

Implementing other learner support services in online and distance learning through orientation

Introduction

Supporting learners at a distance from inquiry through completion is not only essential but crucial to student success. According to Granger and Benke, 1998, integrating student supports in the overall academic process begins at first contact with the university to graduation. Learner supports or aids are integral components when present in all aspects of the distance learning process, and when strategically planned, structured student-specific activities are critical to student success. Many of the past barriers in online distance learning involved transitioning from face-to-face learning to online, but are no longer an obstacle when effective supports are in place. Smith & Drago (2003) says producing effective learners, no matter the learning environment is by integrating “orientation programs that ensure learner comfort with the environment and the technology” (p. 2). Smith & Drago (2003), also shows, when students’ lack knowledge and preparation to the learning environment, it affects learning. Students are not able to maneuver the technology or the tools to obtain course materials when lacking knowledgeable about the technology. A widely used method of providing learner support is through new student orientation sessions. Although orientation activities are not new to academe, best practices are increasing its popularity in distance learning, producing role models for dual and single mode institutions emerging into distance learning sites. Tait (1995) argues that student supports should cover a range of activities, yet his research focuses on who the student is and how to meet student needs, never addressing where the support process begins. Rumble (2000), on the other hand, explore student needs in the progression of the course, overlooking the beginning or before the course begins. Rumble (2000) also argues for integration of student support services as part of the course management system (p. 223). Neither theorist addresses the needs of students prior to entering the learning environment. In fact, most research jumps right into matriculation. Although both theorists address the need for learner supports in the distance learning

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environment, both miss a crucial process—preregistration or the time prior to entering the learning environment. The purpose of this paper is to support incorporating learner supports from first inquiry through completion to ensure that students develop critical academic skills through specialized workshops to ease student's transition to college life.

Incorporating pre-registration learner supports

Learner supports or aids are essential to promote learning and become familiar with the distance learning environment. Studies conducted by scholars in the field show that providing students in distance learning with structured activities during the preregistration process result in a positive learning experiences and reenrollment (Granger & Benke, 1998). The first contact with the university is enriching and meaningful, moving the focus slightly away from learner type, geographical location, language barriers and learning styles, to the holistic needs of the student (Bowser & Race, 1991). According to scholars like Bowser & Race (1991) and LaPadula (2003), pre-planned campus wide academic success programs orient students to the learning environment, strengthening "their knowledge of the university and its administrative functions."

LaPadula (2003) argues that offering learner services are vital to increase enrollment and maintain student persistence. In fact, research states that the most prominent reason for including student support is to "ease student adjustment to college and contribute to the student's academic success (p. 119)." For this reason, one cannot dispute the importance of supporting learners from inquiry—not after enrolling in the university. The student's first contact with the university begins from the time he/she shows interest in the university's course offerings, and continues throughout the educational journey. An integral component of a planned activity in support of student success is evident at the University of Maryland University College. The university offers a four-week online orientation session to Webtycho and the online learning environment, UMUC411. This course is available to students before the semester

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starts. Students learn not only how to access administrative functions but also how to navigate in Webtycho, the learning management system.

Benefits of preregistration activities

To increase student persistence and form positive, first, and lasting impressions of the university, successful, learner supports or aids are essential components in all aspects of distance learning processes. According to Lynch (2001), a variety of media is available for addressing student needs. During orientation, media introduce students to study aides such as video and audio recordings that are essential for recall of course content. In addition, providing informational sessions that outline student expectations in terms of course participation and conduct is reflective of student persistence—nothing left to guess. Distance learning faculty and experts provide research showing that effective learner supports offset high dropout rates, especially when students receive training in the functionality of technology prior to taking online courses. In contrast, research by Lynch (2001) conducted at the University of North Carolina shows that not participating in preregistration or orientation resulted in students registering for courses that did not match with their academic needs. On the other hand, students who participated in orientation prior to registration, completing structured assignments using online tools and processes make better course selections.

Effectively implementing learner supports following best practices such as those presented by Lynch (2001) showed significant impacts on student persistence. In addition, incorporating elements of learner supports provide students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the technology and persistence rates were higher. The preregistration or orientation activities introduce students to the various characteristics of online work students are likely to encounter in the course work. Lynch reinforces the need for offering a variety of preregistration assignments that explain expectations in terms of participation and conduct, success is eminent.

Orientation as learner support

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Why institute student supports using orientation? The evidence is paramount. For example, the women's study programs at the University of South Australia provide orientation sessions prior to the beginning of classes and even throughout the learning process. These have proven beneficial to women studying at a distance (Hipp, 1997). The results were overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciated the exposure to annual one-day orientation sessions and the wealth of information shared. The sessions provided information on many support services available to students, the process of online and distance learning and the skills required to navigate and maneuver through the online structure. Women surveyed felt the pre-academic orientation encouraged personal growth and academic development. In addition, the university also mailed packages to students consisting of a video explaining the online learning structure as well as the university's administrative hierarchy with contact information for all pertinent staff and administrative offices (Hipp, 1997).

There are many methodologies used to orient students to the online learning environment with little to no cost to the university. Yet, it is clear that employing an orientation program is critical to obtain successful results in student persistence. The Monash University, one of the largest distance providers in Australia uses CDROMs to orient students to the standard operating procedures for the institution. This example and many others show that no matter what the method for providing learner support services, it is a crucial element of student support in higher education.

Benefits of providing orientation

Orientation sessions in distance learning will incorporate numerous activities to familiarize students with the university's standards and expectations—all provided at point of inquiry. McLoughlin & Marshall (2000) states, students will "learn how to learn" (p. 2). One way to affect success is by concentrating on developing students' study skills needed for the distance-learning environment. In addition, offering campus wide academic success programs orient students to the learning environment, campus programs, and pertinent administrative services.

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New student orientation sessions for freshman are commonplace in face-to-face teaching and learning. These sessions provide students with pertinent learning tools, such as adjusting to a new high school or college community and knowing the location of essential campus offices. Students also obtain advisors and counselors to assist in course selections and other administrative function (Bowser & Race, 1991). The significance of orientation sessions is also important in non-academic environments helping employees to transition from traditional classroom learning to online learning environments. Employees also gain an understanding of distance learning technology functionality, resulting in a successful learning experience. Proper training from the beginning of the learning environment, ensures higher productivity and skill development (Smith & Drago, 2003), no matter the environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, coordinating learner supports in the total learning process is essential for the student to gain knowledge about and be able to operate within the modes of delivery and gain access to the learning environment and the administrative functions inherent in online learning. Orientation sessions provide distance learners with advance knowledge of the learning structure, enabling a smooth transition to the learning environment, if new. Students build confidence and motivation to the program, thereby encouraging persistence. Employing best practices outlined by Smith & Drago (2003) produce effective learners, ensuring that the student is comfortable with the learning environment and technology. Providing student supports from inquiry to completion is a key resource in the online distance-learning infrastructure. These orientation efforts are vital for returning and new students to the online, distance learning structure, and known to produce effective learners.

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