

In addition to promotion, students need to see the portal and potential uses for the portal from day one (actually, from before day one-if used for recruiting purposes). Often times the problem is that existing students were never taught early on to use a portal, so they are not inclined to start doing so mid-college. The institution needs to understand this and build up the use of the portal with new students.

Finally, the portal should be designed to allow students to access information when it is relevant for them. The portal should give the student the opportunity to interact with others and access all relevant pieces of their program. The portal should also be well-designed, appealing, and sexy. If the portal does not capture one's attention, then students will likely only return to it when absolutely necessary.

Q: What kind of response has there been to using E-mail as the communication method?

A: Initially there is typically concern and apprehension, but as time goes on, students grow accustomed to seeing all communication on email. As with portal use (see above answer), email

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has to be heavily promoted, students must be indoctrinated from early on in their program, and faculty, staff, and administrators must lead by example (meaning they must use email themselves).

In addition, email messages cannot be used for just anything. The messages must be short, to the point, limited in number, and relevant to students. Relevance is particularly important because as student will typically only pay attention to an e-mail's content if it is important to them at that time. If an email is sent about registration opening in 2 months, a student will likely disregard the message. However, if that same message is sent a few days before registration, a student will likely pay close attention.

Q: Do you suggest institutional email accounts for students for official communication?

A: I do suggest institution email accounts because the institution can then control access and can monitor use. If a student is not accessing their institutional email account, then the institution can contact the student in other ways if necessary. In addition, I have had a number of faculty complain about outside email addresses. They are often times offended by the names students use for the email addresses. In addition, the faculty often receive bounce back messages from the third-party email provider saying the account mailbox is full. Again, with institutionally assigned email accounts, these problems can be controlled.

One other advantage to institutionally assigned email accounts is that not everyone has alternate email addresses. By assigning everyone an institutional email address, the institution insures that all of its students have at least one email account.

The drawback to institutionally assigned email accounts is that students then have to maintain another email address. This can be annoying, but setting up email forwarding can help alleviate this nuisance.

Q: If e-mail is the official means of communication - how do we maintain records, ensure confidentiality, provide equal services/timely response, for all with online education?

A: I will answer your questions in order. First, to maintain records, email systems such as Outlook allow users to create folders. A person could theoretically maintain an email folder for each student. However, that would result in multiple student records around the campus. A better option would be to either print the correspondence and place it into the student record or to import the email into a document imaging system. This would maintain a single record while still maintaining the vital communication with students.

Ensuring confidentiality can be accomplished two ways. First, if a student emails a staff or faculty member, then that staff or faculty member must log into their email to access the email. This is the first method to ensuring confidentiality because the intended recipient must log in to read the confidential message. Second, dual files could be maintained. Our counselors maintain a separate student file from the academic file. This allows them to place confidential email correspondence into their physical file, which is then locked and accessible only to the counselor.

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In order to provide equal and timely responses, some institutions have purchased or developed a correspondence management tool. We are contemplating purchasing RightNow technology. This technology allows an institution to manage the flow of incoming correspondence, direct the correspondence to the appropriate person, and track the response time. In addition, templates can be built for common questions. These templates insure that equal and accurate content is sent in response question.

Q: If you are interested in doing a web cast, what are the tech needs or requirements?

A: Your IT staff will have the best information about technical needs, but my understanding is that you need to have a video camera and not just a webcam because the quality is typically poor. This camera needs to be connected to a computer that is connected to the server. You would also need a microphone for sound. The video and audio are then posted on the host server, which can then be accessed by anyone with an internet connection. Again, I do not know the exact specs that would be needed to insure a smooth, streaming presentation, but your IT staff should know this.

Q: Are there any specific ways of creating an online sense of community for international students based in the US or abroad?

A: Yes, you could do this. You would need to encourage your international student club to create a presence online. That way international students can access the club and other students online. In addition, you could create a webspace or discussion board/chat room on the portal or online student union. Again, this would create a space for international students to congregate and connect with one another.

Q: How are the student unions monitored by the university? Who or what department does the monitoring?

A: As I mentioned in the presentation, I don't believe that institutions should act as big brother and keep a vigilant eye on what is posted on the union. I would suggest that institutions simply play an advising role, technical role, and a moderating role. This keeps the content of the union in the hands of the students. Content enforcement can be handled by the student webmasters and only in severe cases would the institution get involved.

