SETONWORLDWIDE: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This case study offers a strategic model of methods and services resulting in relatively high student success rates as defined by course completion of introductory first and second semester online courses. This strategic model is presented in the context of Sloan-C's **Five Pillars of Quality Online Education.**

KEYWORDS

Retention, Student Success, Course Completion, Strategies, Institutional Commitment, Sloan-C Five Pillars

I. INTRODUCTION

With unprecedented shifts in the higher education competitive landscape brought about by advances in technology mediated education that unfolded in the mid 1990s, Seton Hall University launched a strategic initiative around a centralized structure that would support, build and administer an online learning delivery infrastructure. In 1997, SetonWorldWide set in motion the development and delivery of online courses at Seton Hall University. This case study describes the SetonWorldWide strategic model of methods and services that has resulted in an average 96% student success rate as defined by course completion of introductory first and second semester courses. This strategic model is offered as a perspective to other institutions who aspire to similar results.

II. MISSION, CONTEXT AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The institutional mission of Seton Hall University is to prepare students to be leaders in their professional and community lives in an environment that fosters student service, leadership and excellence in a global society.

Recognizing the potential market for adult learners, the vision of a Seton Hall online campus was guided, in part, by the determination that SetonWorldWide would focus on online professional graduate courses where students would matriculate from graduate programs in two years or less. SetonWorldWide's online courses would support and extend the University's mission by delivering high-quality, career-enhancing education through a variety of online delivery methods that would capitalize upon a combination of technologies, instructional methods and services. SetonWorldWide currently offers eight online graduate degree programs and four online graduate certificate programs. Using a cohort approach with students beginning and ending the program together as a learning team, each program utilizes a sequential course curriculum with introductory foundation courses taken in the first two semesters. More than 1500 students have enrolled in SetonWorldWide online courses since its inception.

SetonWorldWide students are represented by broad geographic dispersion. The student body is represented by all fifty states as well as students represented from Canada, Puerto Rico, England, Ireland, Iraq, Dubai, Germany, Jamaica, and Saudi Arabia. The mean age of SetonWorldWide students is 35 years. The mean years of work experience of SetonWorldWide students is 11.3 years. The average class size of SetonWorldWide courses is eighteen students with most courses staffed by both a primary and a secondary instructor. The average length of SetonWorldWide online courses is seven to ten weeks.

III. STUDENT SUCCESS AS AN INSTITUTION-WIDE PRIORITY

The driving principle underlying the SetonWorldWide philosophy is the recognition that while there are unique learning challenges inherent in online delivery, the online learning experience must be commensurate with on-campus academic standards of quality. Geographic distance between the student and the instructor must not compromise the academic integrity of the educational process.

The institution's commitment to success is demonstrated by its support for specific methods and service strategies that are common to all SetonWorldWide online program courses. These methods and service strategies encompass aspects of:

- Student population
- Course design
- Course format
- Program administration
- Faculty deployment
- Academic oversight
- Student Grouping
- Non-academic student services

IV. SETON HALL UNIVERSITY'S DEFINITION OF "SUCCESS"

The distinctive challenges inherent in online course delivery make course completion a primary concern for student success. Physical separation poses a particular risk for full integration into the learning process. A student who is more integrated can be seen as more likely to persist and complete a course. For Seton Hall University, retention in individual courses resulting in a student fully completing the course and earning a grade is the primary indicator of success.

A study of SetonWorldWide 2004-2008 student enrollment data reveals a 96% completion rate for students enrolled in SetonWorldWide introductory first and second semester foundation courses. Personal or professional crises were the most common reasons cited for those students who did not complete the introductory first and second semester courses. Of the 4% who did not complete introductory first and second semester foundation courses, half of those rejoined subsequent learning team cohorts.

V. FRAMEWORK FOR SETONWORLDIDE STUDENT SUCCESS

The specific methods and service strategies common to all SetonWorldWide online courses can be presented in the context of Sloan-C's Five Pillars of Quality Online Education: learning effectiveness, scale, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction. The methods and services strategies inherent in the SetonWorldWide strategy can be tied to one or all of the Sloan Five Pillars. A matrix summarizing

these corresponding elements is seen in Appendix A.

