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In order to understand and meet the needs of the distance learning population, student affairs administrators must partner with our colleagues in the fields of technology and distance education. A study of distance learners at North Carolina State University provides information and opportunities for strengthening those partnerships.

Assessing the Needs of Distance Learners: A Student Affairs Perspective

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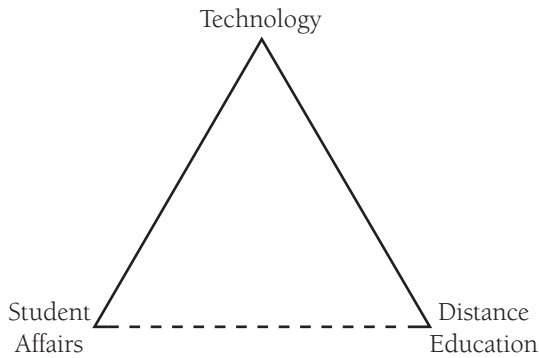
The convergence of technology, student affairs, and distance education has begun but is not yet complete. Given the ubiquitous nature of technology, the growth of distance education enrollments, and the role of student affairs in student learning and success, these three fields are now inextricably connected and form a triangular relationship (see Figure 4.1).

Currently, the strongest of these three relationships is between technology and distance education. Technology is the fuel on which distance education runs and is a primary focal point in virtually all distance education professional organizations and publications. Likewise, distance education is a regular feature in the technology field.

The relationship between technology and student affairs, while not anywhere near that of technology and distance education, is strengthening. Technology has received significant attention in the field of student affairs through its organizations, publications, and professional preparation graduate programs. While not a regular feature, student affairs and its various units do receive some attention in the technology field, particularly related to student conduct, records, policy, and security.

The weakest relationship is between student affairs and distance education. Distance education, while becoming a somewhat more visible topic, has not been featured in student affairs to the same degree as have technology or other topics. Likewise, student affairs is rarely mentioned in the field of distance education and is usually limited to the discussion of a narrow set of student services. Herein lies a significant gap: the triangle of student affairs, technology, and distance education is not complete because the connection

Figure 4.1. Relationship among Technology, Student Affairs, and Distance Learners



between student affairs and distance education is still in the early stages of development. However, it is encouraging that both professions—distance education and student affairs—are aware of this gap and are looking for ways to strengthen the bond. This triangular relationship highlights several issues that must be addressed by student affairs administrators, such as the role of student affairs in serving distance learners, the use of technology by distance learners and by student affairs offices, and the needs of the distance learning population.

Distance learners are a segment of today's college student population that can no longer be ignored by the student affairs profession. The most recent government data indicate that 56 percent of all degree-granting institutions offered at least one distance education course in 2000–2001; among these institutions, 34 percent offered degree programs designed to be completed totally through distance education. Distance education now has significant alliances with industry and the military and is viewed as one important solution to overall enrollment growth in higher education (Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2003). The impact is a shift in higher education from a campus-centric model, which is constrained by place and time, with control in the hands of administrators and faculty, to a consumer-centric model, where control is shared with the student and without the time and place constraints (Twigg and Oblinger, 1996; Beaudoin, 2003).

At North Carolina State University, the historic and projected growth of the distance learning population has mimicked the national trend, having started with video-based courses, adding Internet-based courses, eventually developing full degree programs, and anticipating more than 15 percent growth annually (North Carolina State University, 2005). In 1997, the North Carolina state legislature designated funding for distance education as one solution to the tremendous increase in college enrollment

expected in the state. This funding trickled down to the Division of Student Affairs, resulting in the creation of a full-time professional staff position responsible for helping the many units in the Division serve the distance learning population through its diverse courses, programs, and services.

Literature Review

A significant area of growth in literature about distance learning in higher education focuses on student services. Support for distance learners is emphasized in publications by professional organizations and associations, primarily in the fields of distance education and technology. All regional accrediting bodies (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001) and the American Council on Education (2002) have issued guidelines regarding distance education that highlight student support as an integral element.

