

A Statewide Study of Perceptions of Directors on the Availability of Online Student Support Services at Postsecondary Institutions

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Abstract

As a state university system planned for growth in the availability of distance education degrees, the presidents and the provosts decided to include consideration for the availability of student support services. To ensure availability of student support services for online students, college and university systems in the state developed and implemented a self-reporting tool, the Online Student Support Scorecard, to measure the availability of those services at both the college and the university levels. Although institutions were offering many of the services identified in the scorecard as essential, institutions were struggling to provide some of the services. Differences also were identified between the types of services available at the state college system compared with the university system.

Keywords: online student support services, postsecondary, quality assurance

Brown, V.S., Strigle, J., Toussaint, M. (2020). A statewide study of perceptions of directors on the availability of online student support services at postsecondary institutions. *Online Learning*, 24(4), 167-181. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i4.2147>

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The demand for distance learning courses grew steadily during the past decade (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2017). With the rising popularity of distance education, postsecondary institutions increased the number of distance courses and programs offered to their students. During this period of rapid growth, institutions focused on improving the quality of the distance

learning courses, while both instructional and noninstructional support services received less emphasis (Crawley, 2012).

Retention rates within online-only degrees are difficult to ascertain, with many students engaging with the institution by taking a combination of online and on-campus courses. Numbers reported nationally indicated how many students were taking distance courses rather than degree completion. Very few studies have focused on the academic outcomes of online students. Those studies which are available examined student success at community colleges. The results have indicated that the distance education students have less favorable academic outcomes than the on-campus students. For example, in one study, students enrolled into community college distance education courses were less likely to complete their degrees, transfer to a four-year institution, and had lower completion rates (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). In another study, students taking distance-only learning classes were less likely to retain into the first semester the following year or to complete online-only degrees than students who took a combination of online and ground courses (Scott, Swan & Daston, 2016; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018).

Review of Relevant Literature

Tinto's (1993) student integration model for higher retention rates referred to two dimensions of students' academic experience that need to interact together for improved retention. Both dimensions are required for students to develop intellectually. The first is the social dimension that is tied into a sense of belonging at the institution. The social dimension is the engagement of the student with classmates and instructors outside the classroom. The academic dimension is associated with those factors that promote success in the accomplishment of academic goals, which include self-awareness of abilities and confidence in successful completion of coursework. To address academic success issues, faculty and advisors should be aware of the tutoring and nonacademic support available on campus.

Tinto (1993) identified several causes for students not completing a higher education. Student support addresses several of those reasons, such as the inability to adjust to academic life, difficulty academically, isolation from the mainstream of institutional life, and financial barriers. Early in the development of distance education, the lack of social interaction was identified as a barrier to students' success (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). In a literature review on student support services, Bailey and Brown (2016) concluded that student support can and should engage online students with the institution's community through social and institutional governance activities to build relationships and engagement with the institution. For off-campus students, replacing traditional modes of interaction with a consistent flow of communication keeps them informed and assists them in navigating the system (Simpson, 2018). As online learning expands, so does the need for convenient online support services to support academic success.

Within the literature, a consensus appeared to be emerging regarding the importance of focused support services to the success of distance learners (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013). A panel of distance learning experts indicated that support services were important in student retention (Heyman, 2010). Students themselves indicated a great need for technical support services (Netanda, Mamabolo, & Themane, 2017). In a study about the availability of student support services, the data indicated that institutions with higher graduation rates for the on-campus students were more likely to graduate the online-only students as well. For those institutions, student support was a contributing variable for increasing students' opportunities for success (Shea &

Bidjerano, 2018). Through a series of studies, online tutoring, counseling, orientation, and career planning attributed to the success of distance learners (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Lehan, Hussey, & Shriner, 2018; Sandoval-Lucero, Antony, & Hepworth, 2017).

Most postsecondary institutions offer a wide variety of support services to meet the needs of their traditional students. The assistance available to on-site students ranged from guidance through the application process to tutoring and career services. Despite the recognition by most educational stakeholders that student support services played a vital role in recruitment, success, and retention (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2001), many essential services did not meet the needs of distance learners (Newberry, 2013). Many public institutions struggled to create and to implement services that enhanced student retention and satisfaction in online courses. In an evaluation of 40 higher education institution websites to determine availability of online student support, only 42% had 8 of the 16 administrative support services available. This observation led the researchers to conclude that baccalaureate institutions continued to serve the traditional college student populations, which could be contributing to the nontraditional students in selecting for-profit institutions to obtain their education (Jones & Meyer, 2016). As a result, the current state of the support services provided to off-campus students may not be as adequate as those provided to campus-based students (Rowh, 2014).

