

# Using ALNs to Support a Complete Educational Experience

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## ABSTRACT

The most obvious factor influencing students' satisfaction with distance learning is convenience of access. While ALNs clearly can provide convenient access to educational *content*, how do they measure up in terms of access to the broader range of elements that make up a "complete" educational experience?

Within traditional education, a complete education has been viewed as inseparable from the resident experience, with its access to instructional as well as co-curricular activities and support services. ALN programs that hope to meet the *educational*—rather than merely *informational*—needs of distant students must find ways to offer comparable opportunities and services.

Penn State's World Campus is working to realize the potential of ALNs by using innovative strategies for meeting several specific objectives. These objectives include access to high-quality course content; interactions between faculty members and students beyond those in direct instruction; interaction among students at the program level; broad access to information and instructional resources; flexible access to appropriate support services; and developing students' feeling of "belonging" to the institution.

This paper provides specific examples of online strategies for meeting these objectives and reports preliminary evaluation results relating to student satisfaction in courses offered during the first two semesters of World Campus programming.

## KEYWORDS

ALN, Penn State World Campus, Student satisfaction, On-line learning communities, Evaluation

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In September 1996, The Pennsylvania State University, a pioneer and national leader in distance education, announced its intention to create a new distance education “campus” that would use innovative learning technologies to serve adult students at a distance. The Penn State World Campus would become the University's 25th campus, providing access to undergraduate and graduate degree and certificate programs and just-in-time professional development programs. With support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the World Campus opened in January 1998 with a pilot offering of four courses.

Since January 1998, the World Campus has received almost 7,000 inquiries, which have generated nearly 600 program admissions. In academic year 1998-1999, the World Campus is offering its first full year of programs with 33 courses in 11 certificate and degree programs, including programs in Geographic Information Systems, Business Logistics, Customer Relations, Turfgrass Management, Educational Technology for Teachers, Dietetics, and Hotel and Restaurant Management.

## **II. A STARTING POINT FOR UNDERSTANDING STUDENT SATISFACTION**

The World Campus is envisioned as the mechanism by which Penn State will respond to the lifelong learning needs of adults by using asynchronous learning technologies and pedagogies to extend the University's academic resources to learners worldwide. Integral to the long-term success of this vision is the development and delivery of programs that students perceive as appropriately meeting or satisfying their educational needs.

The multiple-media ALN environment differs in significant ways from more traditional distance education contexts, and these differences have implications for student satisfaction. However, the newness of this practice environment meant that initially there was little direct knowledge of factors contributing to student satisfaction with ALN courses on which to base course and program design. As a result, guiding assumptions about student satisfaction were based on Penn State's own experience with older forms of distance education (correspondence study; audio- and videoconferencing; and satellite transmission, for example); on the literature relating to general distance education practice; and on the results of market research with prospective students.

The assumptions discussed below provided the starting points and guides to the early design of programs and support systems. Concurrently, however, strategies for the extensive and continuing evaluation of World Campus programming were implemented and are now providing direct student feedback that has largely confirmed these early assumptions about student satisfaction while also providing a wealth of information on which to base improvements to programs and processes.

### **III. ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH ALNs**

The following assumptions guided the design of the initial World Campus programming, which represented three areas of study: Noise Control Engineering, Turfgrass Management, and Chemical Dependency Counseling. Because their validity has been supported by formal assessment activities, they continue to inform the design of courses, programs, and learner support.

#### **A. Assumption 1: Student Satisfaction Is Related To Convenience And Quality Of Programs**

Many adult students choose distance study because barriers—such as location, lack of time, and multiple roles—block their enrollment in on-campus courses or programs. Geographic distance from a higher education institution is a major barrier to conventional study. In a study of distance students at four universities, distance from campus was viewed as “very important” or “somewhat important” by 75% of those surveyed [1].

Increasingly, students are reporting that their motivation to study on line comes from feeling time-bound, even more than from being place-bound. In the one study, 95% of the respondents identified time constraints as a “very important” or “somewhat important” barrier to resident instruction. Similar findings have been reported by other researchers [2]. The multiple roles that most students fill contribute to their sense of being time-bound. Many students, particularly women, are unable to fit conventional study, with its rigid scheduling and often inconvenient location, into schedules that are already overburdened. As a result, access that is not limited by geography or an institution’s inflexible business hours can be a significant factor in students’ overall satisfaction with an educational program [3], [4], [5].

