Distance Learners
in Higher Education:

Institutional Responses for
Quality Outcomes

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Chapter 8

Supporting learners at a Distance from inquiry through completion

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A staff member at a university learning technology center happily notified me that the center had just completed a new computer-interactive writing course using hypertext. Students would receive immediate formative feedback on their writing exercises as they worked through the course.

"This will be great for distance learners," she beamed.
"Sounds really good," I said. "What's the platform?"
"Macintosh."
"But most working adults only have easy access to PC's. What about them?"
"Well, they can use our computer labs."
"Oh. From Nova Scotia?"

The overarching lesson for every aspect of distance learner support is:
Know your learners. Know who the are, where the are, and what's available to them. Understand their needs and limitations in regard to every aspect of your program. Providing real access to education at a distance involves ensuring that your intended learners can be successful in your program. The Education Network of Maine asks, "What happens to Amy?" (their typical distance learner) whenever they consider changes and new developments. In this chapter, we will spell out what that means in major program areas and provide some examples and case studies.

Marketing experts tell us that every aspect of the product, program, or services is a marketing activity, building client satisfaction and loyalty to ensure repeat business (or not). Similarly, successful student support is a result of every aspect of a program, from a prospective student's first awareness of the program to graduation day, working in an integrated fashion to maintain the student's engagement and progress. Students find programs supportive not because there is a Coordinator of Student Support available from 9 to 3 to solve their problems, but because the program was designed with the student perspective in mind by faculty and staff who understand that distance learners need and expect a responsive program.

Understanding distance learners sounds simple enough when we consider how we are able to understand our traditional students. But distance learners are 1) not around to talk to and 2) will not stick around if the program does not work for them. In thinking about how to raise real awareness and sensitivity to distance learners, it is important to understand the assumptions and inclinations faculty and staff already

have. Distance learning programs vary not only in size but in their relation to other programs within the same institution. Few originated as distance education programs. Some distance learning programs began from an engineering school's interest in using new technologies; some are an outgrowth of an existing adult education program; still others originated in the outreach and extension missions of university continuing education programs. In each case, there is an existing inclination and infrastructure which must be reckoned with. And in each case, an understanding of the learner's profile can provide an invaluable prism through which to view its effectiveness.

From initial program and course design, through promotion, intake' registrarial logistics, and the delivery of courses, faculty and staff must be aware of their prospective students' circumstances and needs. This is notably a problem when campus programs seek to serve distance learners. A delivery technology is selected, but too frequently the attendant operations and supports are provided as afterthoughts. *Know your learners.* Where are they? How and when do they access your programs? What can go wrong to interrupt the program personally or technically? A program serving a cross-town site through microwave has different concerns from one serving students nationally or internationally using the Internet. Professional, technical, and clerical staff as well as faculty must each take into account learner characteristics and needs to contribute to a successful program.

Who Are Your Learners?

The majority of distance learners are adults beyond the traditional age of undergraduate college attendance. They are returning to education usually for an identifiable reason: to qualify for promotion, to prepare for a new job, because their employer expects it, or even because it's something they now want to finish. In many cases, returning learners are goal oriented (e.g., gaining the degree or certificate) more than task-oriented (anticipating the actual study and learning process). Distance learners usually have busy lives already, and education must compete with jobs, childcare, household responsibilities, etc. Whether your program is open to a broad range of participants or is targeted to a specific population within an organization, it is important to know that rarely will your program have students' undivided attention.

Beyond these general observations, successful distance educators understand the particular characteristics of the students they wish to serve. The program and supports, as well as all marketing and promotion, begin with this understanding. Broad areas of understanding of prospective students include:

Knowledge

What are the knowledge goals of the program and what knowledge do the prospective students have? It is important to build on what students actually know. In some cases, assessment pretests are valuable to both the student and the provider institution. The British Open University provides self-assessment tests to help students determine if they need preparatory work before undertaking particular courses.

Prior Skills

What are the skills required to be successful in the program and what skills do the prospective students actually have? Academic skills include critical reading, writing, and quantitative skills, but equally important are skills in time management, information retrieval, and study habits.

Experience

What experience does the program assume and what experiences are prospective students likely to bring to the program? This can be as broad as communicating effectively at a distance and as specific as using a particular software application on the computer. It is not uncommon for adult distance learners to have significant experience in a narrow aspect of a field, especially practical experience. It is often important that the program is designed to accommodate these background differentials.

Culture

What cultural background does the program assume and what backgrounds do the prospective students actually have? This can of course refer to obvious cultural (and linguistic) differences, but subtler differences must also be recognized, especially as programs cross regional and even national boundaries. This becomes very important when the application of abstract principles can result in quite different practices and outcomes.