Consequently, higher education could benefit from a tool to guide institutions in the development of support services for online students, comparable with those available to on-site students. Student services are complex and vary depending upon how the institution has decided to organize the support services and to what services are available. To address the increasing complexity in providing online student support services, the Student Services Workgroup developed the Online Student Support Scorecard Guide (Brown, 2018). This paper is reporting data on the extent of the services offered to online students across a state and analyzed the differences in the types of services provided.

The Scorecard

As the state university system (SUS) developed an online education strategic plan, concerns about the quality of the services for online students surfaced. To address the concern, one of the tactics within the plan was to develop a tool or a scorecard that could ascertain the services provided and the quality of those services for online students. The Student Support Scorecard was developed through a statewide process in response to tactic to improve online student services.

The intent of the Student Support Scorecard design was to create an easy-to-use process for evaluating the support services at postsecondary institutions for students taking most or all their courses off-campus. The purpose of the scorecard was for an institution to evaluate the equivalency of the student services offered to distance learners and to on-campus students. Postsecondary institutions used the results of the scorecard to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the support services essential to the success of distance students.

The Student Services Workgroup, the group charged with the development of the Student Support Scorecard, used a collaborative process to develop the scorecard. Committee members were distance learning leaders and top management of student support services from universities and colleges. The committee developed the quality indicators and categories with the description of the scoring criteria and levels. The membership of a larger group through the Virtual Campus Distance Education and Student Support Services and Access Membership Council's Subcommittee, which consisted of distance learning and online student support leaders throughout

the college and university systems, conducted a review and provided feedback to the Student Services Workgroup. After revisions, the scorecard gained another level of approval at the Online Education Strategic Plan Steering Committee whose membership consisted of five university provosts. The final level of approval before the implementation was the Innovation and Online Committee for the Board of Governors for the state university system.

The final version of the scorecard contained 44 quality indicators within 11 categories of services: admissions, financial aid, preenrollment advising, veterans services, career counseling, postenrollment, orientation, library, disability, technology support, and graduate support services. Each category consisted of two to nine ordered category items or standards (STDs) with three choices: two signifying exemplary service, one signifying the service is available, and zero indicating limited or no service. The maximum points available varied across the categories: (a) 10 for the admissions support category, (b) 4 for financial aid support, (c) 10 for preenrollment advising, (d) 4 for veterans support, (e) 10 for career counseling, (f) 8 for orientation support, (g) 16 for postenrollment support, (h) 10 for library support, (i) 8 for disability support, (j) 6 for technical support, and (k) 12 for graduate support.

Admissions Support

Distance learning leaders identified the need for students to connect with their institutions as a high concern and a strategy to promote student success (Heyman, 2010). Students' initial contact with an educational institution often has a lasting impact on their perceptions of the quality of the services offered at the institutions. Prospective campus-based students usually attend a tour of the physical campus at which time they ask questions and resolve any issues before deciding whether the institution fits their academic aspirations. The same level of services should be extended to prospective online students. The five standards included in this category are: (a) the institution responds to prospective student inquiries during the admissions process, (b) the institution provides virtual campus tours during the admissions process, (c) the institution has online applications, (d) the institution has the capability for documents required for the admission to be submitted online, and (e) the institution provides onboarding service support for all types of students.

Financial Aid Support

Netanda et al. (2017) found that off-campus students selected financial aid support as one of the support services critical to students' success. Access to Pell Grants was a predictor of retention into the first semester in the following semester for online-only students (Scott et al., 2016). Campus-based students can consult with financial advisors. To emulate the face-to-face services, on-campus financial aid offices routinely provide a frequently asked question page for the online students. The scorecard guide suggested the implementation of the following standards in this category for online learners: (a) students have access to a financial aid counselor or advisor or coordinator, and (b) students have access to financial literacy assistance.

