STUDENT LEARNING AND STUDENT SERVICES: POLICY ISSUES

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I. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of students in the United States are involved in online education, according to research by the Sloan Foundation. By fall 2004, approximately 2.6 million students were estimated to be enrolled in at least one online course, an average growth rate of 24.8% from 2003–04; this figure represents a 5% increase over the 2002–03 growth rate [1]. The consequence of this continuing expansion of the e-learning population is that policies with respect to student learning/academic programs will need to be updated or developed; and policies and practices with respect to existing student services, which often provide different support for onsite and distance students or minimize online services, will need to fit the realities of online learning. Given the technological world of the 21st century, it would behoove institutions if such policies applied to all students and services were online.

What are the student areas which require policies for online learning to be effective? Issues in four areas seem to dominate: student learning, student services, 24/7 support and outsourcing, and multi-campus/system alignment. Each points to several policy issues, often inter-linked, that need discussion, decisions and implementation practices [2]. The discussion below does not make a distinction between fully online or blended courses, unless noted.

II. POLICY ISSUES

A. Student Learning: Academic Program Issues

As student enrollment increases, a key academic issue is whether the institution or department will offer individual courses, programs or complete degrees in online or blended formats. While many schools do offer total degrees, others currently debate the course or program issue [3]. The consequence of this decision impacts the entire university structure and operations and the extent of its commitment: technology support, library resources, faculty development, teaching load and promotion, administrative support for the online enterprise, course evaluations, student and faculty services, whether services are 24/7 or time limited, and so on—all of which affect institutional planning and budgets. Similarly, a determination has to be made whether there will be a differential fee structure for onsite, online or blended courses. The outcome will reveal how the institution sees itself within higher education in this decade and beyond; for what roles do they believe students should be prepared and how should the enterprise be organized to support those roles?

Several other areas affected by the above decision—the extent to which the academic program offerings are onsite, online or blended learning—are course load limits, course evaluations, examinations for off-campus students, and student technology expectations.

1. Course Load

The issue here is whether course load limitations should be related to mode of learning: is there a maximum load for an online student? Is the issue the online coursework or the student's full time versus part-time status? Should the decision be different for online and onsite courses?

For example, students at Washington State University's (WSU) distance degree program (DDP) must have an advisor's clearance to register each semester. Thus, students with 12 or more credits must have completed at least 50% of their coursework and students with less than 12 credits must have completed at least 25% of their coursework in order to be cleared. The purpose is to assure that students keep their financial aide and make progress towards their degree [4, 5].

2. Course Evaluations

What policies govern course evaluations at the institution? How do online/ distance students obtain the evaluation materials and provide feedback? At the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), distance course evaluations are online and students are electronically prompted to complete the instrument one month before the end of the semester. Response rates are very high because the UMUC policy requires that all students respond or they cannot re-enter the online class; the software allows students to select the option "no response" when the evaluation pops up. At WSU, evaluations are also online; however, response rates depend on the ability of faculty to persuade students to complete the instrument. A related issue is the policy about evaluation standardization: is there a departmental evaluation (i.e., WSU) or institution-wide (i.e., UMUC), or another model? Do students in blended courses use the onsite or online evaluations?

3. Examinations

Since distance students are not on-campus for exams, another policy issue involves off-site examinations. Who decides: the individual faculty member, the department, university-wide policy? These decisions must lead to clear procedures involving whether these are to be online, timed exams or proctored. If the latter, then items such as identifying proctors, locations, and deadlines must be transparent, user-friendly, and interactive [6]. It should be noted that off-campus examinations are likely not an issue for blended courses.

4. Student Technology Skills and Expectations

The policy requirement here is for a clear standard that specifies the minimum expected technical skills and competencies of the students as well as the required hardware and software for the learning environment. In addition, the extent of multi-media in courses has become an issue in some institutions, because many students still have dial-up service and media takes a long time to load or may be costly. Policies about expected skill levels and the minimum speeds reflect not only the university's decisions about the extent of technology-linked learning, but also impact the flexibility in course design. Given the continuing advancements in technology, how might the institution facilitate high speed access; what policies might support access to free or discount WiFi services?