A. Learning Effectiveness

SetonWorldWide leverages the unique characteristics of online environments to provide a distinctive learning experience for its students. A number of method and service elements are seen to enhance course completion within the context of learning effectiveness. Course design around an asynchronous model responds to the need for students being able to control the pace of their lives and the student grouping model around the cohort learning team approach provides ongoing peer and faculty support. Students identify with their cohort and a support structure quickly develops. The intensive interactivity incorporated into the course content and the on-campus residency that takes place prior to the introductory foundation courses result in bonding, collaboration and identification with the student's learning community. Students meet face-to-face with program administrators, faculty and cohort colleagues at the on-campus residency and a protocol of student advising is established.

The elements that lead to learning effectiveness include:

- Asynchronous "any-time any-place" learning
- Cohort learning team student grouping
- Course format provides intensive faculty-student and student-student interactivity
- On-campus residency requirement for cohort learning team students

Evidence of effectiveness is found in the feedback received from students. Students are administered online course feedback forms prior to the course beginning, a mid-course evaluation and an end-of-course survey. For cohort students a mid-program evaluation is administered during the cohort's mid-program on-campus residency. The feedback consistently demonstrates that the asynchronous learning model, the cohort learning team student grouping, and a course format that provides a high degree of interactivity and the on-campus residencies contribute substantially to course completion rates.

B. Scale

SetonWorldWide works toward offering an educational value through an institutional commitment to cost effectiveness with an expectation of return on investment of its online initiatives. As a stand-alone unit that must recover its costs through revenue, SetonWorldWide's budget model is driven by methods and service elements that control costs and provide a return on the investment. The elements that lead toward a commitment to cost-effectiveness include:

- Instructional compensation through an adjunct faculty model
- Majority of SetonWorldWide instructors from on-campus full-time faculty
- Institutional 24/7 Help Desk
- Institutional learning platform support
- Institutional Teaching and Learning Technology Center

A budget model that compensates faculty on an adjunct overload basis with the majority of instructors coming from the on-campus full-time faculty ranks allow for a cost effective instructional budget model while assuring high-level instructional quality. Leveraging key institutional educational resources such as the 24/7 Help Desk, using the institutional-wide learning platform with attendant support and access to the Seton Hall University Teaching and Learning Technology Center for course development support add

immeasurably to the cost effectiveness of SetonWorldWide online course delivery. This, in turn, guarantees ongoing sustainability and investment for future growth.

C. Access

SetonWorldWide provides access to all qualified, motivated students to complete courses and programs with access throughout the student's life cycle. Access starts with a search engine optimized dedicated SetonWorldWide web site that provides information on discipline and program online course options, dedicated program administrators that provide information and personally facilitate admission, and post-admission academic, administrative, and technological assistance. Learning resources such as academic advising, remote library access and learning platform tutorials provide students with support throughout their academic life-cycle. Access elements include:

- Search engine optimized web site
- Brand name
- Academic advising with program Academic Director and faculty
- Program administrator serving as admissions gateway and as liaison with bursar, financial aid and registration
- Technological Support though 24/7 Help Desk
- Remote library access and dedicated online learner reference librarian
- Learning Platform online tutorials

With the majority of inquiries coming through search engines, seamless access starts with a search engine optimized easily accessible and informative web site that describes programs, curricula, format, and other vital information so students can make an informed decision about learning need fit. Administrators assigned to each program convey students through the admission process and remain as a resource for the individual student throughout her/his student life cycle assisting them with administrative and academic matters. Institutional support by way of remote access to the library and an online learner reference librarian and technological support with a 24/7 Help Desk and learning platform tutorials provide students with access to learner support resources. Post course student surveys indicate that access to a full-time dedicated administrator, technological support and online information retrieval through remote access to the library contribute to student persistence in course completion.