Veterans Support

The availability of online support is important for veterans. Veterans often relocate to a job or return to their home state upon retirement or upon leaving their military positions; therefore, continuation of their coursework is imperative. A subgroup of veterans may have suffered various traumatic brain injuries with the potential impact upon cognitive processing (Walz & Bleuer, 2013). Life transitions may be difficult for veterans who may be transitioning out of military life

for various reasons. Some of the reasons may not be voluntary, such as severe injuries. Consequently, veterans require specific strategies to ensure success in their academic careers (Robertson & Brott, 2014). For this group, the ability to submit qualifying paperwork online is important; otherwise, a trip to the campus becomes necessary and challenging. Veterans also benefit from a support group of individuals who understand the unique experiences which can create challenges in their lives. The standards included in this category are (a) students have access to support for personal and financial Veterans Affairs processes, and (b) students have access to transition support services.

Preenrollment Advising Support

Providing quality advising services to students prior to enrollment is vital to the success of the institution regardless of the learning modality (Lorenzo, 2012). Advising gives the students the necessary information that will enable them to navigate the internal structures of the institution. When students cannot access vital information in a timely manner, they become frustrated and decide to pursue their education elsewhere. Postsecondary institutions must provide efficient services in guiding students to remain competitive in the growing crowded online educational marketplace. The five standards in this category are: (a) the institution provides advising for students to set academic goals for themselves, (b) students have access to transcript evaluation and degree audits, (c) students have access to enrollment planning, (d) the institution provides placement testing, if needed, and (e) students are able to contact the student disability office during the preenrollment process with services in place before the first day of class.

Orientation Support

During the admissions process and following its completion, students need assistance for a broad range of situations. They need help choosing which courses to take and the proper sequence in which to enroll. They may need to transfer credits from institutions they attended previously and to pay their tuition and fees. Through an intentionally designed orientation, students begin to develop relationships and to become socially integrated into the campus. As they become familiar with the terminology used by the institution and understand expectations, students begin to understand themselves as learners and how to build social networks, which then promotes retention (Sandoval-Lucerom et al., 2017). Online students benefit from these connections, intentionally planned for an online environment. The scorecard guide incorporated the following standards in this category: (a) the institution provides first-year advising for First-Time-in-College (FTIC) students; (b) the institution provides orientation for transfer students; (c) during the registration period, students have access to the course catalog and to information, and; (d) students can make payments for courses, applications, and deposit fees.

Postenrollment Support

Distance learning leaders believe that there is a link between students' satisfaction with support services and students' retention (Heyman, 2010). Providing the proper support services for students after enrollment increases their motivation and persistence, as well as their willingness to engage in their academic studies (Bailey & Brown, 2016; Lorenzo, 2012). Campus-based students usually have access to a wide variety of academic support ranging from advising to tutoring and to proctoring services. Advisors provide guidance in the sequencing of courses and help students find academic support when needed. Off-campus students need access to the same level of academic support without having to travel to the physical campus. The standards comprised in this category are as follows: (a) the institution offers academic advising to students,

(b) the institution has early alert notifications and follow-through contact with students, (c) students have access to success and academic coaching, (d) students have access to counseling, (e) students have access to personal development opportunities, (f) students have access to tutoring services, (g) the institution offers students access to academic proctoring, and (h) students have the choice to participate in student and campus organizations.

Disability Support

Giving students with disabilities access to an online education plays an important role in removing barriers for this population. Some students may have limited mobility and may find it difficult to travel to the campuses. Others may be visually impaired, necessitating access to specialized software to accommodate their needs. Ensuring students with disabilities have remote access to services is of the utmost importance. The scorecard guide mandated the following standards: (a) students can request academic accommodations, (b) the institution offers new student intake appointments, (c) the institution provides academic accommodations, and (d) the institution provides assistive technology access.

Library Support

Off-campus students need access to library resources in an efficient and timely manner. In a recent study by the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries, library services contributed to student learning and success in five areas: (a) library instruction in their initial coursework, (b) overall student success, (c) collaborative services that involved the library to enhance student learning, (d) providing information literacy instruction to strengthen academic outcomes, and (e) library research consultations to enhance student learning (Brown & Malenfant, 2017). The five standards for this category are: (a) students have access to library support personnel, (b) students have access to library materials and databases, (c) students have access to library workshops and tutorial library skills, (d) students have access to library resources through a website using multiple devices, and (e) the library has developed an app to improve the accessibility of the library's resources from mobile devices.

