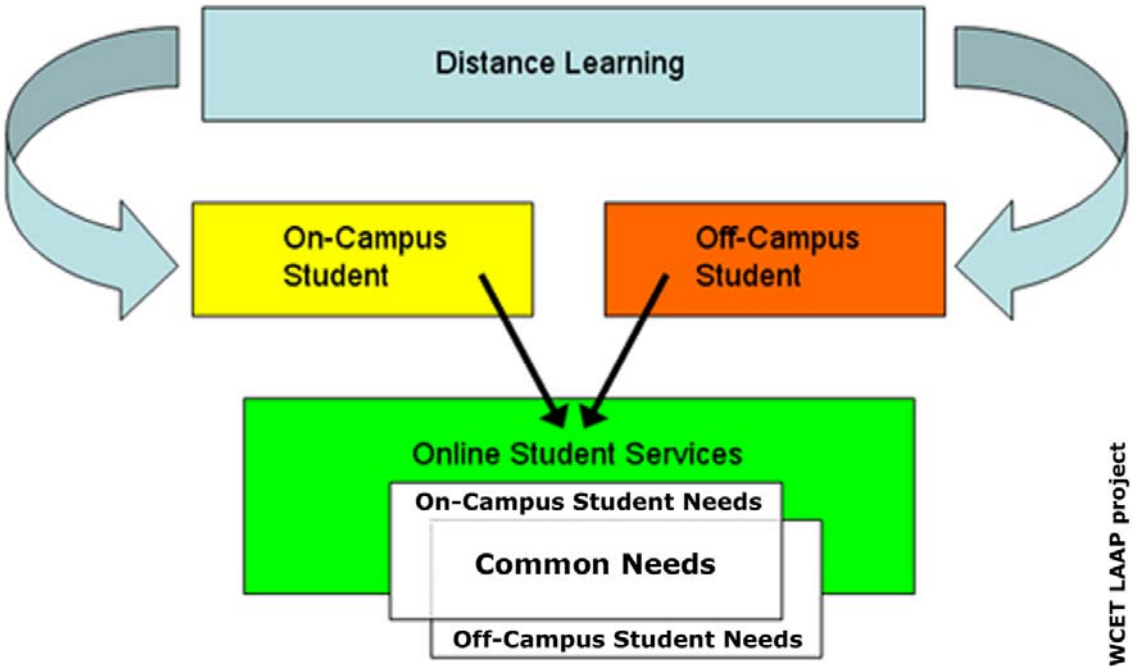
Guidelines for Creating Student Services Online

Overview

Most campuses, recognizing the important role that student services play in learner success and retention, have a full range of student services in place to support their on-campus learners. Yet, many have failed to provide the same level of service to their off-campus learners who cannot come to campus.

Indeed, serving the off-campus student has not been part of the mainstream campus agenda for most institutions due to a lack of both the resources and the flexibility to meet the unique needs of these students. Where service has been provided, it has most frequently come from the units offering distance courses or programs (e.g., the Division of Continuing Education). On many campuses this has resulted in duplicate systems, one for off-campus and one for on-campus students, supporting such core services as admissions, registration, and student accounts, as depicted below:



For other non-core services, such as advising and tech support, the responsibility has often fallen to faculty members teaching the courses. The goal should be to implement student services online for as many of the on-campus and off-campus student needs as possible (that is, minimize offline services).

Now that the e-learning population is expanding so rapidly, this bifurcated system is no longer viable on many campuses. Not only is this dual systems mode of operation expensive and inefficient for institutions, it is an unfair burden for faculty and a confusing and frustrating process for all students. This is especially true for students who live on campus, but enroll in online or other mediated distance courses — estimated at 80% of today's e-learning population. For example, these students must enroll in some courses via the campus registrar and others via the Division of Continuing Education, paying different tuition and fees. At some institutions, the for-credit courses offered through the Division of Continuing Education or other units may not count toward a student's degree or certificate program — even as an elective! This is not good student service! Students expect and demand one voice and unified services from their single institution.