Although students want their access to programming to be different (that is, more flexible) than that which characterizes resident instruction, they *do not* want any differences in the quality of instruction. Research suggests that the quality of content, instruction, and support are major factors in student satisfaction with distance learning [6]. This perspective provides the basis for the second assumption guiding World Campus program design:

#### **B. Assumption 2: To Meet The Needs Of Distance Learners, ALNs Must Provide A “Real” Educational Experience**

The needs of distance learners are similar to those of traditional students. Distance learners need access to an educational experience that goes beyond access to content; they need a learning environment that connects students to content, to expert instruction, to a wide range of instructional resources, to their peers, and to appropriate support services. The World Campus is committed to the belief that all students, even those separated from each other and from the traditional campus by geographic distance, deserve the benefits of such a learning community.

### **C. Assumption 3: An ALN Learning Community Offers A Multi-Faceted Learning Environment That Meets Objectives It Shares With Resident Instruction:**

- Appropriate academic content
- Interaction/engagement with course content
- Interaction with faculty outside of the “classroom”
- Out-of-class interaction among students in the same program
- Access to a broad range of instructional and informational resources
- Access to academic advising and other appropriate support services
- A feeling of “belonging” to the university community

Realistically, not all learners will identify each of these elements as crucial elements in their learning experiences. Research and experience both suggest, for example, that interaction with instructors may be more important to many distance learners than is interaction with their peers. Additionally, some learners would prefer to maximize the flexibility of their learning experiences by “opting out” of collaborative projects or peer interactions that require the coordination of schedules [7]. However, such course design decisions should reflect a balance between the needs of multiple stakeholders: the learner’s need for control [8], the faculty member’s need to ensure effective instruction and learning, and the institution’s need to fulfill its mission or to maintain credibility with regulatory bodies, for example.

Of course each ALN course does not need to incorporate *all* of the above elements, any more than all on-campus courses do; decisions on this point will be made on the basis of pedagogical considerations. However, the power and flexibility of ALNs are allowing the World Campus to develop a design framework that ensures that a student’s overall program of study will offer numerous opportunities to participate in a learning community.

### **D. Assumption 4: The Infrastructure To Support ALNs In Higher Education Must Be As Solid As—But May Differ From—That Supporting Resident Instruction**

A real university education offered at a distance needs a design, delivery, and support infrastructure that is at least as solid as that supporting resident instruction. This is true from both an “institutional positioning” perspective and from a “service-to-students” perspective.

Institutionally, recognition by a university’s “mainstream” that ALN providers such as the World Campus are able to both reflect and contribute to the mission and reputation of the university depends on being able to demonstrate complete and appropriate service to students. The service-to-students perspective reflects the fact that much that happens naturally in face-to-face instruction through the mere fact of bringing people together in one place must be more intentionally designed, facilitated, and supported in the ALN environment. Course design structures and institutional processes need to work together to bridge the physical and psychological distance that separates instructor from learners and learners from each other.

## **IV. REACHING THE OBJECTIVES OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY**

A number of structures and processes have been developed by the World Campus to reach the objectives identified above.

### **A. Appropriate Academic Content**

This objective is met by having faculty members and appropriate governing bodies make decisions relating to academic content. Because World Campus courses are taught by regular Penn State faculty members, and because courses and programs must undergo the same approval processes required in resident instruction (e.g., approval by the Faculty Senate or Graduate Council), World Campus students can be assured that the content they are taught is of the same quality as that offered in resident instruction. One result of this focus on content parity is that credit courses taken through the World Campus are not distinguished in any way from resident courses on a student's transcript.

### **B. Interaction/Engagement with the Course Content**

Reflecting the University's commitment to active, collaborative, relevant learning, World Campus courses use ALN strategies to engage students in the teaching-learning transaction. Team projects focused on critical thinking and the application of problem solving skills; collaborative assignments; assignments tailored to students' work situations; and interactive quizzes are strategies intended to increase the depth of student interaction with course content.

### **C. Interaction with Faculty Outside of the "Classroom" and with Students in the Same Program**

A learning community offers more than transmission of information and ideas; it also offers a way of establishing connections between people. In the World Campus, instructors help students form these connections through audio-conference calls to introduce themselves or as a way for teams to get to know each other. E-mail interactions also support connectedness, as does the Program Office feature, which offers students who are in the same program, but perhaps not in the same class, a space to meet and "chat" about issues that cut across courses or about other topics of mutual interest.