Technology Support

Students have varying levels of technical abilities. Providing appropriate and effective technical support allows students more time to focus on their academic studies instead of spending time resolving technical issues. With the large number of nontraditional students taking online classes, with many of those students older than traditional students, the need for technical support of online students is necessary (Netanda et al., 2013). This support begins with admissions and should continue throughout the students' academic experience. The three standards included in this category are: (a) students have access to help-desk support for technical support, (b) students have access to information about the minimal software and computer requirements for taking online classes at the institution, and (c) students have the same access to required software as traditional students.

Career Counseling Support

Regardless of the learning environment, students need access to career counseling to explore career options and to increase the likelihood of securing employment after graduation. The scorecard guide adopted the following standards: (a) students can explore career assessments during counseling, (b) students have access to job placement services, (c) students have access to

internship resources or services, (d) students have access to resume writing workshops, and (e) students have access to interview preparation workshops.

Method

Participants

Most public postsecondary institutions in the state used the scorecard to evaluate the availability and quality of the services for the distance learning students. The participants comprised high-level administrators in charge of online programs. Two categories of public postsecondary institutions were available to provide educational opportunities to students in the state: state colleges and universities.

The State University System (SUS)

The SUS encompasses 12 public universities strategically placed in different regions of the state to provide educational opportunities to its residents. The mission of the universities is to provide bachelor's and graduate degrees that are often highly specialized. Therefore, the universities are more likely to market their programs beyond the local region. Variability exists across the different institutions in the availability of the curriculum offered (from very little to over 35%), the types of online degrees (100% for four-year degrees to only upper division or graduate programs), and the maturity of the distance education programs. These universities offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral-level degree programs in a variety of fields. Of the 12 universities, 10 provided enough numbers of distance courses and degrees to participate in this data collection about the services available online. The legislature allows the universities to charge a maximum average of \$30 per credit hour fee for distance learning courses to offset the increased cost of design, delivery, and support of distance courses.

The State College System (SCS)

The SCS includes 28 public community colleges which serve one or more counties across the state. Institutions within the SCS offer college credit certificates, two-year associate degrees, and a limited number of bachelor's degrees. The primary focus of the degrees offered by the SCS institutions are related to employment skills in a variety of fields based upon local demand. These institutions provide services to students who either are academically underprepared for university-level coursework or who desire to obtain degrees that prepare them to enter the workforce in a relatively short period of time. Any student who graduates from high schools in the state must be accepted into the SCS institutions. In recent years, the SCS programs have evolved to include select bachelor's degrees in areas deemed in critical need of new graduates by the state legislature. The mission of the colleges typically remains to serve the students who live within the 28 regions, each with at least one physical campus, designed to provide higher education access within a reasonable distance to most of the state's population. Variability also exists in the SCS in the breadth of course offerings, the availability of all courses to obtain a degree online, and the maturation of the offerings. Of the 28 colleges, 24 offered a significant number of distance courses to participate in this study. The legislature allows colleges to charge a maximum of \$15 per credit hour distance learning fee for the additional expenditures in the development and the delivery of distance courses.

The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What level of services is available to distance learners at postsecondary institutions in the state?
2. What differences exist between the levels of services provided by the universities compared with the services state colleges provide?

The original purpose of the scorecard was to establish the status of the student support services across the state at the colleges and universities. Due to the type of data collected, it was possible to make comparisons between the two systems. This report by the researchers identifies differences, several differences, and potential policies that contribute to those differences.

Sampling

Gathering the data required two methods depending upon the type of institution: (a) state college or (b) state university. The scorecard was sent via email to administrative staff in charge of distance learning programs at the participating institutions. The email contained the purpose of the data collection and the Excel spreadsheet with the Rubric describing the different criteria and the levels. For the college system, of the 28 state colleges, 24 participated. The email with the Excel spreadsheet and the guidebook was sent to the university system through official channels of the Board of Governors' Office to the Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment Offices at the universities. From that point, the distance learning leaders gathered the data for submission. Within the state university system, 10 universities participated. Two universities had limited distance education offerings leading to their not participating in the data collection.