B. Student Services Issues

The realm of student services may include administrative areas such as registration, admissions, and student accounts that enable students to get into a course, as well as academic support once a person is enrolled such as advisement, library resources, text purchases, technical support and so on. The WCET-LAAP project, which developed guidelines and tools for web-based services, drew the following, all

encompassing, web of services graphic [7]:

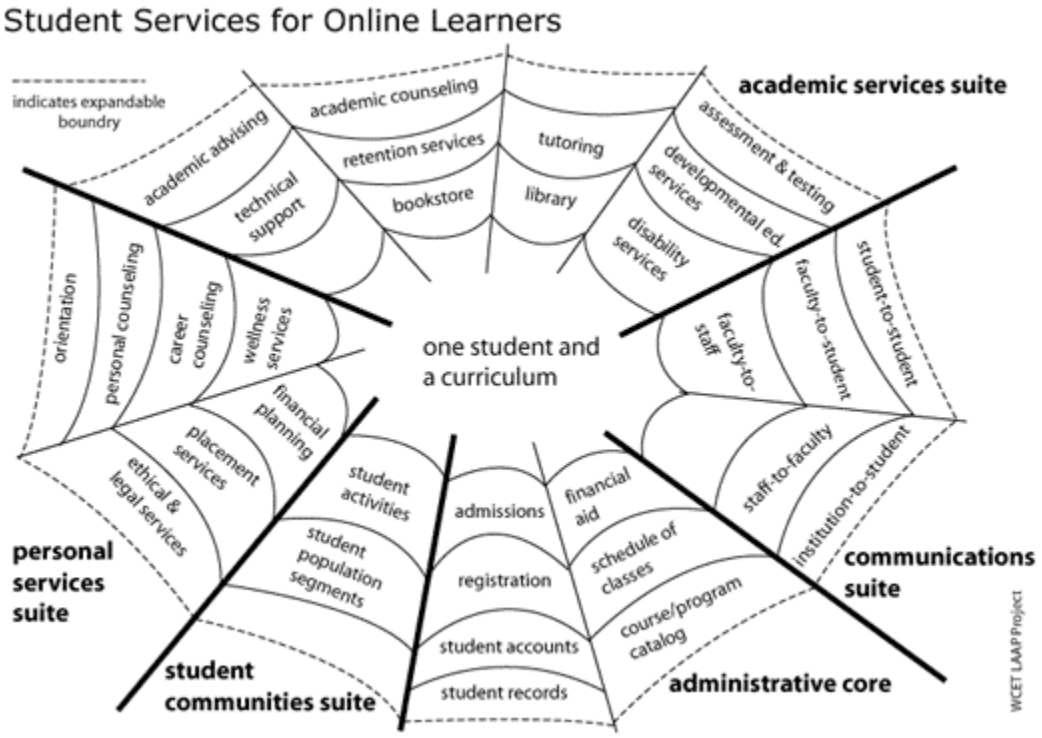

Figure 1. WCET-LAAP Project

In general, student services that support the online learner require policies that identify which services are online, whether they are available to all students or only those in online courses and whether the service is accessible 24/7. Thereafter it is important to clarify the procedures and clearly communicate and update the information. The WCET graphic, above, identifies a global (ideal?) system that covers all aspects of a student's life with the academic institution. Processes such as application, course registration, financial aid, drop/add, and class schedules are a reflection of services in the administrative core that are usually available online to all students.

The discussion below will focus on three specific areas in the academic services suite—advisement; library and information resources; technical support—which have come up most frequently in discussions with student services professionals and which may not be available online or only available to online students.

1. Advisement

A policy to provide online advisement requires staff training in both counseling and technology. This means that advisors have to be comfortable with distance communication, with technological multi-tasking, and with both synchronous and asynchronous relationship management. Since many counseling programs do not offer this perspective, it becomes incumbent upon the institution to hire and train advisors who can excel in these functions. Moreover, students in blended coursework may need both options—online and onsite—which requires the ability to toggle back and forth. A related challenge is the need to integrate new technologies to automate routine tasks and do the time consuming activities, thus enabling the advising staff to offer "the more valuable 'high-touch' service students prefer" [7].

2. Information and Library Resources

The ability to obtain and access the resources that are critical for quality academic learning without limitation of time or place requires a policy that identifies the extent of the institution's commitment: how much of the resources will be online and with what depth? What proportion will be full-text? What range of resources are available—e-books, journal articles, databases? Increasingly, the need is to have online databases with full-text articles, e-books, online tutorials, and help from librarians. Related to the resource and access issue is the extent to which student assistance by librarians and tutorials will be supported. At UMUC, for example, personal library assistance is available 24/7, both synchronously and asynchronously, via phone, chat or email [8]. Once again, the issue is whether these resources will be available to all students or only those in online coursework.

