Case Study in Developing Online Student Services: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Offering a comprehensive suite of online student services has been a priority of our distance education program at Southern New Hampshire University. Making these services a reality was not as easy as it sounded. This case study discusses the lessons learned as we work towards meeting our student services goals.

Background

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) implemented its Distance Education (DE) in 1996. Since that time SNHU's DE program has grown from a small program offering 10 – 15 courses a term, to one of New England's leading providers of online education. With nearly 10,000 yearly enrollments, over 700 + course sections offered yearly and 130 faculty members worldwide it was clear the types and availability of services offered even three years ago were no longer adequate. Additionally as the number of DE programs continued to rise it became increasingly evident that SNHU's online student services were not meeting the needs of their current students, nor were they effective at competing with the services offered by the big online programs and the for profit organizations. Fiscal constraints precluded our ability to outsource services or hire new staff. This made the department look inwards, towards its management and current staff, to research and find ways to create new and improve the current online services available to DE students.

Growing Pains

In 2001 it became clear the department's policies and procedures needed to be reviewed and revamped. As a result of heavy advertising, military partnerships, a quality delivery method, asynchronous format and the increased acceptance of online programs, enrollment numbers continued to rise. By the end of 2001 the number of yearly enrollments had increased by nearly thirty percent from the previous year. Unfortunately due to budgetary limitations the staffing did not grow with the enrollments. This left the whole department feeling overwhelmed and the students feeling under serviced.

The University's website did not meet the needs of prospective students, and the needs of the current students were not a top priority at that time, because the majority of them had access to services on campus. This created a large disadvantage for the students enrolled in DE programs. The only information readily available to prospective DE students was information on degree programs, course offerings and basic information about the online application process. The online services available to current students was the ability to apply and register, review current and projected schedules and get some basic advising information. Not only were the online services lacking, the department internal processes were also outdated and did not reflect the needs of current students. Registration confirmations were printed and mailed. The time needed to print, sort, stuff envelopes and mail out the confirmations was substantial. This did not include the time needed by the staff to actually process the information and handle all the other daily administrative tasks that were required of their positions. Additionally, registration updates and reminders, schedules and promotional materials were all printed materials which needed to be mailed.

Email was occasionally used for mass communications, but there were no listservs, bulk email software or distribution lists that were formatted for html messages. Instead all bulk emails had to either be sent using plain text out of Blackboard, our online course delivery system, or if html formatting was needed the students email address, which still needed to be gathered from Blackboard, could be entered manually and the message was sent using Outlook Express. This presented many problems;

1. Manually entering that many email addresses took a significant amount of time.
2. Obtaining the email addresses out of Blackboard meant using the email accounts provided to the students by the University and the majority of students did not use these accounts.
3. Sending out emails through Blackboard also meant the majority of students would not receive the message and those who did would receive something that was rather boring and plain looking due to the plain text format.
4. Sending out html enriched and graphic intensive emails through the University's server would bring the system to a halt. No one on campus would be able to send and receive emails, the server almost crashed and in general no one wanted this to continue.
5. Sending these types of bulk emails placed DE's email system on the block sender list of many major email providers, such as AOL and ATTBI.

It was due to the student's demands for better services and the staff's needs for streamlined processes that the quest for improved online services began.

Transitions

Although changes and improvements began in the fall of 2000, it was during the beginning of 2001 the Director of Distance Education and the Executive Director of Continuing and Distance Education approved the first major procedural change, directly related to student services. All registration confirmations would now be sent through email, this one change alone saved over 15 man hours a week. This one change opened the door for many improvements to the website and online services. Below is a timeline along with brief descriptions and the lessons learned during the implementation of current online services offered by SNHU's department of Distance Education.

1997-Online Library

Starting in 1997 all students were able to access library services database from anywhere in the world. The library subscribes to several research databases, but before 1997 students were only able to access the information from the library's computers on campus. This new technology started with off campus access to a single database but has since grown to include access to all current research databases. Students all over the world can now take advantage of the library's services 24 /7. Additionally students can conduct research using InfoTrack, EBSCOhost and other online services from the comfort of their homes. As with any new service there have been problems. First, students must activate their SNHU id numbers in order to access these services. Secondly, many students do not remember their student accounts and / or loose their id cards making them unable to access the site. They then try to contact the library for access information; however without the student's SNHU id the library can not help them and they have to wait for the DE office to open to get their information.