Leaders of distance education were located at the universities and the colleges. Across both systems, these leaders held different titles, including director, assistant or associate provost, dean of an online college, or vice president. These leaders typically reported to an academic administrative unit. The distance learning leader at the institution gathered the data. Determining how the area was rated typically occurred using two different methods. For those institutions in which the distance learning leader worked closely with the student support units and was very aware of the services provided, the distance learning leader would have scored the services. Typically, in smaller institutions, the distance learning leader conducted the evaluation. For institutions with larger staff in student support services, the distance learning leader consulted with the different units around campus to rate the service provided. Some of the distance learning leaders consulted with the authors of the scorecard if they were unsure of how to rate their services.

Results

To determine the level and the types of services available to distance learners at the participating postsecondary institutions within the state, the first step was to tally institutional scores and to calculate the descriptive statistics (Question 1). The next step identified the number of institutions that met the standards established in the scorecard. The calculated aggregate score for the universities and the state colleges created the total score received by each institution and provided a comparison point as the maximum number of points available for each category of service (CAT) and each STD for an answer to research Question 2. The categories comprised 2 to 9 ordered category items or standards each with three choices: 2 signifying exemplary service, 1 signifying the service is available, and 0 signifying limited or no service. The mean score per

standard was obtained by dividing the mean for a category by the number of criteria in the category. Table 1 below summarizes the details.

Table 1
Institutions' Achievement Levels Per Service Category

Support service category	State University System (SUS)			State College System (SCS)		
	# Exemplary	# Adequate	# Limited or no service	# Exemplary	# Adequate	# Limited or no service
Admissions	8	2	-	7	9	8
Financial aid	5	4	1	6	6	12
Preenrollment	8	2	-	14	6	4
Veterans	5	2	3	5	5	14
Career counseling	6	4	-	6	7	11
Orientation	5	3	2	9	14	1
Postenrollment	4	4	2	6	12	6
Library	9	1	-	9	14	1
Disability	7	2	1	17	2	5
Technology	8	2	-	14	7	3

To further examine the services provided, the exemplary and the adequate categories were combined for a percentage of institutions offering the services. Figure 1 reflects those findings. Across the SUS, the institutions were providing adequate or exemplary levels of services in admissions, preenrollment services, career counseling, library, and technology. If an institution was to score limited or no services, they did so in financial aid, veterans services, orientation, postenrollment, or disability.

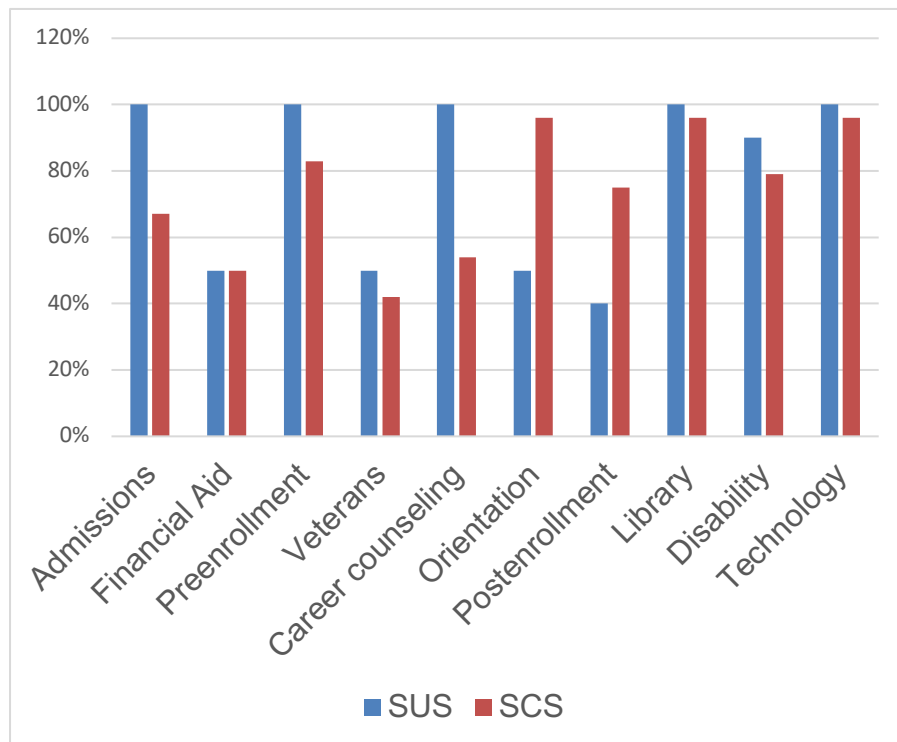
Within the SCS, 90% of institutions reported providing an orientation, library services, disability services, and technology support. The SCS institutions were less likely to provide services for financial aid and veterans services. The increased likelihood of providing these services can be linked to the challenge of providing a secure online process for documenting residency for financial aid and various documentation to receive veterans' benefits. Library support and technology support services were categories with almost similar results. One hundred percent of the universities provided services at or above the adequacy level, while 96% of the state colleges achieved equivalent results. Within the state systems is a fairly robust process for sharing resources to provide 24-hour chat with a librarian, shared purchase of databases for online resources, and access to materials available at libraries across the state.