Moreover, all students deserve access to a full array of student services and until we provide these we cannot expect to see the same levels of student success and retention between on-campus and off-campus courses. Additionally, today's students expect services to be available at a time and place convenient to them. This is most broadly achieved by putting services online.

WCET's LAAP Project on Student Services

In its project, Beyond the Administrative Core: "Creating Web-Based Student Services for Online Learners," WCET worked with three partner institutions and a corporate partner to develop new online student services. The institutions were Kansas State University (KS), Kapi'olani Community College (HI), and Regis University (CO); and the corporate partner was SCT (the manufacturer of Banner and Plus student information systems and other student services software). To learn more about the specific student service applications developed in this project, go to model services.

This three-year project (2000-2002), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) through its Learning Anytime Anyplace Partnership (LAAP) program, has resulted in this set of guidelines to help other institutions put their student services online. These guidelines are intended to provide some general direction and recommended steps in implementing online student services. How the guidelines are used on each campus will vary with the campus culture and its intention to put some or all services online.

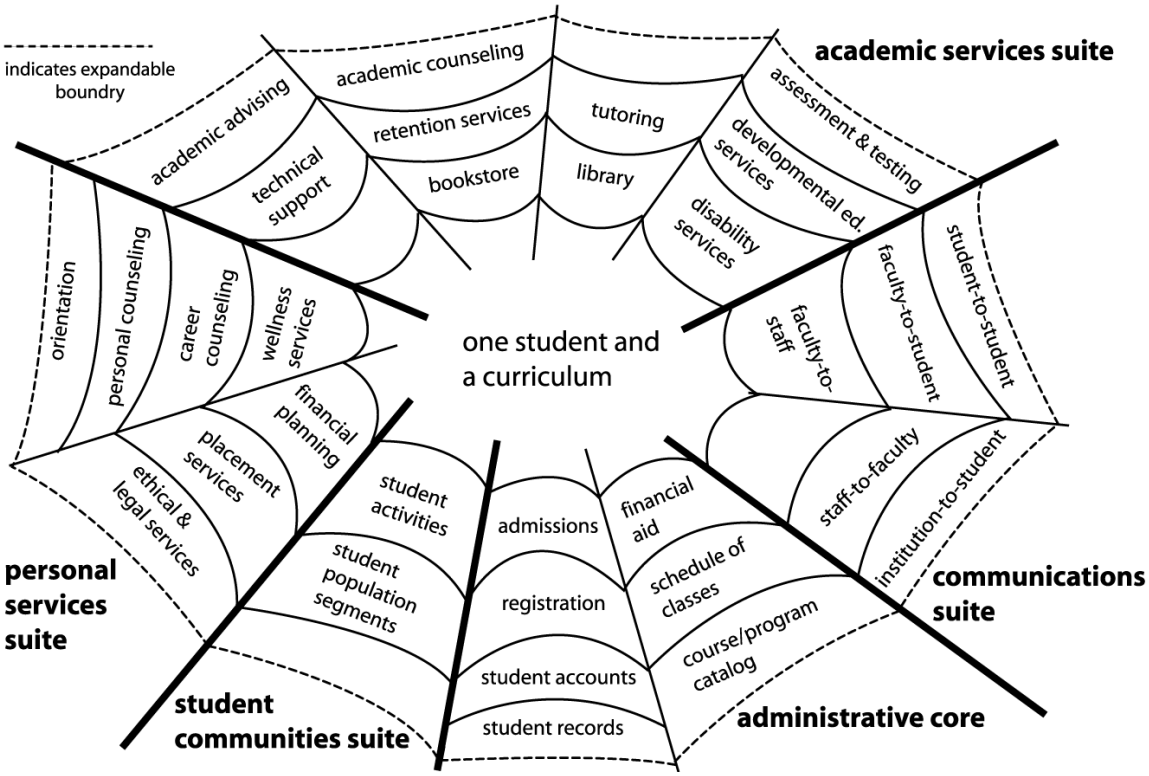
What Are Student Services?