Context

What context does the program expect for the learners and what context do they actually inhabit? Computer availability is only one example; the order, time, and opportunity to undertake various kinds of assignments or research can be a critical factor.

Goals and motivations

What does the program assume about the learners' goals and motivations and what is actually known about them? Joy in the pursuit of learning and knowledge for its own sake are noble, but usually not sufficient to bring busy adults back to the time and expense of formal learning. To know why someone is in a program and what outcomes she or he expects can provide a valuable tool in supporting (and retaining) that student.

Learning patterns and styles

What teaching and learning approach does the program use and what learning approach is most successful for the learners? The recent emphasis on active learning and the importance of building interactive activities into programs has moved us much beyond the passive learning lecture presentation of the past. Educators continue to explore flexible modes which can support different ways of knowing and learning. Computerbased multimedia programs show much promise here.

How Do You Support Their Decision to Return to Education?

From the moment a perspective student learns of your program, there will be decision points for him or her at each one of which you win or lose an enrollment. Traditional "marketing" talks about product (the content and format of the program), price, and performance. Certainly each of these will be a positive or negative feature for prospective students. But even in the first contact, there are positive steps of support. Prospective students are turned off by:

- A phone receptionist "too busy" or without the resources to provide full information
- A phone receptionist so intent on getting information for the marketing database that the inquirer can't get her or his questions answered
- A two- or three-week delay in receiving program information
- No ready way to get further information and counseling

The time and resources invested at the outset to respond to and engage inquiries effectively can serve not only to improve enrollments, but to provide an important information base for the continuing success and retention of enrolled students. This is true for individual students, and especially for targeted populations of students with shared characteristics or experiences.

Many successful programs have established processes of assessment in which they determine the learning profile and needs of prospective students at the outset of the program. For specific populations, broad characteristics can be determined through various means, including self- or organizational description (e.g., by Human Resources), survey instruments, and focus groups. The point of these is to understand enough about the learner's circumstances and learning needs that some element of the program does not present a barrier to successful study. This will also assist your promotional and marketing activities. For instance, suppose your learning and technology center offers to add an interactive inquiry system to your World Wide Web site. This can enable inquiring students to enter their field of interest and preferred mode of study in order to receive an individualized report on what the program offers them. However, the majority of your students are in Human Services, and your recent survey indicated that most of them only use computers in their offices, and that fewer than 10% have ever used the Internet. Is it worth the investment?

Focus groups with prospective students and their sponsors can help to ascertain student needs and to make the best match with institutional resources. Investing in this type of analysis allows for the design of services which can help to make students successful.

Summary

Know your learners: Anticipate their concerns and provide support in the program design. Be ready and able to provide information when and as they need it. Marketing databases are only as good as your ability to respond to the learners.

How Do You Prepare Them to Be Successful Learners?

Gatekeeping vs. shepherding

Traditionally, admissions processes played a gatekeeping function, filtering applications to admit only those who fit the institution's or program's preferred profile. Those who passed through the filter presumably had the requisite preparation to succeed in the program. The premise of distance learning is at 180 degrees from this: distance learning is designed to accommodate the needs of the learner by providing learning opportunities accessible to him or her. Consequently, it is important to know what improves accessibility. Successful distance learning programs use counseling and academic advising to ensure learner success.

Portfolios

Good counseling can be combined with a student portfolio which documents the learner's needs, interests, and prior learning. Thus after learners have determined through initial academic advice that the program

offers what they seek, counseling and detailed academic advising can ensure a good fit. Prior learning assessment is conducted at a distance by . institutions such as Ohio University, University of Maryland, and Empire State College, and is usually integrated into a college course.

Orientations

A number of programs, recognizing that their adult students have been away from formal study for some period, provide a full orientation program to prepare them for their new study activities. This "Returning to Learning" activity can take various forms, from a face-to-face weekend session on campus to a term-long credit-bearing study of adult learning strategies. Organization, time-management, and study skills are critical components. Peer learners can be valuable for cooperative learning, simulations, team activities, and simply staying on track.

The University of Maine has developed a series of videotapes which are broadcast through its telecourse system (Dexter and Kane, 1995) and Rochester Institute of Technology and Empire State College have developed and distribute videotapes. Topics are directed to support the learner in areas such as distance learning success, writing, independent study, stress reduction, time management, and career options.

Study skills resources typical in campus environments are also important to distance learners. If print and phone are the major approaches to learning, resources should be available via this format. The University of Maryland, University College has set-up study skills assistance via the phone. Empire State College has set-up a virtual writing center on the Web. A key component of this service, however, is a phone number with voice mailbox for individual tutorial support for those who do not have access to the Web.

Career and counseling support is now also available through mentors and advisors with the addition of print resources, videos, and electronic resources. Current career information through the Internet is easily accessible through the gophers and Web sites for networking, r6sum6 and employee services, job lines, and assessment. Colleges such as Appalachian State University have created on-line counseling centers to provide standard information and to answer questions.