1999- Online Bookstore

Follett book stores contracted with SNHU to be the provider of course materials for all classes offered online and on campus. In 2000 an area on the SNHU website was developed and linked to efollett.com. All students were then able to purchase their textbooks and other materials needed for their courses through this website. Students can also research materials needed for their courses and they can look up information on the required text, get the price, and then comparison shop for better prices through places like Amazon.com without ever leaving home. There were several problems encountered during the transition to the online format, and many still are still in existence today. Students who lived overseas have

to plan on 3-4 weeks for delivery of their order and if courses are cancelled students have to pay shipping charges if they wish to return the book. Additionally, the book store does not carry computer software, so many IT and Communications majors are forced to purchase their software from outside sources. Another problem encountered was the book store allows all students to purchase books online, however they only order enough copies of the books needed for the classes being offered in DE for the number of students listed as being registered for those DE courses. Thusly if a course is being offered both online and on campus and a student taking the on campus course orders the book online it comes out of the stock for the DE class, meaning there will not be enough new books for all DE students enrolled in that class.

2001- Email Confirmations

All registrations for Distance Education courses come in from SNHU's website. The information is sent to a generic email box, which is downloaded onto a computer designated to registrations and applications. The registrations are then processed and the confirmations are emailed back to the email address from which the registration was sent. The process was easy to do, time efficient and made it very easy to track any problems. The lesson learned was, SNHU's email was still being blocked by many of the major email providers thusly many confirmations would be sent back as undeliverable. Many times students would say they never received the confirmation, even though the read receipt was sent back to the office or they would delete the confirmations without reading them thinking it was junk mail.

Online Access to policies and procedures

A complete set of policies and procedures that directly related to students, such as drop and withdrawal policies and procedures, refund requests, transfer credit evaluations and tuition reimbursement were created and added to the appropriate pages on the website. There were no down sides to this new service. It benefits both students and staff members and, in many cases, has streamlined or eliminated the need for staff involvement.

2002-Improved website

In 2002 the University changed its website format to Egrail, which created a unified look and feel to the entire site. This allowed the main tool bar to be visible from every webpage and allowed for easy navigation. The department was able to obtain training for one staff member who was the only person able to update any of the pages associated with DE. This made it possible to complete timely updates for all DE related information, easy customization of DE specific information and implementation of online services specific to DE and their students. The problems encountered during this transition were, the University was slow to recognize that DE had different needs for the website and was reluctant to issue more than one user id and password for access to the update site. Because the information changes frequently it was very important that more than one person in the department is trained on how to use Egrail and update the website. Additionally, no staff members are able to create web forms. These have to be created by the University's webmaster, so if a new form is needed or if changes to the application or registration forms are needed there is a wait period of up to two weeks, depending on the schedule of the webmaster.

Online Academic Advising

Complete information pertaining to academic advising, graduation, planning sheets, degree requirements, schedules and contact information are available in one spot on the website. This has enabled the university to provide student the opportunity obtain needed information on an as needed basis without having to worry about contacting the office during normal business hours. At this time there have been no drawbacks to providing this type of self service opportunity to students.

Downloadable Forms (PDF Forms)

Another initiative undertaken by Distance Education was to put all forms online for students to download. Originally the forms were uploaded as Word documents, but this allowed students to change the information, thusly corrupting the form. It was for this reason it was decided all the forms would be converted to PDF format Students are now able to access and download every form they will ever need during their time with SNHU. This includes, but is not limited to, petition to graduate, petition to walk, change of major and refund request forms. The amount of time students have to wait for forms to be mailed to them has vanished, and students do not have to have access to a fax machine if the form is needed quickly. The students did have a few technical problems with the downloadable the information, such as they have to have Adobe Reader software to access the forms. The software is free and the link is provided, but there are still many students who are not comfortable downloading software. Or they may be have an older computer or running an older operating system that will not allow them to download the software.

Online Technical Support

The technical support staff for Distance Education has created an FAQ sheet and has uploaded it onto the website. There is also virus information, PC maintenance, computer requirements and information on email located on this page. Students have immediate access to common problems and virus alerts. New and prospective students can view computer requirements to see if their system meets the minimum requirements and they can obtain information about the University's email service. The concerns with a self help technical support area are, the website is not an acceptable replacement for live technical support and many students do not bother reviewing this information so they don't know what to do or who to contact if they do have problems. Additionally, many continuing education and day students using Blackboard for hybrid courses contact the DE technical support staff for help. This causes problems because there are only two support staff devoted to 1500 DE students, plus they do not have access to non DE students information or records.