While the topics of student support and student services appear with increasing frequency in the literature, the provision of student services is reported to be a significant but underdeveloped component of distance education programs (Peters, 1998; McLendon and Cronk, 1999; Husmann and Miller, 2001; Levy and Beaulieu, 2003; Levy, 2003). Student services for distance education is also an area that has only recently seen empirical study and is still quite lacking (Visser and Visser, 2000; LaPadula, 2003).

Two administrative philosophies for serving the distance learning population emerge from the literature: separate services for distance learners that exist in parallel to services provided for on-campus students, and integrated services that serve both the distance education and on-campus populations. Separate services seem to proliferate as a reaction to needs identified after distance education programs are established (Blimling and Whitt, 1999). This approach is also advocated as a deliberate one to ensure that the special needs of distance learners are met (Connick, 2001). However, others contend that integrating services for distance learners with services provided for on-campus students will result in a more comprehensive services package and make efficient use of resources (Rinear, 2003; Meyers and Ostash, 2004; Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004). Kretovics (2003) asserts, "This view of separate but equal services should be unacceptable to current student affairs practitioners" (p. 11).

One major model for defining the scope of services for distance learners emerges in both the literature and in institutional practice and can be described as an enrollment management-plus model. Included in this model are the typical enrollment-management services, such as admissions, financial aid, and registration, in addition to basic academic resources, such as libraries, academic advising, and technical support. These represent the minimal transactional services required for students to be enrolled and complete a distance education course and for which technology has been used to adapt existing services to extend the provision to the distance learning population. This limited set is very often the extent of services found in the

literature and offered in practice (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2003; LaPadula, 2004). Even the eight regional accrediting bodies use this model in their “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs” (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2000). There has been a recent trend to include tutoring, career counseling, and bookstore services in research and in practice (Levy and Beaulieu, 2003; Floyd and Casey-Powell, 2004). While some researchers have been looking beyond this somewhat limited model and examining other services and activities as well, such as student health, student government, personal counseling, orientation, and virtual communities (Hirt, Cain, Bryant, and Williams, 2003; LaPadula, 2003; Rinear, 2003; Meyers and Ostash, 2004), no studies could be identified involving institutions that offer the full array of student affairs programs and activities to the distance learning population.

There is some evidence that distance learners, who tend to be older and have work and family commitments (Kretovics, 2003; Moe, 2002; Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2003), do not desire these services (Hirt, Cain, Bryant, and Williams, 2003). However, the distance learner population will see growth in the traditional college demographic group as higher education enrollments grow overall and institutions continue to use distance education as a means to meet enrollment projections.

While the body of research is growing, there is one significant omission of key importance from the student affairs perspective. Missing from much of the earlier distance education literature is the connection between success and a sense of connection with other students and the institution. One exception is Krauth and Carbajal (1999), who find that sense of connection is strongly tied to retention, completion, and satisfaction. A widely accepted concept in the student affairs profession is that traditional on-campus students benefit from being engaged in campus life and feeling connected to various aspects of the institution (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). This benefit may also extend to distance learners, as evidence mounts that these students are more successful when provided with support services (Dirr, 1999; Levy and Beaulieu, 2003). The term *student services* itself is often referenced to include transactional services that are necessary for the student to conduct business with the institution (enrollment management) and academic services (plus). The term can be considered exclusive of the type of programming available to traditional on-campus students that enhance their sense of connection. Examples include student organizations; support centers for marginalized student populations, such as women, gay-lesbian-transgendered, and African-American students; health education; arts programs; student government; leadership programs; recreation programs; and student activities.

More recent research has observed the importance of sense of connection for distance learners as the student affairs profession seeks to understand its role in serving this population. Meyers and Ostash (2004) point to

the value of online communities to nurture distance learners' sense of inclusion. Floyd and Casey-Powell (2004) include "social support services" as one type of "student support services" available to distance learners, and "fostering sense of belonging" is included in the "Inclusive Student Services Process Model" they articulate (p. 59). Kretovics (2003) includes "the creation of community" as a primary recommendation for student affairs professionals in serving the distance learning population (p. 5) and suggests that some of the lessons learned in serving commuter students in the 1970s and 1980s may be helpful in serving distance learners.