The term "student services" varies in meaning from one campus to another. Indeed, this term and those used to refer to certain services may vary significantly within a campus. For example, at one of the universities involved in the LAAP project the term "academic advising" had four different meanings within a single department of one of the colleges.

The lack of consensus may be due to the evolving and fragmented nature of student services. Over time campuses have added various student services as the need for them arose. Some of these services are centralized, but many are not. Moreover, many operate in their own "silos," with separate technology infrastructures and

different policies and procedures. To establish some consensus for discussion about student services, the LAAP partners adopted a web of student services graphic for the purposes of the project that depicts an array of services that should be available to online learners. The dotted lines at the outer edges indicate that this is not an exhaustive list.

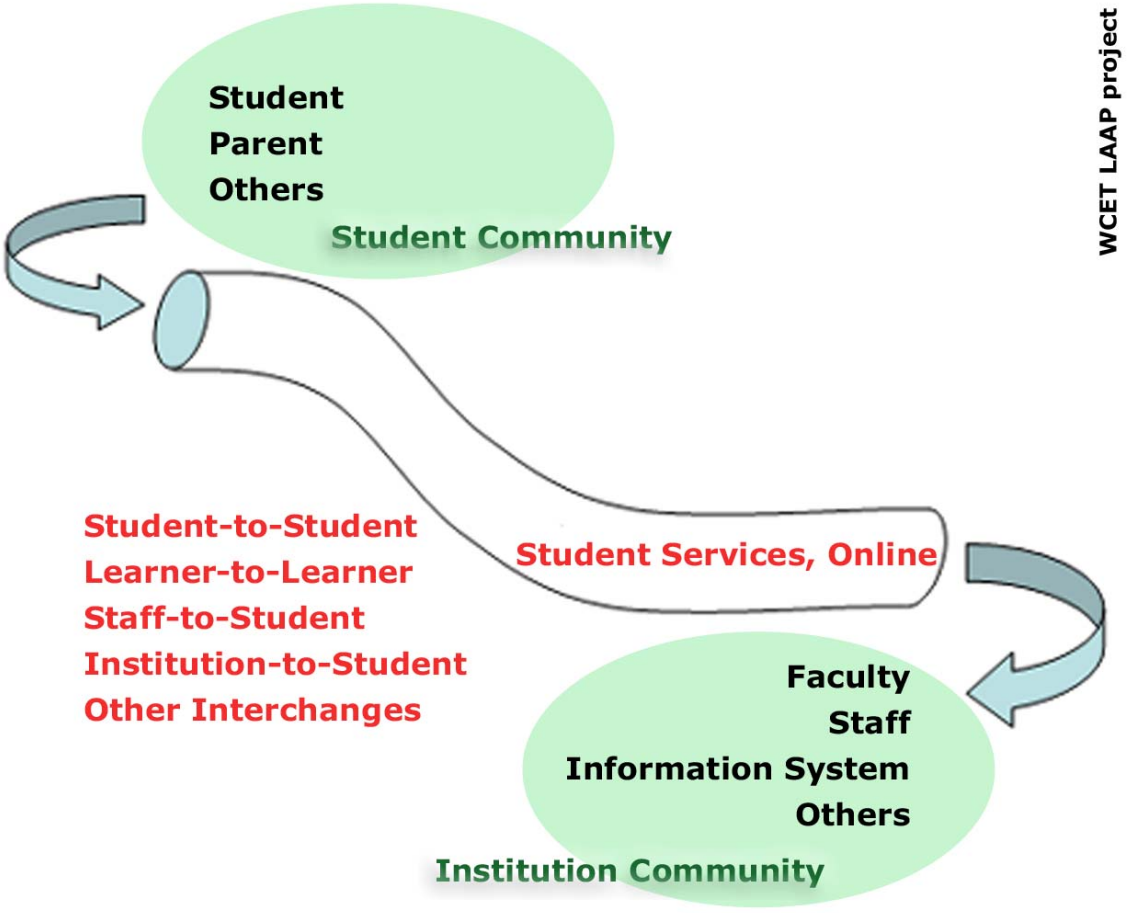
Student Services for Online Learners



Most of the existing services on the physical campus today were designed from the institution's point of view. Students move from office to office integrating these services, sometimes encountering conflicting information and advice. Unfortunately, many institutions repeat this experience for students in the online environment where students click from page to page, again integrating conflicting information and advice.

