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How Community Colleges Can Better Support Online Learners

Promising Practices for Creating a Positive Online Learning Experience

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Develop a **robust orientation** for online learners

Have an **assigned advisor** be the first point of contact for students

Establish **standards for engagement** with online learners

Involve employers in the development and implementation of **online career-oriented services**

Leverage technology to **facilitate work-based learning experiences** online

Don't let technology be the "tail wagging the dog"—**select technology with the purpose in mind**

Consider how technology can **supplement resources** and **ease advisor and college staff burden**

Collect **survey feedback for continuous improvement** of the course experience

About one in three public community college students took an online course in fall 2017, up from 27.3 percent in fall 2012. Over that same period, the share of students enrolled in exclusively online courses grew from 10 to 13 percent. Changes in technology, student demand for flexible education options that do not interfere with family and work commitments, and a shifting labor market are driving increased enrollment online.

Online programs can make education more accessible to students, but what supports have the potential to facilitate success? We interviewed research experts, college staff, and administrators to better understand how community colleges are delivering innovative support services to their fully online learners (students completing coursework or degree programs where all instruction takes place virtually). Through conversations with practitioners and our review of available research, we identified three types of supports that have potential to facilitate success: academic and personal supports, engagement supports, and career-oriented supports. The goal of this research is to elevate for college staff and instructors, higher-education administrators, and policymakers promising practices for supporting online learners.

ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL SUPPORTS

Community colleges provide academic and personal supports to help online learners navigate their academic experience and for various other needs. These supports can play an important role in student success.

Develop a robust orientation for online learners. An important component of advising is familiarizing students with course and program requirements and the overall expectations of online learning. A deliberate, robust approach at the start of a program can help students better prepare for online learning.

Have an assigned advisor be the first point of contact for online students. An assigned advisor can help online students connect with the institution, increase awareness of the resources available to them, and provide referrals for supports from other institutional offices.

ENGAGEMENT SUPPORTS

To combat isolation among students, engagement supports can increase the connection between students and (1) what they are learning (learner-to-content engagement), (2) the teacher (learner-to-instructor engagement), and (3) their peers (learner-to-learner engagement). These supports are aimed at increasing engagement through online methods.

Establish standards for engagement with online learners. Setting clear accountability metrics for college instructors before the semester begins that describe how they should engage with students helps ensure instructors understand the commitment required.

Collect survey feedback for continuous improvement of the online course experience. Student surveys throughout the semester that assess the effectiveness of engagement and interaction can inform the continuous improvement of supports that increase engagement, in turn increasing students' chances of success.

CAREER-ORIENTED SUPPORTS

Career-oriented supports in online programs aim to help students succeed in the workplace, sometimes through work-based learning and practicum components. Career supports, which include career-readiness, job-search, and placement supports, are offered in for-credit, noncredit, and employer-sponsored online courses and programs.

Involve employers in the development and implementation of online career-oriented services. Employer partners must be invested in a program's success and inform colleges about the supports students need to succeed at work. Employers can demonstrate a strong commitment by mentoring online students, providing them with in-person work-based learning opportunities, or hiring program graduates, all of which help validate the relevance of online coursework and credentials earned online.

Leverage technology to facilitate work-based learning experiences online. Advances in virtual reality have enabled new online training opportunities, such as tactile simulations and other work-based learning methods, for occupations in industries that have historically required on-site education (such as advanced manufacturing). Colleges should explore opportunities to expand work-based learning in the online context.

TECHNOLOGY

An important consideration spanning all three categories is the critical role technology plays in the delivery of each type of support. Fully online learning is a technology-mediated experience for learners, and technology can be used to better deliver course content and support student learning.

Don't let technology be the "tail wagging the dog." Decisions should not be driven by the latest fads or technologies coming on the market. Rather, start with the learner's needs and related goals and strategies and let the selection of technology flow from there.

Consider how technology can supplement resources and ease advisor and college staff burden. Colleges seeking to increase efficiency while delivering effective supports can use technology to automate some aspects of that delivery. This approach can free up time for supports that require personalized, one-on-one interaction.

ADDITIONAL READING
Supporting Community College Learners Online (full report)
Amanda Briggs, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Shayne Spaulding **https://urbn.is/2IaCtc2**

Supporting Community College Students Online: Filling Knowledge Gaps for Success (fact sheet)
Amanda Briggs, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Shayne Spaulding **https://urbn.is/3aphSgb**