### **D. Access to Instructional and Informational Resources**

Connectedness to a larger learning context is also reflected in students' access to a broad range of resources. Computer conferencing allows faculty members to provide World Campus students with opportunities to interact with content experts from either the physical campus or around the world. Guest "speakers" can provide an advance set of readings for discussion or make an online presentation, then be available to answer questions or participate in online discussions over a period of several days. World Campus courses provide course-specific and disciplinary electronic links to libraries and other data collections that offer students access to vast collections of information. From these and other sources students can gather the raw materials they need to develop a personal knowledge base and a coherent approach to their program of study. Figure 1 offers a screen shot of a Program Office Home Page, the entryway to a variety of instructional resources and support options.



Figure 1. Program Office Home Page.

## E. Access to Academic Advising and Other Support Services

The objective of ready access to suitable academic advising and support services is to ensure that students receive the guidance and personal support required to complete their programs in a successful and timely manner. In the World Campus, faculty members or staff advisers conduct individual academic counseling sessions via telephone or electronic mail. Policies, procedures, and information related to general administrative functions are accessible on line at the student's convenience. Detailed course and program information (i.e., description, admission requirements, equipment requirements and costs) is also available on line, and students may register, order their textbooks, and pay their tuition and fees electronically. In the area of learner support, the goal continues to be to automate as many elements as possible and to develop "self-help" strategies that will release staff to attend personally to those situations where a "high-touch" approach is more appropriate. Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of the World Campus online student environment, which reflects a broad range of learner support services.

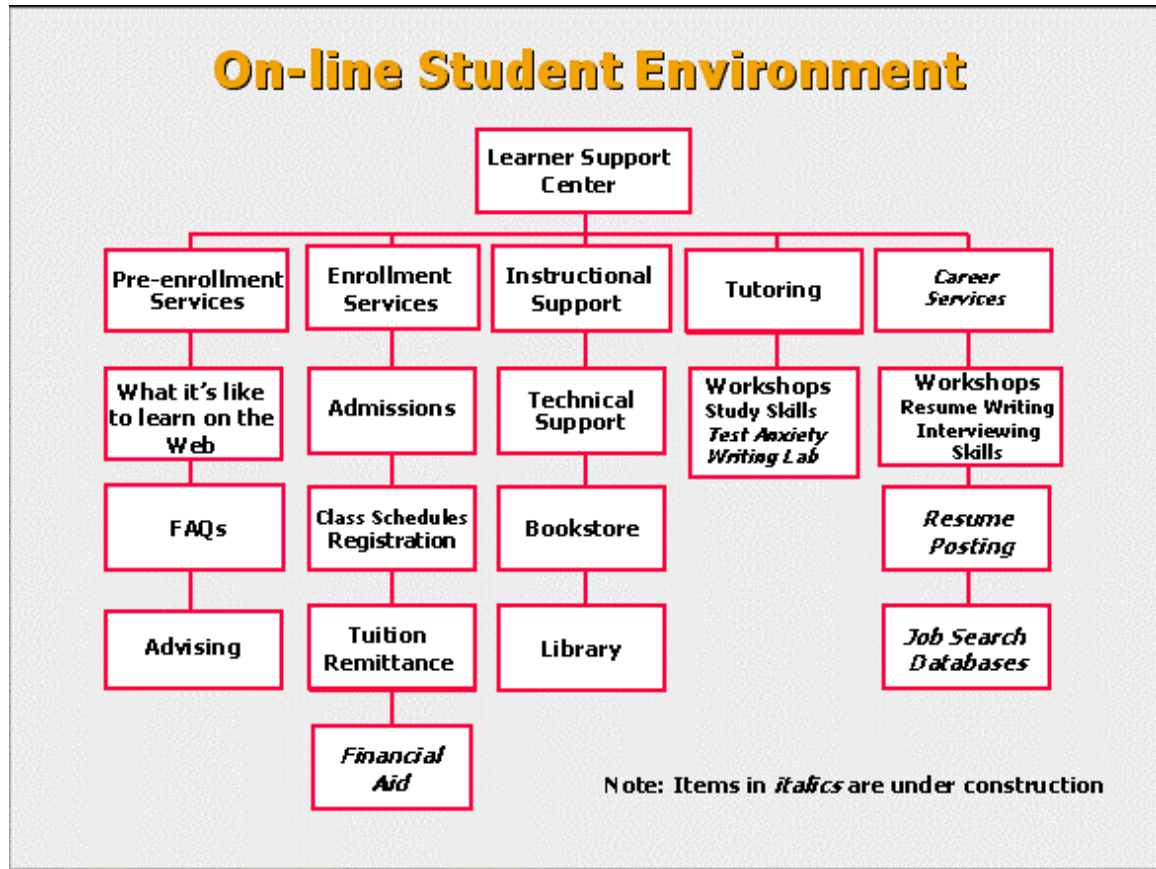


Figure 2. World Campus Support Services.