The Web provides an opportunity to deliver integrated student services designed from the student's point of view. These new services, blended by associated functions, cross service boundaries and are customized and personalized for the individual student. For example, Penn State University has developed an online service to late-drop a course. Through a series of interactive steps with the eLion system, students assess the impact of dropping a course on their grade point average, receive information about tutoring, learn about the impact this action will have on their financial aid, and find out how dropping this course will affect their progress toward program completion. Blended together are academic advising, registration, tutoring and financial aid information to provide the student with the full context in which to make a better decision. Visit the eLion demo for further information.

Student services, the online version, provide a “conduit” between and among the student community and the institution community, as shown below.



The student, a parent, or others from the student community [see top left of diagram] can use the online student services [see middle of the diagram] to communicate with a faculty member, with a staff member, with an information system (such as, a student information system or SIS), or with other elements of the institution. In addition, students can communicate among themselves and institution members can communicate among themselves through the student services online “conduit.”

Motivating Forces for Online Services

There are several motivating forces for implementing integrated, consistent online services. These include:

- **Declining budgets**
  At the time of this writing, most institutions are undergoing severe budget cuts. In order to provide the same or a better level of service, institutions

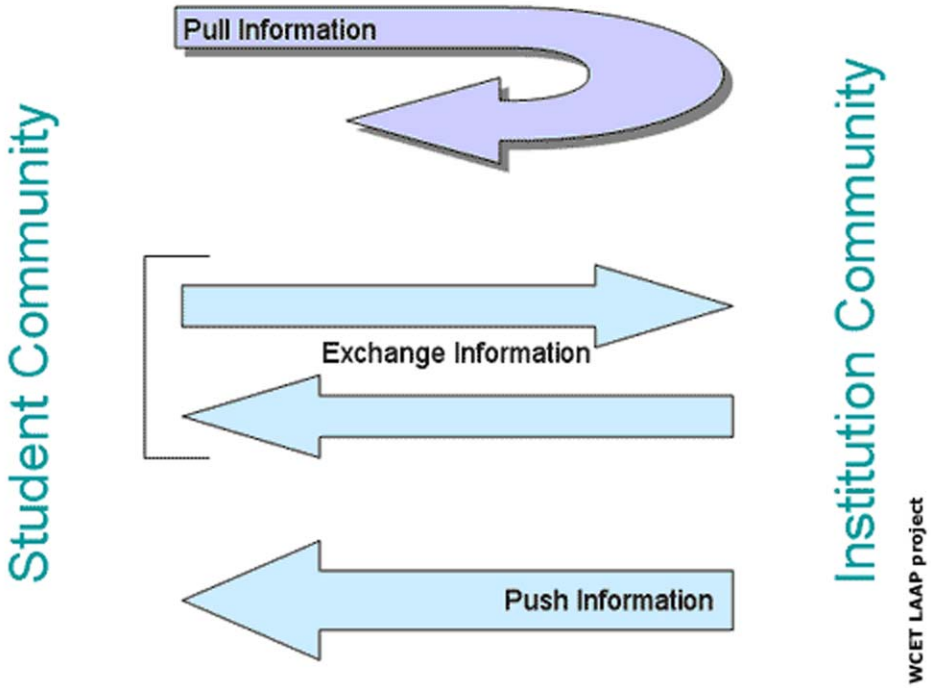
must find ways to automate routine services and make them more easily accessible.