As far as who should be involved on the administrative side, I would suggest that an IT person act in the technical role. I would also suggest that the dean of students (or VP or student affairs) act in the moderating and perhaps advising role. Because the dean or VP would deal with disciplinary or other student matters, this is the person (or at least the office) that should fulfill the advising and moderating roles.

Q: What measures need to be in place for secure online elections?

A: The biggest piece that must be in place is a secure access point. This access point would require the student to log in using their username and password. Once logged in, the institution is able to verify who is voting and would also be able to track to insure that each student only has

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one vote. In addition to the secure section of the website, it would be important for the institution to provide space for the candidates to talk about themselves and possibly hold a chat with potential voters.

Q: What university administrators are typically responsible for oversight of online student unions?

A: Please see my answer above (two questions up).

Q: How can we guarantee hacking does not take place, thus voter tampering?

A: The best way to minimize hacking is to require the student to authenticate their presence by logging in with a username and password. We can never eliminate hacking, but we can certainly try to minimize it by educating our students and setting up secure sites for user authentication.

Q: How do institutions maintain current email address for everyone if that is the official means of communication?

A: The three institutions for which I have worked maintained institution assigned email addresses in the student database (Banner, Datatel, Peoplesoft, etc.). When we wanted to send out a message, we would query the database for active students and send a mass email to them. The key for us was that we issued institutional email addresses and maintained those addresses in the student database.

Q: How do you assess the effectiveness of online services? What measures do you use and do you have any data available?

A: We assess our online student services just like we assess our on-campus services. We conduct student surveys and hold student focus groups. To increase response rates, we advertise drawings for gift certificates for those who respond. Some of our questions are demographic and some are multiple choice, but the majority of our questions are open-ended, which means the student can enter any answer they want. We do not survey the entire student population; rather, we identify groups of students and the pull random samples from those groups (stratified random sampling).

Q: Can you have the same approach in reaching prospective students?

A: Everything I have talked about can be used to reach prospective students. Our database assigns an ID number to all prospects as well as current students. This means that we could technically create a portal or union for prospective students. Some schools do this already, but we do not. We have talked about it, but we have not moved in that direction because of resources.

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Q: Can you provide sample policies/procedures for making e-mail the official means of communication.

A: Here are a couple policies on the web:

- http://www.fpd.finop.umn.edu/groups/ppd/documents/policy/Email_Pol.cfm
- <http://www.utexas.edu/its/policies/emailnotify.html>
- <http://www.inverhills.edu/Enrollment/CollegePolicies/EmailCommunication.asp>

Q: Do most universities assign students an email and use that address as the official means of communication or do they use the email provided by the student such as hotmail?

A: Institutions vary. Some assign institutional email accounts and others rely on students to provide an account. My recommendation is to assign institutional accounts. This insures that every student has at least one email account. In addition, the institution has more control and is able to track student usage. Institutionally assigned email accounts can also be similar in set-up (look), so they are easier to remember than complicated hotmail or yahoo accounts.

Q: How close are we to having the capability to do video-phone type communications over the web?

A: This capability is already available. Here is one company (though I don't know how good their service is. <http://www.sightspeed.com/>

Q: Also, what does research show about use of online activities by on-campus students - will it increase participation?

A: Research we conducted at my previous institution (MSU, Mankato) show that on-campus students also access online services. Since the majority of our students were on-campus, a majority of our online services were accessed by these students. We found that even though the student was on-campus, they often preferred to conduct their business online because it was easy to use and available to them when they wanted to access those services (essentially, 24/7).

Q: Where is Facebook quote from?

A: The quote was from <http://www.facebook.com/about/php>. The problem is that it is no longer available in the news section because they are constantly adding new articles and do not maintain an archive. You can find great quotes from this site because the links take you out to college newspapers that have articles about Facebook.

Q: Do you have an idea of the average space allocated to students that the university maintains?

A: I think it ranges anywhere from 5 MB to 50 MB. Our institution (Inver Hills) has only 5 MB of space. The U of Minnesota has 20 MB of space. I suspect that 20 is probably the average.

Q: If our institution does not offer portfolios or portals currently, do you know of any third-party

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c that offer these type of services?

A: Third-party vendors may help you design your portfolio or portal, but they often require that your institution host the portfolio or portal. For portfolios, I would suggest the Open Source Portfolio Initiative (OSPI). This is what the University of Minnesota and other colleges and universities are using. Their website is <http://www.osportfolio.org/>.