## F. A Feeling of “Belonging” to the University Community

The objective of identification with Penn State is to provide students with an educational experience that reflects connection to the history, reputation, personnel, and resources of the University. For World Campus students, this feeling of connection is fostered through initial and continuing communications that reflect the institution’s commitment to a relationship that goes beyond academic contact. Official correspondence establishes a sense of institutional identification through welcoming messages and communications of interest about the University. Prominent display of Penn State logos and other identifying symbols on all communications, including course materials, also helps to establish a student’s identity as a “Penn Stater.” Electronic links to online tours of campus landmarks and to University publications such as the student-published newspaper the Daily Collegian provide informative—and entertaining—ways of establishing a sense of identification with the University.

## V. EVALUATING STUDENT SATISFACTION

The overall World Campus evaluation project attempts to answer six questions relating to access, student performance and satisfaction, faculty experiences, and financial viability. The following two questions focus most directly on the issue of student satisfaction:

- Does the World Campus increase access for learners through the use of a variety of distance education delivery modes?

- How satisfied are World Campus learners with the ALN environment and their learning experiences?

Evaluation results reported here are based on data gathered from students in the first two semesters of course offerings through interviews, a brief mid-course survey focused on factors influencing students' choice of the World Campus, and an end-of-course survey. The interview data, because of its depth and richness, has been particularly helpful in providing feedback on which to base improvements in processes and products. However, because the population of students is still small, and the initial response rate to the end-of-course survey has to date been low, conclusions drawn from early evaluation data must remain tentative until a larger population of students and strategies for increasing the response rate offer more data.

## **A. Preliminary Results**

Students have generally been positive in their assessment of their ALN experiences. From the feedback provided, we have identified both enhancers of and detractors from student satisfaction with the World Campus courses.

### **1. Enhancers**

- Removal of geographic barriers to participation in higher education
- Mitigation of situational barriers
- High quality course content
- Opportunities for career development/possibility for promotion
- Name value of Penn State
- Level of interaction with faculty and World Campus Learner Support unit
- Use of technology in the course (as an enabler, not an end in itself)

### **2. Detractors**

- Technical difficulties (browser, ISP problems)
- Course workload (time requirements beyond expectations)

In general, early evaluation results confirm initial assumptions regarding the importance to students of convenience, quality, and opportunities for interaction. Additionally, this group of students stressed the importance of career considerations and the reputation of Penn State in the workplace in influencing their choice to participate in World Campus programs and in their satisfaction with their courses. Overall, students did not cite the technological features of their courses as primary enhancers of satisfaction; rather, they viewed these features as occasionally problematic but ultimately desirable secondary mechanisms for ensuring convenience and interaction.

## **B. Next Steps**

These early evaluations efforts will be succeeded by further evaluation activities including: Expanded assessment and analysis focusing on factors that potentially influence performance and/or satisfaction (age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, occupation, location).

1. Program-level evaluation that assesses the effectiveness of curricular groupings of courses, activities, and services, particularly in terms of their ability to provide and sustain a viable learning community.
2. Implementation of "lessons learned" through assessment to improve recruitment, programming, and support products and processes.



## VI. SUMMARY

Student feedback gathered through the formal evaluation process has already been used to improve World Campus recruitment, programming, and support services. For example, input relating to institutional and program motivators is guiding changes in marketing/recruitment materials to more strongly emphasize the high quality and competitive advantage students themselves emphasize as benefits of a World Campus education, as well as to clearly distinguish between easy access and easy content. Similarly, feedback about the convenience of course formats or the amount or “chunking” of course content is focusing attention on potential areas of improvement in course design, and has already spurred changes in the pacing of course activities. Finally, student comments and ratings of the importance of specific support services or options have reinforced the overwhelming importance to distant students of a strong learner support function. As a result, a major focus of both assessment and continuous improvement within the World Campus will be on the flexible, robust, and scaleable support options necessary to meet the needs of learners in the ALN environment.

However, it is important to realize that student perceptions of satisfaction are only one factor in the development of educationally sound, socially responsible, and fiscally viable programs. As the World Campus matures and expands, identifying, implementing, and assessing the proper balance of elements necessary to satisfy the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting needs of multiple stakeholder groups—students, faculty, institution, and society—will be an important and continuing challenge.

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