

Delivering Student Services Online via Your Online Course Tool

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Syracuse University School of Information Studies delivers student services online using their online course tool, which has led to increased student satisfaction. By using the online course tool, which is used to deliver online classes, no additional resources were needed for web development, staff training or software. Students are able to access academic advising and other student services through the same portal as their online courses.

Syracuse University School of Information Studies has created accessible, cost effective student services for distance learning students achieved by using the same learning management system students normally use to access their academic courses. Increasing access to student services has increased student satisfaction and hopefully retention rates. Using our own learning management system has lessened the work load of our student services staff, minimized resource costs, and increased faculty participation with students outside of the classroom. Current school surveys of both distance and campus populations show that distance students are more satisfied with student services than campus students.

Since the inception of the distance program in 1993, the School of Information Studies has continually refined the way it has handled student services for the distance learning population. After exploring the idea of having distance learning student services handled by a separate entity, the school arrived at having the student services staff responsible for both the campus and distance population. The idea of one student services staff advising both distance and campus populations reinforced the idea that the campus and distance students were both in the same academic program; they simply had a different mode of delivery. Two career counselors, advisors, etc. to serve a population with the same questions, who were simply communicating with them in a different way was not an efficient use of resources.

Although having the staff provide services to both populations worked well, since the distance students followed the same curriculum, internship requirements, etc. as the campus students, the staff found communicating one on one with distance students over the phone or through email inefficient. While campus advising was largely accomplished by group meetings, or unofficially through student word of mouth, the distance students reacted as individual silos. Students asked the same questions repeatedly through individual email or phone calls. Distance student questions were more numerous due to the lack of "hallway advising" that normally happens between campus students. Campus students tend to get many of their answers through other students during hallway conversations, or within campus group sessions. Distance students do not have the luxury of picking up informational tidbits as they pass in the hallway, or chit chatting before class, although they have an equal need of career services, academic advising, etc. The School of Information Studies was committed to providing their distance population with access to the same student services that our campus students enjoyed, and the most effective way to do this would be online.

Although distance students were acclimated to the online environment through the web-based classroom, and it only made sense to provide student services online, we did not have the luxury of hiring a web designer to develop and maintain a suitable site. The resources were not available to turn current staff

into webmasters. The staff was already under heavy workloads with having to accommodate a large percentage of the population through individual emails and phone calls. The staff was looking to streamline their workload, not increase it, and was unable to commit additional resources of time or money. We also did not want students to be faced with an additional portal or login. The new system needed to be as accessible as possible for students, and easy to maintain for staff.

Campus student services offices are often placed in physical proximity to the student lounge or classrooms providing easy access to those in need of advisement. If students had to walk across campus for advising or career counseling etc., they would be less likely to use the service. It was imperative that online student services be offered right next to their virtual classroom in an environment the students were currently familiar with.

Since Syracuse University School of Information Studies had been using WebCT as their course management system for several years, and the student body as well the staff was familiar with it, WebCT became the obvious choice.

A separate course in WebCT was set up to include a place for academic advising for each program, career and experiential learning, textbook swap, registration problems, etc. as well as a section for informal chat. Every student, faculty and staff is enrolled in the course and sees it when they log in to WebCT. Student services staff who would normally be fielding these questions monitor their respective areas within the WebCT course, provide information, and answer student questions. Students see the student services "course" alongside their respective academic classes when they log into WebCT, so they can easily check on what textbooks students are swapping, or get their internship paperwork along with their lectures and assignments, etc.

The student services WebCT course has provided distance students with greater access to services while increasing community. Students who previously lacked access to group advising sessions and may have been hesitant to ask a question can now gain insight from the questions asked by fellow students. Students also have the opportunity to ask questions of their fellow students, replicating campus hallway chats. Information that would normally be passed between students in a casual hallway conversation is now communicated twenty four hours a day in the convenience of their own home or office. Communication has increased across the board, including interaction with faculty outside of the classroom.

Offering student services through WebCT has decreased staff workload while improving service and increased the student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom. Previously staff may have taken ten phone calls in one day all dealing with the same question. Now, the question will be posted to WebCT and answered once by a staff member, with the answer accessible to all the students, decreasing the workload for staff. Faculty members can easily participate in group advising chats, post messages of their own and be more aware of distance student concerns.

Our most recent survey of the entire student population shows us that distance students are more satisfied with student services than their campus counterparts and show a higher rate of community. Although our retention rates were above ninety percent prior to the switch to online student services, we are hopeful that the increased satisfaction rates will lead to increased student retention.

Biographical Sketches

Kathryn Allen has directed the distance education programs at The School of Information Studies since 2000.

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As instructional designer, **Peggy Brown** has explored and managed our online course tools expanding their use from teaching to include research and collaboration, within and outside the university, as well as helped design and implement the online student services site.

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