- **Growing enrollments on campus and online**
  Due to the decline in the economy and the arrival of the baby boomer echo, enrollments are growing. Some institutions cannot accommodate additional classrooms on their physical campus and are using online and other forms of mediated instruction to meet demand. For the same reasons, institutions cannot add more physical student services offices and are using the Web to augment or replace traditional services.

- **Increased accountability**
  Student services play an important role in learner success and retention. With the expansion in e-learning enrollments, the regional accrediting agencies have taken an increased interest in the provision of services for this population and have made a commitment to address this subject in their evaluations of institutions.

- **Student expectations**
  Students expect their institution to offer comparable, if not better, service than they experience in their personal lives for social, medical, commercial, and other services. Among these expectations are:
  - **Self-service**
    Younger generation students, in particular, want to serve themselves. By developing more self-service options, institutions reduce staff workloads for routine tasks, freeing these professionals to focus on the more important individualized service students prefer. This also enables institutions to provide expanded access to certain services — in some cases making them available 24x7.
  - **Just-in-time**
    Students have grown accustomed to securing instructions, information, and advice as they need it — rather than in the one-time data dumps popular in the past. The Web allows institutions to meet this expectation with concise packets of service at specific or on-demand intervals preferred by the student.
  - **Personalized**
    In the era of computers, generic service is obsolete. Students want and expect to be recognized as an individual.
  - **Customized service**
    Today's postsecondary population is more diverse than ever before and one size does not fit all. Increasingly, students will expect institutions to deliver services that are appropriate for their specific needs or interests. Managing this relationship well will be key differentiator among institutions in the more competitive environment on the horizon.
  - **Customizable services**
    "Choice" is the definition of this era and using it effectively is necessary to avoid information overload. Students want to choose formats, views, and preferred services for easy access at their convenience.

- **Push & pull choices or selections**
  New technologies make it possible to both collect and send information/service to students as needed, as below:



  Students will increasingly expect institutions to "push" reminders, relevant information, and other services to them as appropriate. This type of communication has policy implications, such as how should institutions manage their communications? See policy issues.

- **Interactive information exchanges**
  Increasingly, students will expect interactive pages that take them more quickly to the specific information or service they desire, as shown above.
- **Integrated and consistent services**
  Good student service calls for integrating related services to provide a seamless and unified experience for the student.

- **Competition among institutions**
  As state funding decreases, institutions will become increasingly competitive for students and the tuition dollars that they bring. The institution's image on the Web — already most prospective student's first impression of the institution — will grow in importance. Services will become one of the key distinguishing factors among institutions in the electronic environment where students can move to a competitor with a click of the mouse. Indeed, Phil Farley of IBM/Tivoli Software in his keynote address at the WCET annual

conference in 2002 identified improving student services as one of the best competitive returns for an institution.

- **Smart usage of new technologies**
  New technologies and the Web make it possible to automate and integrate many student services to provide better learner-centered service. By providing staff with new technology-enabled tools to automate routine tasks as well as perform some of the more sophisticated and time-consuming tasks, they can provide the student with the more valuable "high touch" service students prefer.

Suggested Evolution of New Online Services

As institutions put services on the Web, they often move through a series of stages from putting information about services on the Web to providing interactive, personalized and customized service via the Web. Indeed, Darlene Burnett describes four generations of services:

- **Generation 1—Content**
  The information is presented from the institution's point of view, using terminology and organization that mirror the physical organization and processes of the institution.

- **Generation 2—Content in Context**
  The information is channeled for population segments. For example, there are separate paths for prospective and matriculating students to various student services. These services are distinct entities, however, still reflecting their physical organization.

- **Generation 3—Customization, Personalization, and Community**
  New "one-stop" services — like enrollment services — aggregate and integrate a range of related services to provide personalized and customized service from the student's point of view. Transaction services, portals, and communication tools enhance the student's experience.

