

HOW TO BUILD EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

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Online support services for learners can be as important to their academic success as the actual teaching. Following are guidelines on how to select and design online services, respond to issues such as what are the particular challenges of online learning, determine which services are essential for learner success, and bring these services into an institution. To extend the usefulness of these guidelines, we have also outlined web resources on these and other themes in [Resources to Build Effective Online Learning Support Services](#).

THE CHALLENGE: PROVIDING ONLINE LEARNERS WITH THE BEST OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS

In order to have the best opportunity for success in their studies, online learners need access to more than course content and effective teaching. They need access to a wide range of support services that help them to engage with their institution and instructors, succeed in their studies, connect with each other, and make a successful transition to the workplace.

Online students need access to all the services available to on-campus students: recruitment, enrolment management, orientation, advising and counseling, records, registration, credit evaluation, financial aid, academic skills assessment and development, academic writing centres, advocacy, special needs assistance, learning resource centres and libraries, bookstores, and computer labs and technical help desks.

NEEDS OF ONLINE LEARNERS

Unique demands of online learning

Online learners have some unique needs due to the nature of their mode of study, such as time management and self-directed learning. Reading quickly with good comprehension, communicating effectively in writing, taking initiative in communicating with peers, and working collaboratively online in small and large groups are essential skills in a virtual environment.

Early intervention

When online learners drop their studies, they do so early, usually at the very beginning of their first course, and not surprisingly, a learner who completes one online course successfully is much more likely to continue with their online studies. The critical nature of the first year experience has been recognized on campus with the development of support services specifically designed to meet this need.

Diversity

Online students are characterized by their diversity. Attracted by the accessibility of online study, these learners include many working

adults as well as younger students who are combining online learning with classroom courses for great flexibility. Prospective learners who have been away from formal study for a significant period likely need help with assessing academic preparedness. First Nations students may benefit from services that are responsive to their cultural needs and values. Younger students may need assistance with the developing skills such as time management.

Peer-to-peer support

Isolation resulting from insufficient academic and social is a reason that distance learners may drop out. Somewhat ironically, improved efficiency in the form of online self-service transactions can contribute to a sense of anonymity, making efforts to create a social atmosphere for online learners that much more important. Web-based technologies offer unique opportunities to facilitate the important social component of belonging to an academic community, facilitate peer to peer support, and teach critical skills of collaborative online learning. Equally importantly, as institutions grapple with how to provide quality support to greater numbers of students, it is likely that learning communities offering peer support will become that much more critical.

Access

Perhaps most importantly, learners who choose to study online do so for the convenience and flexibility. They need access to learning resources and services in the same way that they have access to their courses, that is, online and on demand. Online students need access to 24/7 technical help and library resources, the ability to self manage their administrative services such as registration, course changes and financial transactions online, access to a variety of self-help resources such as skill development tutorials, virtual spaces to meet with peers, and when necessary, access to student services staff beyond normal office hours.

CORE SERVICES

There are at least four purposes that should drive the development of core services for learners: Services that help learners engage with the institution

- A website that welcomes visitors and learners, gives them a feel for institutional culture, and makes information and services easily accessible within a click or two
- Information such as education and training opportunities, course and program descriptions and availability, transfer arrangements, credential requirements, faculty and staff bios
- Student advocacy (human rights, complaints and disputes, policy and procedure review)
- Responsive administrative systems: admission, credit assessment, self-management of student information (enrolment, transcripts, progress toward credential) and other administrative transactions

- Financial aid and student awards assistance
- Orientation (to the institution, to online learning, to the program of choice)
- Bookstore (textbooks, learning materials)
- Help desk to assist with technical problems with institutional systems such as portals, e-mail and other communication systems, learning management systems, student information systems, administrative and financial systems

Services that help learners succeed in their studies

- Readiness for online learning and academic preparedness assessment
- Academic advising (program planning, transfer and credential requirements)
- Prior learning assessment
- Academic skills assessment and skills development (writing, numeracy, reading)
- Study skills assistance (time management, exam preparation, reading, note taking)
- Personal counseling to promote mental health and address problems that present barriers to study
- Library access, librarian assistance, and information literacy skills development (finding and evaluating information, literature reviews, citing)
- Special needs assistance for students with disabilities or other special requirements that may present barriers to study

Services that help learners connect with each other

- Learner communities (opportunities for learners with common interests to come together; peer support and tutoring, leadership training)

Services that help learners make a successful transition to the workplace

- Alumni support (career and job assistance, networking, community development and leadership opportunities)
- Career counseling including help with assessment of interests, skills, and abilities