Since I am a huge fan of open source, here is a site for open source portals: <http://www.metadot.com/>. I think most institutions develop their own portals. Some use open source and others develop their own from scratch.

Q: how is the data for the e-portfolio populated-e.g. degrees completed? by the user or the institution?

A: E-portfolios are populated by both the institution and the individual. Institutions will populate address, grade, degree, advisor, major, etc. Students will add their resume, presentations, pictures, etc. Essentially the institution provides the basic infrastructure for the portfolio and the student is able to add more information and customize the final product.

Q: What tool does UMN use to operate their Portal?

A: I believe the UMN portal is homegrown, but I am not 100% sure. You can contact the developers of the UMN portal at my@umn.edu.

Q: Any indication of how much storage capacity and tech support/help Desk time these schools carry - per student?

A: As stated above, I think it ranges anywhere from 5 MB to 50 MB. Our institution (Inver Hills) has only 5 MB of space. The U of Minnesota has 20 MB of space. I suspect that 20 is probably the average. The University of Minnesota tech support hours are:

Monday-Thursday	8am-11pm
Friday	8am-5pm
Saturday	Noon-5pm
Sunday	5pm-11pm

Our hours of operation for tech support are:

Monday-Thursday	7:30am-9pm
Friday	7:30am-4pm
Saturday	9am-3pm

We are a smaller school, so our hours are not as extensive as the University of Minnesota.

Q: Do you have an idea of the size of the staff that would be needed to support such initiatives?

A: The number of staff will depend on the services you want to provide and the hours of operation. There will be a significant amount of time up front to develop some services but then

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the number of hours to maintain the service once running would be minimal. Take for instance the online student union. Up front, the institution would have to provide a significant amount of staff, technology, and financial resources. However, once the site is working, the students maintain it. Therefore, institutional resources are minimal once the service is functional.

Q: Do these schools carry graduates on to an alumni community - and if so, how much capacity do they provide? For how long?

A: Graduates of an institution are a valuable commodity, so it is important for alumni to continue to feel a connection to the institution. The on-campus and online communities should continue to be accessible to alumni because they are the face of your institution in the community, government, and private sector. Therefore, tools that students can use to feel connected should also be made available for alumni to feel connected. Then, the intersection between current students and alumni can be created at the career development office. This is where the institution can help create networks for current students to connect to alumni and for alumni to seek out qualified current students for post-graduation employment opportunities.

I see that many institutions instantly drop (or do so within a short period of time) their graduates from community tools like email, portals, and portfolios. This is too bad and I would hope that more institutions will allow alumni to continue using some community building tools for many years after graduation.

Q: Who provides the support for students using e-portfolios?

A: At the University of Minnesota, the e-portfolio service is provided by the computer helpdesk on each of the institutional campuses. On the main campus in the Twin Cities, the support is provided by the Academic and Distributed Computing Services. While the helpdesk provides support for daily student use, one of the vice president and provost staff work on the development and improvement of the e-portfolio (as well as the portal). I would suspect that at most institutions with an e-portfolio that the IT staff services student use and that another entity on campus is in charge of development and improvement.

Q: How have you determined your student's preferences in terms of online services? I'm trying to create our first online environment and am trying to set priorities.

A: The initial batch of online services were developed based on what other institutions were doing and based on WCET guidelines. We then assessed these services with surveys and focus groups to make sure the services were serving the students. In addition, we asked students what other services they would like to see and what they would use. This helped drive the second round of services. We plan to continue this cycle in an effort to improve current services as well as add new services.

Q: How is it that people make money in Everquest?

A: People make money in Everquest by selling virtual goods outside of the game. Since Everquest is a fantasy game, these goods might include weapons, clothing, and magical items

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that might be used within the game. The virtual goods are put up for sale on Ebay, discussion boards, or on a virtual black market. Other users pay real money for the goods and the goods are transferred in the game.

Q: Is there a tracking component to identify who is and isn't using the portal and the frequency of usage?

A: Once a user logs into a portal, all use and frequency of use can be tracked. Therefore, the institution can compile individual and aggregate data, which can then be used to make improvements, implement changes, or even eliminate the portal all together.

If you have further questions or need clarification on one of the above questions, feel free to email me at lpirius@inverhills.edu.