There does seem to be a concern in the student affairs profession that interpersonal interactions are being sacrificed in order to achieve efficiency in providing student services. Although distance makes in-person interactions difficult, the Internet provides flexibility in communication via e-mail, instant messaging, online forms, and video conferencing. These Internet solutions are welcomed, but with some trepidation. Meyers and Ostash (2004) suggest that practitioners should deliberately plan which services will be contact and which will be self-serve. A distance learning task force convened by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA, 2000) contends that distance learners may not experience the same socialization process as their on-campus counterparts. The term "high tech—high touch," first coined by John Nesbitt (1982), still resonates for student affairs practitioners who are looking for a balanced approach in using technology to serve both distance learners and on-campus learners.

In an effort to understand better the role of the Division of Student Affairs in serving the distance learners at North Carolina State University, a survey was conducted to gauge several aspects of the distance education experience. For the purposes of the study, the term *distance learners* was used to describe those students at NC State University who were enrolled only in distance education course(s) at the time of the study. The term *on-campus learners* described those students who were enrolled only in on-campus courses at the time of the study.

Method

This quantitative study was designed to compare the responses of distance learners at NC State University with a matched group of on-campus learners.

Participants. A total of 2,077 students—the entire distance learning population at NC State University—was surveyed in the fall semester of 2003. Of these, 778 students participated, for a response rate of 37.4 percent. A control group of on-campus students was selected based on matching characteristics of gender and ethnicity. A total of 6,190 on-campus students was surveyed, and 1,962 participated for a response rate of 31.6 percent.

Instrumentation. The research team collected feedback from all student affairs offices and other units providing services to students to develop the survey instrument. The survey was distributed to both on-campus and

distance learners in an attempt to learn whether there were any differences between these student groups regarding their knowledge, use, and need of the various courses, services, and programs in student affairs. Students were asked to rate importance, satisfaction, and likeliness on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = Very Unimportant, 4 = Very Important; 1 = Very Unsatisfied, 4 = Very Satisfied; 1 = Very Unlikely, 4 = Very Likely).

The survey was divided into five sections:

- Specific experiences as distance learners, including their primary reasons for taking a distance education course, the frequency of campus visits and the reasons for those visits
- Technology, including skills, type of computer, and type, frequency, and location of Internet connection
- Sense of connection with others at the University
- Preferences for communicating with NC State University's various departments, programs and services
- Importance and satisfaction of each of the available services and programs
- Importance and likelihood of use of services and programs not available to distance learners.

The survey distributed to the on-campus control group included the same questions as the distance learner survey, with the exception of the sections regarding the distance learning experience and likelihood of using services and programs currently not available to distance learners.

Procedure. The surveys were administered electronically to both on-campus students and distance learners. Using a homegrown bulk e-mail system, an initial invitation was sent that contained a hypertext link to a web-based survey. A paper version was available on request. After the initial invitation, two follow-up e-mails were sent to non-respondents to encourage the completion of the survey. The distance learners received an additional follow-up from their faculty encouraging them to complete the survey. A cash incentive was promoted in the original invitation and subsequent e-mails to enhance the response rate.

Analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of the variables, such as frequencies, as well as inferential statistics. Two-way analysis of variance was used to determine if there were statistical differences between the means of selected variables. An alpha value of .05 was chosen to determine if differences were statistically significant. R-squares were examined to indicate the strengths of the relationships.

Results

The results of the survey underscored significant differences between distance and on-campus learners.