Some core services meet more than one of the four identified purposes. For example, academic skills development helps students succeed in their studies, as well as providing them with transferable skills for a successful transition to the workplace. Prior learning assessment helps students to engage with the institution, gives them a head start in their studies, and helps develop a portfolio to facilitate their entry to the workplace.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNER SUPPORT

Support services for learners are all those measures taken to facilitate learning persistence and success, and to improve the quality of the learning experience through engagement and integration into the academic community. From a student perspective, learner support services should have the following characteristics:

1. **Purposeful:** exist to support learners in their studies from first inquiry through graduation and beyond; integrated into institutional mission and strategic objectives
2. **Transparent:** provide clear points of contact; clear standards of service identified
3. **Accessible:** available on demand according to the needs of the learner; 24/7 where possible
4. **Responsive:** responsive to individual needs; provide efficient turnaround
5. **Interactive:** encourage and facilitate interaction among and between students(s), faculty, student support staff, and academic content
6. **Self-directed and developmental:** facilitate self-management of processes and development of skills and attitudes necessary for independence and lifelong learning
7. **Integrated:** demonstrate a high level of cross-functional collaboration that results in services being experienced as seamless by the learner
8. **Open to Change:** evolve continuously to accommodate new learner populations, educational developments, economic conditions, technological advances, and findings from research and evaluation.

STEPS TO BUILDING EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

1. Build a solid base of support with **institutional leadership**. The commitment of the executive team is essential to going forward.
2. Identify team leaders and create a **cross functional team** to develop a strategic plan for student services. To integrate student services across units and academic departments and create a new way of conceptualizing learner support, the team needs broad representation that might include individuals from the following units:
 - Student Services/Student Affairs (e.g. information, advising, career and personal counseling)
 - Academic Support (e.g. academic skills assessment and development, writing centre)
 - Student Disabilities/Special Needs
 - Continuing Education (traditionally the location of services for distance learners)
 - Registrar's Office (student information systems, admissions, transfer credit, enrolment management)
 - Student Recruitment

- Institutional Research
 - Deans of Faculties
 - Public Affairs
 - Web Masters
 - Program Directors
 - Faculty Representatives
 - Student Awards and Financial Aid
 - Information Technology
3. Highlight **student representation** on the cross-functional team. These positions might be filled by student government leaders, advertised and selected using a transparent process, or through a call for proposals from students asking for ideas about how student services can be improved and/or made more accessible through innovative application of technology.
 4. Create an **environment conducive to creative thinking** and risk-taking. A relaxed and comfortable atmosphere will help project team members brainstorm to elicit the best ideas for re-engineering existing and inventing new support, services, and systems. A retreat or some other type of group process activity is a good way to initiate such projects.
 5. Clearly identify the **objectives** to be achieved by making the transition to online student services and how achievement of these objectives will be measured, e.g. improved satisfaction with services for all students, retention, skill development, engagement.
 6. Conduct an **audit** of how well current students are being served. Identify gaps in service such as online students without access to technical help or academic advising beyond regular office hours. Identify services that can make the most positive difference to student performance and satisfaction.
 7. Collect any **relevant information** to be considered: online learner characteristics, data about impact of existing services, student needs surveys, reports from online faculty about need for referral points, research about future needs, e.g. trends in student demographics, graduate skills most in demand by employers, best practice models and guidelines.
 8. Develop a **strategic plan** for online learner support services that is aligned with the institutional mission and strategic directions. Include a plan for data collection and evaluation.
 9. Begin with one or two areas of services where **significant impact** can be made with a transition to online delivery, where there is a high level of certainty for success, and where there are existing models or examples (e.g. online library access; technical help desk; FAQ page for academic advising; automation of administrative and/or financial transactions; self administered online study readiness assessment; tutorials for skill development; extended hours online contact with financial aid or academic advising staff).

10. Find **partners** who have similar needs and share development responsibilities and resources. Seek funding sources that favour collaborative arrangements and result in the potential for system-wide innovation and benefit.
11. **Evaluate results** such as, impact for students (retention, learning outcomes, skills development, satisfaction, engagement and participation); impact for faculty (support for online teaching); cost efficiencies; deployment of staff; overall objective achievement; potential impact on system (use by other institutions).
12. **Publish results** and make developments available to others.

NEXT STEP: DEVELOP A FULL RANGE OF ONLINE ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Ontario colleges and universities have already demonstrated that excellent teaching can take place online, and that web-based administrative and financial services are more efficient and responsive to student needs than those only available through face-to-face transactions. The next step is to work toward developing a full range online academic support services that characterize quality learning environments. The challenge is to provide all of our students, especially our under-served populations, with the breadth and quality of support they need and deserve in a user-friendly format so they can be nurtured, encouraged and supported throughout their academic careers.