3. Technology and Technical Support

Without the technology infrastructure none of the online programs and services can exist, as we know. Policy issues involve questions related to the learning process, such as determining which learning management system(s) will be available; will the university have one system or will departments have independent choices? Which administrative process, will be done online, i.e., registration, drop-add, bill payment and so on? How much computer lab support will be available, for both onsite and blended students (who may not bring their computers to campus)? At the University of Maine, a related issue arose: the need for new refund policies due to technical problems such as inaccessibility or problems getting a password [3]. Moreover, the potential for anytime, anywhere learning leads to additional policy decisions: will assistance be available in real time or asynchronously? Will assistance be 24/7 or specific times? Decisions about where responsibility for technology and the support lies within the university structure, and its breadth and depth, reflect the perceived importance of this issue.

C. Should Services be 24/7? Should Services be Provided In-house?

The ability to provide academic programs and support for online learners is closely related to two policy issues: whether services should be available 24/7 or for specific hours; and whether the services should be provided in-house or out-sourced. These issues often arose first with the need to provide technical assistance, then moved to areas such as tutoring, book purchasing and now arise in discussions about first-line advising. The decision with respect to 24/7 assistance requires that institutions identify their students' needs and the support areas involved. How that support will be managed, in-house or by and external organization, involves considerations about finding the qualified staff to provide the support, whether the institution wants to be involved in the management details and how the needs match budgetary considerations. If the support is out-sourced, training the external provider in the culture and details of the organization must be done. UMUC, for example, provides 24/7 USA-wide email, phone, and chat support for the learning management system by using an outside company. UMUC's library services provide similar personal help via a librarian support company. Some universities use a tutoring provider, such as Smarthinking.com, to provide assistance in basic areas such as math, accounting, economics, and Spanish. Many institutions now use a company such as MBS Direct to handle all book orders. The trend towards outsourcing support functions may be one of the more striking developments in higher education.

D. Communication Issues

Given the need for speedy and accurate communication about academic programs and student services, policy decisions about where the communication responsibilities lie are needed. For example, an

interactive, easily navigable website is critical. Moreover, communication does not need to be only passive, waiting for students to ask for information. The WCET report notes that the use of 'push and pull' technologies can enable students to 'pull' the information they need, while allowing the institution to 'push' reminders about deadlines and services [7]. Oblinger and Skinner [9] identify several guiding questions about services: are they "available to users at any time, wherever they are? Is the service available in real time? Do the offerings and services 'learn' from interaction with users? Do the offerings and services anticipate the needs of users?" Another resource is an online handbook. How the communication is managed, updated, structured, and interactive requires a policy about communication management.

E. Multi-campus/ System Issues

The above issues deal with intra-institutional policies and practices. In cases of a multi-campus system, inter-institutional issues are involved. At Washington State University, for example, system funding for distance courses is affected by which campus is the student's home base; at the University of Maine System, residency at the student's home campus (last 30 credits) is still an issue; in some systems, policies for transferring credits among campus schools with facility and clarity are not in place, thus affecting degree completions; and decisions about fees for distance courses whether taken by residents or non-residents need to be consistent within a system. It is imperative that governing boards foster fluidity and strong alignment among campuses, or students will face barriers to completing their education.

III. CONCLUSION

There are four broad policy issues that affect online student learning and student services within an institution: whether online/ blended academic offerings will be individual courses, programs or degrees; whether online services will be available only to distance students or to everyone; whether the services will be available 24/7 or at specified hours, in house or by an external company; and whether there will be a differential fee structure for distance and onsite coursework. With respect to multi-campus/system alignment issues, questions about residency, ease of transferability, and fees and campus pay-backs need to be addressed quickly. The responses to these questions will reveal how the institution sees itself and its role in higher education in the decades to come.

IV. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudine SchWeber, Ph.D. is Chair of the Doctor of Management Program at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) and Collegiate Professor. Previously she was Associate Provost for Distance Education and Lifelong Learning at UMUC. Dr. SchWeber has written and made many presentations about varied issues in online learning in the United States and abroad. She was a Fulbright Fellow to Israel focusing on e-learning and its challenges.

V. REFERENCES

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