What Learner Supports Are Built into the Delivery of the Program?

Organizations which deliver distance learning must be adaptive to learners, needs and student -support services must reflect the unique goals of students outlined in the previous sections. Even the perfect CD-ROM or course guide will fail if the student does not receive good instructions or get them on time. These are some suggestions for delivery:

A. *Keep administrative processes simple, convenient, and automatic.* Standardize the processes for communication and offer provisions for communications through fax, phone, mail, Computers and other electronic means.

B. *Make both self-help strategies and direct assistance available .to aid learners in solving problems as they are encountered.* All staff should be trained in support service resources and recognize that they have a responsibility to address concerns of students. But programs should be designed so that learners can help themselves, since they often study at non-office times. Use phone or electronic options for students to get questions answered or to leave a message and get a prompt reply. Fax-on-Demand services or self-help booklets might help a student through a rough spot.

C. *Provide back-up materials and systems.* Make provisions for alternate arrangements if you know that there is a possibility that a course guide will not be available. Students participating in a

telecourse should have clear instructions about what to do if the instructor does not show up. Realize that there will be expectations or problems, but analyze your program and policies once you have multiple situations or exceptions.

D.   *Continually learn from your experience as an organisation.* A good test is to walk through your systems as a learner to see if they are easy and convenient to use. Ask for feedback on administrative strengths and shortcomings and ask support staff to report on concerns.

What Learner Supports Are Built into the Academic Program to Build Motivation and Confidence?

One way to enhance the motivation and confidence of the student is to build on the relevant experiences in which the student has been successful - usually tied to work or home. Each study activity should be designed so that the student can articulate his or her goals, including how his or her past experience can contribute to goals. If content in the courses can be built on real-life examples, learners will be more successful. In addition, every course must have clear instructions. The worst Situation for a distant student is to have carved out time to work and not understand what is expected. If you structure your learning materials and student service guides in similar packages or formats, it helps the learner to learn an approach to study. If site-based study centers are an option, they should be accessible and easy to use, with on site support or referral available.

In programs in which students come together for short periods (telecourses or videocourses) or residency-based programs, every opportunity should be taken to enhance the community for the learners. Of course, technical support and process facilitation are important. But even more important is the student service support to help students to create a learning community. Peer support networks and mentoring help to promote student success. The National Technological University (NTU) provides engineering courses through a video and satellite network (Oliveira, et al., 1989). Site coordinators provide support for the infrastructure, administration, tutoring, feedback, and facilitate local activities.

How Do Faculty Support Distance Learners?

Successful distance learning programs are learning organizations, which grow, adapt, and change based on the needs of the learners served. Part of this learning process is promoting effective faculty involvement in program design and delivery and supporting faculty development. A distance learning program must provide student supports which go beyond the delivery of courses; however, the faculty who teach the courses often provide-the integrative function of linking the academic program and the student to academic and support services. Unlike conventional campus programs, a faculty member cannot send the student to the Deans Office for information. The faculty for distance learners must be aware of resources for students and be willing to make referrals. It may at times go in the other direction: the faculty may become the whole college for the student. Distance learning programs must be designed to support faculty teaching at a distance.

Faculty should be trained and evaluated in methods of effective distance instruction. Distance learners need knowledge of assignments in advance, structure, and prompt feedback. Any instructional program is only as good as its ability to connect with its students. Program administrators should work with faculty to adapt instruction to the learner profile. The experiences, goals, and expectations of the learners should be integrated into the learning activity. Helping faculty to assess expectations and skills of distance learners through administrative and support services will assist students in the courses.

In order to deliver the courses, a faculty member must be at least somewhat proficient with the technology or have access to student support services. Effective use of technology in distance learning requires an ability to visualize the potential of expanding opportunities for students. The New School in New York and Empire State College have both received funding from the Sloan Foundation to provide faculty development to develop on-line courses.

Faculty at Empire State College teaching courses via computer conferencing routinely set up chat rooms for more informal student interaction. When technical employees enrolled in a course wanted to talk more about how examples applied to a particular work setting, a special chat room was set-up. Faculty must have support and input into delivery issues.

Summary

The *Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society,* intended to provide guidance and support for all educators and trainers using distance learning methods, address their second principle to learner support: "Distance learning opportunities are effectively supported for learners through fully accessible modes of delivery and resources." Each organization providing distance learning has the responsibility to assist learners in effectively using the resources provided through a learning support system (ACE, 1996). In this chapter we have tried to suggest strategies for providing that support.

NOTE: Further explication of some of the ideas expressed here is available through the University of Wisconsin module *Learner Support Services,* part of the distance learning certificate program.

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