Experiences as a Distance Learner. The first section of the survey, which was not included in the version distributed to on-campus students, examined the specific experiences of distance learners. When distance learners were asked why they took distance-education courses, the most frequently cited reason was to accommodate work schedules (72.6 percent), followed, in order, by family obligations (42.3 percent), live too far (42.1 percent), prefer distance education (24.7 percent), financial (16 percent), other (12.8 percent), course not available on campus (4.2 percent), and on-campus section full (2.8 percent). The survey also asked how often and why distance learners came to campus. With respect to frequency, 40.9 percent reported that they never came to campus, 31.8 percent came once or twice a semester, 18.2 percent monthly, 6.3 percent weekly, and 2.8 percent daily. Respondents gave varying reasons for why they came to campus, including to take tests and exams (34.5 percent), purchase textbooks and supplies (32.5 percent), meet instructor (16.6 percent), use libraries (15.9 percent), meet advisor (11.5 percent), pay for courses (11.3 percent), register for courses (9.8 percent), attend NC State events (7.9 percent), use computer resources (6.8 percent), and get ID card (5.1 percent).

Technology. The second section of the survey addressed the use of technology. While both distance learners and on-campus learners were asked these questions, only results for distance learners are reported here. Distance learners were overwhelmingly satisfied with their overall computer skills, with 96.4 percent indicating that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. When asked where they connect to the Internet, distance learners most frequently cited home (90.2 percent), followed, in order, by work (54.9 percent), NC State campus (9.4 percent), public library (4.7 percent), and other (7.4 percent). To connect to the Internet at home, 30.8 percent of distance learners reported using a telephone modem and 62.4 percent used a high-speed connection device. When asked about the quality of their Internet connection at home, 68.3 percent described their connection as good or excellent, 19.8 percent as adequate, and 6.4 percent as poor. Less than one percent said their connection was unacceptable.

Sense of Connection. The third section of the survey asked students to report their sense of connection with various components of university life. The survey examined students' sense of connection at the micro and macro levels (see Table 4.1). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each component assessing a sense of connection, as well as their satisfaction with each. Choices ranged from one to four, from Very Unimportant to Very Important.

With the exception of sense of connection with "My instructor," there were statistically significant differences between distance learners and on-campus learners for the importance of each component that assessed the sense of connection. On-campus students consistently reported statistically significant higher levels of importance. With respect to satisfaction, there

Table 4.1. Sense of Connection

<i>Component</i>	<i>Importance</i>		<i>Satisfaction</i>	
	<i>DE Pure</i>	<i>Campus</i>	<i>DE Pure</i>	<i>Campus</i>
Students in my [DE] courses	2.53	3.10*	3.01	2.98
Students in general	2.08	2.87*	3.07	2.93*
My instructor	3.63	3.60	3.18	2.96*
My academic adviser	2.92	3.47*	3.06	2.97
My academic department	2.96	3.44*	3.08	2.98*
Faculty in general	2.82	3.12*	3.09	2.90*
NC State University	3.03	3.38*	3.16	3.08*

* $p < .05$

were statistically significant differences for each item except “Students in my [distance] course(s)” and “My academic adviser.” Unlike importance, where on-campus students reported higher levels of importance, distance learners reported statistically significant higher levels of satisfaction than did on-campus learners.

Communication Preference. Communicating with students, regardless of the method of course delivery, can be challenging, at best. In the fourth section of the survey, students were asked how they prefer to receive initial information regarding programs and services, receive subsequent information, and how they prefer to send information. Results indicate that distance learners and on-campus learners overwhelmingly select e-mail as their preferred mode of communication, regardless of the type of information communicated. In addition, the two groups agree that the second most preferred mode of communication, for any type of information, is snail mail. The third most widely preferred mode of communication for both groups, for all types of information, was Web sites, with one exception. On-campus students selected the phone as their third choice of communication for sending information. The two groups split on their fourth choice. Distance education students preferred the phone for each type of information, while on-campus students preferred in-person contact as their fourth choice. Thus, when it comes to the phone versus in-person contact, distance education students prefer the phone and students on-campus prefer in-person, as would be expected.