Institutions in the SCS scored higher than those in the SUS. Orientation support services were one category where the SCS surpassed the SUS. Fifty percent of the universities provided services at or above the adequacy level, while 96% of the state colleges provided similar levels of services. The SCS institutions providing an orientation may be a direct result of their mission. The SCS institutions must accept all students that graduate from the state high schools; therefore, the institutions have a higher number of students not adequately prepared for postsecondary work,

orientation increases retention. In the category of postenrollment services, 40% of the universities achieved at, or above, the adequacy level, while 75% of the state colleges achieved comparable levels. This difference could also be tied to the mission with the state colleges needing to provide additional support for students that may be struggling to complete coursework, whereas the SUS institutions are accepting better prepared students.

Universities scored higher in several categories. In the category of disability services, 90% of the universities achieved at, or above, the adequacy level, while 79% of the state colleges achieved similar results. The differences in this category were the requirement of students to submit confidential information about their disability through a secure online system. This information indicated that universities were more likely to have that technology than colleges. Institutions in the SCS were more likely to report limited technology support. Career counseling was another area in which the university system was more likely to provide adequate or exemplary services. The states performance funding method awards universities higher points based upon the improvement in the percentage of students graduating in four years and the median salary earned by bachelor's graduate employed full-time. The funding formula may have attributed to the decision by the universities to offer career counseling services online as online career counseling supports nontraditional on-campus students as well as distance education students.

Figure 1. Percentage of Institutions in the SUS and SCS Systems Scoring Exemplary or Adequate for the Service Category.



To ascertain the criteria which may have differed within the categories, the mean average was calculated for both the SCS and the SUS. In that analysis, the SCS significantly differed from the SUS in the following criterion. In the admissions category, the mean for the criterion “the institution provides virtual campus tours during the admissions process” was higher for the SUS ($M = 1.6$) than that of the SCS ($M = 0.91$). Similarly, the availability of online applications contributed to the differences observed between the SUS and the SCS; the criterion “the institution has online applications” was significantly higher for the SUS ($M = 2.00$) than the SCS ($M = 1.63$). In addition, the SUS mean ($M = 1.7$) for the criterion “the institution has the capability for documents required for the admissions to be submitted online” was statistically significantly higher than that of the SCS ($M = 1.17$). In the career counseling category, two criteria contributed to the differences observed. The SUS mean of 1.9 for the criterion “students have access to internship resources” was higher than that of the SCS ($M = 1.21$). A similar result was obtained for the criterion “students have access to interview preparation workshops” with the SUS mean ($M = 1.6$) significantly higher than that of the SCS ($M = 0.96$). For the postenrollment service category, a statistically significant difference was observed in two criteria “students have access to academic coaching” where the SUS mean ($M = 1.5$) was higher than the SCS mean ($M = 0.83$), and “students have access to tutoring services” where the SUS mean ($M = 1.60$) was statistically significantly lower than the SCS mean ($M = 1.96$). Within library services, only one criterion contributed to the difference. The SUS system had a higher mean ($M = 0.99$) than the SCS ($M = 0.21$). That criterion was about the development of an app to improve the accessibility of the library’s resources.