2003- LivePerson / Live Help

LivePerson is a company which provides live chat software to companies for sales, marketing and customer service. LivePerson provides the company with the html code needed to add and customize buttons on their website. When students click on the buttons it opens a live chat session with a Student Services Representative. This service significantly reduces the number of phone calls received on a daily basis. It prompts prospective students to talk to someone live, right now, while they are searching the website and the questions are fresh in their minds. The company provides detailed records of all interactions so the Mangers / Directors can run customized reports to view all transcripts. The buttons can be customized with staff pictures, company logos or anything the business would like displayed on the buttons. The key element for this plan was the cost. Like all great services it does not come cheap and some smaller programs may not be able to afford the service. The cost is determined by the number of licenses purchased, each user represents one license. If the person contacting the office has a slow connection, it will cause a delay in the delivery time of their message to the representative's screen.

Improved Email

SNHU switched to a web based email, which made accessing it far more user friendly for the students. The email was previously housed on an internal server and if students wanted to receive the email from their school accounts they had to set-up Outlook or Outlook Express to download the email. The new system allowed instant access to their email from any computer with an internet connection.

Constant Contact-Email Campaign Service

Constant Contact is an email campaign service which allows its customers to easily create and send bulk emails / newsletters. The service is web based and the templates are preloaded so customers simply log in, create the desired lists and subscriber groups, and customize one of the newsletter templates. The technology is very user friendly, cost efficient and allows easy tracking of returned emails, dead accounts, click-through and maintenance of subscriber groups. It also offers the user a quick and easy way to create professional, customizable newsletters and email campaigns. Students are quickly alerted to important updates, reminded about important dates and given information about new services and policies that may affect them. This is also an excellent tool for creating a sense of connection to the University for the student. The main concern with this service is, the website experiences technical difficulties several times a month and a few email providers have blocked email from Constant Contact as they are listed as providers of SPAM. It takes time to properly create and edit newsletters and email campaigns and involves input from the whole department as everyone is responsible for providing updates and information for the students.

Survey Monkey-Instant Feedback / Questionnaires

Survey Monkey is a company that provides software for the creation of online surveys. The surveys are completely customizable and are easy to create for most people. They allow companies create feedback surveys or questionnaires about new services and products. They can insert the link into an email, newsletter, or add it to a website. Survey Monkey stores the information online and the results can be downloaded into an excel spreadsheet or viewed online. Like many good software programs there are a few downsides. The export process can be somewhat time consuming if there are a lot of responses in the survey, and creating advanced surveys takes a lot of time and is best done by someone who has basic understanding of how to create logical expressions.

Looking Ahead

As the DE programs moves into the future there are several new initiatives currently under development, online tutoring, orientation services, WebAdvisor, and virtual advising nights. All of these new services are planned for 2004 and should have positive impacts on Student Services and the students.

There were many lessons learned throughout the transition process, and many more to come as we continue to research and implement new online student services. We learned many lessons by trial and error but even the experiences that did not go as plan have helped to educate us as to how to plan for future implementations. The main lessons learned were;

- Always conduct a test pilot. This will allow for an opportunity to try the product or service on a small scale, with a pre-determined audience. It will also allow time to gather feedback and analyze the results and make further recommendations. It is better to catch any problems in the implementation plan during a pilot, as opposed to when there are 5,000 students trying to use the new service or product.
- Always budget for 1 ½ times the estimated cost. As with any new product or service there will be hidden costs and unexpected glitches that will require extra funds. It is better to come in under budget than having to scramble to find funding to keep the service or product available.
- Always plan for the implementation process to take at least one term longer than expected. If it happens early, everyone will thank you, if it takes longer you run the risk of discouraging students and possibly the administration as well.
- Always get input on any new services from the entire staff, everyone from Student Services, Advising to Faculty Support will offer an unique prospective on the potential service or product.

Keeping abreast of new technology and services offered by other institutions are an essential part of knowing what is available and seeing how the services can benefit students and staff alike. Additionally, having staff available to research student needs as they relate to online services is equally important.

Adequate staffing is another thing we have learned that you absolutely need to have. All of these items will be a top priority for SNHU in the upcoming years.