Programs and Services. Units within and outside of student affairs provide programs and services to facilitate student learning. One of the primary goals of this study was to explore the importance of student services to distance learners compared to on-campus learners, regardless of where those services and programs administratively reside. Thus, the last section of the survey asked respondents to rate the importance of a collection of services and programs, as well as their satisfaction with each (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Programs and Services for Distance and On-Campus Learners

<i>Program/Service</i>	<i>Importance</i>		<i>Satisfaction</i>	
	<i>DE</i>	<i>Campus</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>Campus</i>
Advising-Continuing Education Office	2.98	3.05	3.10	3.0*
Advising-Faculty	3.05	3.49**	3.05	2.97
Advising-Virtual Advising Center	2.56	2.58	3.07	3.04
Student ID	2.47	3.36**	3.07	3.28**
Bookstore	2.94	3.25**	3.13	2.98**
Career Center	2.47	3.04**	2.99	3.05
Cashiers Office	2.77	3.11**	3.04	2.97*
Chap Cooperative Ministry	2.01	2.34**	3.07	3.1
Computer Help Desk-College	2.67	2.94**	3.11	3.02*
Computer Help Desk-University	2.74	2.94**	3.08	3.03
Crafts Center	1.76	2.31**	3.18	3.0*
Dance	1.67	2.19**	3.11	2.93*
Dining	1.77	3.18**	2.98	2.75*
Financial Aid	2.63	3.48**	2.98	2.88
Gallery of Art and Design	1.82	2.51**	3.05	3.08
Greek Life	1.64	1.99**	3.03	2.73*
Health Promotion	2.08	3.03**	3.05	2.98
Housing	1.7	3.13**	2.97	2.79*
Libraries	3.03	3.62**	3.25	3.27
Multicultural Student Affairs	1.88	2.61**	3.00	3.00
Music	1.88	2.77**	3.01	2.93
Orientation/Continuing Education	2.33	2.53**	3.02	2.99
Orientation-Degree Seeking	2.37	3.01**	2.92	2.89
Parents & Families Services	1.94	2.68**	2.94	2.97
Physical Education	2.05	3.02**	2.88	3.09**
Registration and Records	3.29	3.66**	3.13	3.19
Student Center	2.09	3.12**	2.96	3.06
Student Conduct	2.28	3.05**	2.98	2.96
Student Government	2.02	2.86**	2.86	2.76
Student Handbook	2.46	2.84**	3.00	2.96
Student Leadership	2.11	2.84**	2.97	3.04
Student Media	2.11	2.93**	3.05	2.98
Student Organizations	2.10	3.21**	3.02	3.13
Theater	1.94	2.68**	3.00	3.09
Women's Center	2.02	2.79**	3.08	3.15

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .0001$

For services and programs currently available, many of the relationships between on-campus learners and distance learners were statistically significant with respect to both importance and satisfaction. However, the R-square values were extremely low for satisfaction and relatively low for importance, with the highest R-square value equaling .31. The highest R-square values were found between on-campus learners and distance learners in how they

Table 4.3. Likelihood of Distance Learners Using Programs and Services Currently Unavailable

<i>Program/Service</i>	<i>Likely or Very Likely</i>	<i>Unlikely or Very Unlikely</i>
Club Sports	14%	85%
Counseling Center	30%	71%
Fitness/Wellness	38%	62%
Gymnasium	44%	56%
Intramurals	15%	85%
Online Leadership Program	31%	68%
Outdoor Adventures	20%	80%
Student Health Services	32%	68%
Student Legal Services	28%	72%
Virtual Orientation	30%	70%

rated the importance of the following services: student center (.23), student organizations (.25), housing (.26), and dining (.31). The services rated highest in terms of importance to distance learners include registration and records, faculty advising, and libraries. In comparison, on-campus students rated registration and records, libraries, and student health services highest in terms of importance.

Distance learners at NC State University do not pay the majority of student fees and are therefore not eligible to participate in many student services provided to on-campus students. A primary goal of the survey was to determine if distance learners would indeed use selected student services if given the opportunity. Therefore, respondents were asked to rate how likely they were to use several student services for which they are currently ineligible (see Table 4.3).