Discussion

Several factors within the two systems could attribute to the differences in the student support services between the two groups of higher education institutions. The mission of colleges and the universities is distinctive. With a focus on associate degrees at the colleges, students are more likely to attend the institution closest to their present home. However, within the college system in this state are several colleges that now offer associate of arts, associate of science, and bachelor’s degrees. Several of the colleges’ student bodies are large, with 30,000 to 70,000 enrolled students. These institutions would be more likely to have a large online student presence than the smaller rural colleges. Universities are more likely to have specialized degrees at both the graduate and the undergraduate levels, requiring students to either relocate or to take courses online to access those opportunities. Mission differences also attributed to a reduced focus on providing internships to online students. Online degree pathways at colleges historically prepared students to transfer to a university; whereas university students were more likely to benefit from experiences in their desired career pathways. As the mission at some colleges evolves with the addition of online baccalaureate degrees, the ability to obtain internships will become more important to their online students.

Another contributor to the variation in the level of services available is funding opportunities for the services. Universities tend to have more resources to spend in providing services with the ability to charge higher tuition and distance learning fees than the colleges. The additional resources allow the universities to create solutions for technical challenges, such as online applications, platforms for submitting documentation, creating virtual campus tours, using web-conferencing tools for interview support, online tutoring, and app development. These solutions tend to be institution-specific solutions due to the various combinations of student

information systems, learning management systems, and content management tools used in higher education. To address the technical challenges, universities have a deeper core of computer programmers and data analysts to create the unique platforms that allow the performance of these tasks. Colleges may not have the technical support to innovate solutions and have to depend on the universities to engineer the solutions. As a result, colleges appear to rely more heavily on personnel that allow them to provide adequate services beyond the typical workday.

The data collected through this process was self-reported causing a limitation in the interpretation of the data. Administrative leaders at the colleges and universities may have been concerned about governing state board opinions about the institutions based on the data gathered. To navigate that concern, the report to the Board of Governors Innovation and Online Committee included only the statewide data. Each institution received a follow-up report with results of each institution compared with the state average scores. This enabled the institutions to continue to improve the support services for online students.

Other limitations for interpreting the data exist. Although this ability to consult with the authors of the instruments partially assisted with the institutions rating the services in a consistent manner, it is possible that the interpretation of the ratings varied. The email included guidance for the administration of the scorecard; however, institutions used different methods for rating the service areas. However, the desire by an institution to produce a positive report may have reflected in a higher score about the level of service provided.

Several opportunities are becoming available to expand the understanding about the availability of services for online student. Another set of data collection is scheduled after the pandemic crisis ends. At that time, the universities will have had time to evaluate the weak areas to develop strategies for the implementation of online student services within those support units. The two-year window should reflect on improvements in online student support services. The Online Learning Consortium released the Online Student Support Scorecard (<https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-student-support/>) nationally. With the release, other institutions will have the opportunity to participate in the ongoing study of student support services availability. With a wider range of institutions using the scorecard, revisions to the scorecard can be made to ensure its applicability to a broad range of institutions and a robust picture of support services across the United States.

Online students are the actual recipients of support services. Gathering data on their perceptions of the quality of the services they received will provide valuable insights to assess the quality of these services from the students' viewpoints. Interesting findings may emerge regarding differences in students' perceptions and those of administrators about the quality of the services provided by the postsecondary institutions in the state. Additional questions could ascertain the importance of the services from an online student perspective. The importance of a service could drive decisions at the institution related to prioritizing the development of online student services within the different categories.

Conclusion

Research indicated that retention and graduate rates among online-only learners was lower than students taking a combination of online and campus or on-campus-only courses (Scott et al., 2016; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018), and student successes in online programs was correlated to quality support services (Bailey & Brown, 2016; Heyman, 2010; Lorenzo, 2012). This description of the data collection about online services presented availability of services for online learners at public postsecondary institutions in the state. The data indicated that all participating institutions implemented most of the standards stipulated in the distance learning scorecard guide. However, differences existed between the levels of services provided by the universities and the levels of services provided by the state colleges. The levels of services provided by the universities were closer to exemplary level in all but one category of service. SUS leaders gave significantly higher ratings to the services available at their institutions than did SCS leaders in six categories of services: admissions, financial aid, veterans, career counseling, postenrollment, and library support services. No significant differences emerged in both groups' perceptions of the services provided by their respective institutions in four categories: preenrollment advising, orientation, disability, and technology support services.

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