- **Generation 4—High Tech/High Touch**
  Services are designed to establish and nurture a relationship between the student and the institution. Some of the identifying features include process orientation from the student's point of view, decision-making tools, personal recommendations, proactive communications, and real-time interaction with the institution.

At first glance it may appear that this progression from one generation to another is simply the reflection of the increased use of technology. Although technology plays a key role, indeed that is the easy part. This progression really reflects an enormous shift in the way institutions have traditionally operated and there is a plethora of policy, turf, financial, and cultural issues to address with each advance.

Who is the Audience for New Online Student Services?

The question is simple; the answer is not. Each campus must develop its own definition on several fronts.

Range of students

First, there is a wide range of students: prospective, part-time, full-time, matriculating, transfer, inactive, graduating, first-generation, international students, students with disabilities, those on campus, and those studying at a distance … and the list goes on. Each student has some unique needs that require specialized services. Good electronic solutions, then, must address the commonalities with the flexibility to accommodate the differences.

Definition of student

Second, when and over what time period is a student a student? This is a very difficult question in the electronic environment. In the physical environment it is easier to determine when a student is eligible for services and when he is not; the eligibility period is often directly related to his or her physical presence on campus. In the electronic world, where courses may be open-ended or have multiple start and end dates, the time boundaries are not so finite and the implications for the technology infrastructure in terms of service and storage are immense.

Involved parties

Third, most services involve both students and staff — even those self-service student services. What does the staff need to support this new service? Too often, institutions rush to put services online without the backend infrastructure to support the new “automated” process. This can result in poorer service. For example, many institutions have the put their applications online without the database support on the backend to truly automate the process. Staff receives the data via email and then enters it into a database. More students apply because it is easy to do so. In many cases, the staff has more applications to review … students must wait longer for news of the outcome … and yet the yield in enrollments remains about the same as before.

Additionally, some services also need to serve a third party such as parents, prospective employers, or even legislators. Thus, it is important to know the needs of each of these constituent groups when developing technology solutions. Who outside the campus community might want to use your services? For example, many campuses provide some level of service as part of their outreach mission to their local communities. Others (such as, the Kentucky Virtual University and the University of New Mexico) provide library access to all citizens of their states. What parameters must you set for free and fee-for-service access to services? How do legislators view this plan?

Should All Services be Online?

Nearly all services should have some online presence, even if it is just at the information level. Some services (such as, registration) can be totally accessible online, while others (such as, testing or counseling) may be only partially so. For example, institutions may offer some counseling services online for their in-state students, but only information for their out-of-state students due to licensing issues. What is important for all online services, however, is easy access when necessary to a live-person via other remote methods such as online chats or instant messaging, email, telephone, or fax. The institution should clearly state when live help will be available and what the response time is likely to be inside and outside of normal business hours.

One of the issues that institutions will face in the years ahead is how to best staff some services so that equal attention is given to those seeking assistance online and those seeking assistance in the face-to-face environment. Can the same staff do both or will it be necessary to dedicate some staff to each? If services cannot be fully integrated, how will campuses track the use of student services so that there is one integrated record for each student?

Do Off-Campus and On-Campus Students Need Different Services?

They need the same services with a few twists. For those off-campus students who live outside the area and cannot come to campus, services should include affordable alternatives for those components that cannot occur online. For example, textbooks should be available for order by mail far enough in advance of the class start date for a student to avoid rush postage charges. Institutions should be prepared to establish interlibrary loan, testing, and local laboratory arrangements to accommodate all students registered in the class.

Throughout the Web site, telephone numbers should include the area codes and address should include zip codes. Distance courses are more likely to be on non-traditional schedules with more flexible start and end times. This means that the electronic systems that support services associated with them (e.g., registration, add/drop procedures, etc.) must be more flexible. In addition, it means making some staff accessible in non-traditional hours such as evenings and weekends. This may be by synchronous or asynchronous methods as appropriate.