In addition to examining how likely distance learners were to use these services and programs, they were also asked to rate the importance of each. In comparing their mean scores with those of on-campus learners, all of the relationships were statistically significant except for virtual orientation, which is not available to on-campus learners. However, the R-square values were relatively low, with the highest value for student health services at .28.

Implications

Several implications for practice emerged from the results of this study.

Programs and Services. Results from the survey indicated that while on-campus learners and distance learners do not differ tremendously in how satisfied they were with available services and programs, they do indeed differ in the importance they placed on these services and programs. As would be expected, the greatest differences were seen in services not traditionally utilized by distance learners, such as the student center, student organizations, housing, and dining. Instead, distance learners were more concerned

with administrative services that are critical to their success, such as registration and records, advising, and the libraries. Perhaps they would place a higher value on other services and programs that are currently available to them if they were aware of these opportunities. Student affairs practitioners should be deliberate in marketing services and programs to this population.

Results of the survey also indicated that distance learners report they would likely use services and programs that are currently not at their disposal. For example, more than 30 percent of distance learners reported that they would likely or very likely use the counseling center, fitness or wellness facilities, gymnasium, online leadership development series, student health services, or virtual orientation, if they were available. These numbers are promising and should lead student affairs practitioners to delve more deeply into the possibility of offering such services and programs to this population.

The current profile of distance learners, along with previous studies and this study suggest that they desire only minimal transactional services. However, it is also clear that other services and programs would be welcome if available and are likely to be even more desirable to the new distance learner who chooses an online environment over a campus environment after high school. In addition, there are services and programs that may not be rated as important by distance learners and on-campus students alike, but that student affairs practitioners believe are critical to student development and learning. Many of these programs and services, such as leadership programs and support for marginalized groups, are not currently available to distance learners, but should be. Challenging the enrollment management-plus model is a key component to serving this growing and changing population successfully. Meeting this challenge requires educating other campus administrators about the role of student affairs and its contribution to student success. At NC State University, distance education administrators have embraced the notion of providing a broad spectrum of services and programs because of their belief that it is appropriate to do so and, pragmatically, because of the potential positive impact on retention.

Enrollment Growth and Changing Demographics. Student affairs administrators must stay abreast of institutional enrollment projections in order to anticipate the continued increase in the sheer number of distance learners as well as shifts in the demographic makeup of this population. Data from the Sloan Consortium (2004) predict large increases in online enrollments nationally with little evidence of a plateau at this time. The expected average growth rate is more than 20 percent, which far exceeds the rate of overall growth in the overall student body. The bottom line is that distance learners will represent a growing portion of the overall student population for some time. As fully developed degree programs are added to existing scattered course offerings, institutions can expect growth in the traditional distance education population, including older students who live at a distance and students sponsored by industry and the military.

Likewise, students who fit the traditional on-campus profile are increasingly interested in distance education opportunities as an alternative to traditional on-campus courses. In addition, students in the traditional range of eighteen to twenty-two years old will increasingly be exposed to precollege distance education offerings. The latest data from the U.S. Department of Education (Setzer and Lewis, 2005) indicate that 36 percent of public school districts had students enrolled in distance education courses in 2002–2003, and 72 percent of those districts plan to expand offerings in the future. Today's elementary school student may very well attend college directly after high school, but may also expect to receive much of that education in an on-line setting. The combination of shifting demographics and tremendous growth creates a considerable challenge for all of higher education.

Moreover, distance learners are a somewhat invisible population, which further increases the challenge to meet their needs. These students are not physically on campus and have limited in-person interaction with faculty, staff, and other students. Though there is an expected shift as more degree programs are developed, most of these students at NC State University are not matriculated into a degree program and enroll on a part-time basis. Distance learners, on the whole, are not given the same consideration as are on-campus students. Student affairs practitioners must carefully consider these three factors—enrollment growth, changing demographics, and invisibility—in serving this population.

Resources. There are significant resource implications for institutions and students in serving the distance learning population. First, providing services and programs from a distance requires maintaining pace with technological change, which requires a significant investment of resources. Second, institutions may need to impose student fees on distance learners that previously were not required in order to fund the provision of services and programs. Third, these efforts require significant administrative planning and partnerships within student affairs units and with other institutional service providers, especially the distance education administrative units.

At NC State University, the distance education administrative and student affairs units have partnered to improve the overall experience of distance learners and pitch distance education to new audiences. By proactively seeking to serve the distance learning population and seeking that partnership, student affairs administrators have an opportunity to bridge the widely acknowledged gap between student affairs and academic affairs (Kezar, Hirsch, and Burak, 2002). The benefits of a distance education partnership can spill over into other areas. NC State University's Division of Student Affairs actively participates in campuswide discussions, committees, and planning efforts as a result of the increased visibility achieved through partnerships with the distance education units.

Future Research. Given the explosion in distance education and the ongoing demographic shift of the distance learning population, researchers

must continually assess the size of this population, the profile of the distance learner, and the needs of distance learners. In addition, researchers and practitioners must pay careful attention to another growing population, hybrid learners—those students who are taking both on-campus and distance education courses. All three populations—distance learners, on-campus learners, and hybrid learners—have special needs. Student affairs professionals, as well as other service professionals and researchers, must identify those needs and then provide appropriate services and programs. Future research should also explore the relationship between distance learner success and involvement in student services and programs. Similarly, researchers should explore the impact of distance on distance learners' use of and desire for services and programs: Do distance learners who live far away from campus want or need the same services as those who live in close proximity to the institution? Finally, researchers should examine administrative relationships between student affairs and distance education units and their impact on the academic success of distance learners.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, the following seven recommendations are offered to student affairs practitioners.

Student affairs administrators are encouraged to understand how distance education is administered at the institution and what current and projected enrollments are for the distance learning population.

Practitioners are encouraged to understand institutional definitions of distance education as well as the criteria for defining courses, degree programs, and students as “distance” and how these elements compare with the on-campus versions of each.

Student affairs administrators are encouraged to learn how distance education is funded at the institution and if those funds are available for providing services and programs to distance learners.

Student affairs administrators should be prepared to advocate for the role of student affairs in distance education at the institution and to educate others regarding the mission, objectives, administrative design, and leadership of the student affairs unit and units within it.

Student fees must be given careful consideration as they apply to distance learners. Any fees imposed on distance learners should be adequate to fund the respective services or programs. Likewise, distance learners should receive equitable services and programs for any fees paid. This may seem to be an obvious point, but it is worth considering when the students involved are generally at such a distance that the provision of existing services and programs is very difficult.

While some existing programs and services initially developed for on-campus students can be adapted for distance learners, new programs

and services may need to be developed to meet any special needs of this population.

Chief student affairs officers are encouraged to assign leadership duties associated with serving the distance learning population. Such delegation can be accomplished by establishing a position dedicated solely to these activities, by these activities constituting one designated duty of a position, through a committee, or through a combination of these approaches.

Regardless of which method is used, formalizing a commitment to serving this population will increase the likelihood of success.

Conclusion

At NC State University, this survey project has moved the institution forward in its efforts to serve the distance learning population. Within the Division of Student Affairs, departments now have a better understanding of the needs and interests of distance learners and are actively seeking enrollment planning information as they retrofit existing programs and services and develop new ones for this population. A campuswide effort to address changes in the student fee structure is underway, and student service providers will consider the survey data in the decision-making process. Administrators in the university's technology and distance education units have a better understanding of the distance learning population and of the role of the Division of Student Affairs.

Student affairs practitioners are committed to serving all students, regardless of any factor that differentiates them from the mainstream. As a profession, student affairs must now recognize that students who choose to learn from a distance are part of the institutional community and should be provided equitable resources, services, and programs. The challenges of understanding and serving the distance learning population are significant. Creating formal partnerships between student affairs and the distance education administration is a critical component in overcoming those challenges. Closing this gap will result in strengthening the triangular relationship between technology, distance education, and student affairs and will help move our institutions toward a more inclusive model.

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