D. Faculty Satisfaction

SetonWorldWide endeavors to provide instructors with an online teaching experience that is personally rewarding and professional beneficial. Most notable are opportunities to teach students who represent a broad geographic and professional spectrum. The SetonWorldWide student population is comprised of approximately 70% beyond the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area. Student profiles while showing a general homogeneity in age and career status (mid-career professionals), indicate backgrounds and experience that vary widely among programs and courses. Institutional factors that contribute to SetonWorldWide instructor satisfaction are technical, quality assurance, administrative and financial support in a collaborative environment. The established student/faculty ratio of 10:1 common to all SetonWorldWide courses provide an institutional acknowledgement that delivering high quality online education to adult professional learners is highly labor intensive. Faculty satisfaction elements include:

- Geographically dispersed student population
- Course authorship institutional assistance using the Quality Matters Rubric
- Day-to-day operational assistance by Program Administrator

- 10:1 student/faculty ratio in all courses
- Institutional financial support
    - Course authorship stipend
    - Royalty arrangement for new course development
    - Funding for Online Teaching Certification
    - Funding for conference attendance and paper presentations
- Academic Director from home department assigned to each online program
- University program review of online programs

Composition of the student population with the tendency toward relationship building in a cohort student grouping structure, an institutional commitment to quality assurance, technological, administrative and financial support and academic oversight by discipline and department contribute to faculty satisfaction. Combined with the emphasis on teaching presence and the established student/faculty ratio on all online courses is the recognition that online instruction matters at Seton Hall.

E. Student Satisfaction

SetonWorldWide views the effectiveness of the student's educational experience as a primary factor in student success. This educational experience includes aspects of course content and quality, teaching presence, and academic-student services-technology support delivered in a timely, responsive and personalized manner. An analysis of results from student and alumni surveys and of testimonials place levels of high satisfaction the responsive nature of instructors and administrators, a focus on interaction and team learning, and an academic environment that is supportive, rigorous, relevant and challenging. Those elements that lead to learning effectiveness, access, cost-effectiveness, and faculty satisfaction all apply to student satisfaction. Student satisfaction elements include:

- 10:1 student/faculty ratio
- SWW Teaching Presence Best Practices (Appendix B)
- SWW Teaching Presence Expectations (Appendix C)
- Full-time program administrators
- Academic Director and instructional teams comprised predominantly of full-time on-campus faculty
- 24-7 Help Desk
- Cohort student grouping and similar mid-career status

Given the importance of interaction and team learning in SetonWorldWide courses, student composition plays a key role in the group dynamics of SWW courses The target student market for SetonWorldWide programs are those individuals whose professional career stage reflects mid-career status rather than early-career or pre-career status.

The SetonWorldWide online learning environment is characterized by strong teaching presence. The stronger the teaching presence, the stronger students' sense of learning community – there is recognition that a close-knit learning community is an essential component in a high-quality online learning environment. There are a number of teaching presence expectations required of all instructors who teach in the SetonWorldWide online programs.

VI. CONCLUSION

This case study draws upon strategies used in the online campus of Seton Hall University that have led to a 93% course completion rates in its online courses. Presented in the context of the Sloan-C Pillars of learning effectiveness, access, cost-effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction, certain conclusions regarding methods and services can be reached that help in student success.

VII. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip DiSalvio serves as Assistant Provost and Director of SetonWorldWide, the online campus of Seton Hall University. He holds an Ed.D. from Harvard University Graduate School of Education in Administration, Planning and Social Policy.

Dr. DiSalvio serves on the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) Online and Blended Teaching Oversight Board and is a recipient of the *Excellence in Online Administration Award* in recognition by the Center for Internet Technology in Education and eCollege. This award is given to individuals who are seen as visionary in the development and management of successful online education.

VIII. APPENDIX A: SETONWORLDWIDE STRATEGIES AND THE SLOAN FIVE PILLARS

	LEARNING EFFECTIVE-NESS	SCALE	ACCESS	FACULTY SATISFACTION	STUDENT SATISFACTION
STUDENT POPULATION	Mid-career professionals		Search engine optimized web site Brand name	Geographically dispersed student population	Cohort learning team and mid-career status
COURSE DESIGN	Quality Matters Rubric	24/7 Help Desk Institutional platform support		Primary and secondary instructors 10:1 student /faculty ratio	Asynchronous "any-time any-place" learning
PROGRAM ADMINISTRA-TION SUPPORT	Advising support		Full-time program administrator as admissions gateway	Full-time program administrator for day-to-day operations	Full-time program administrators as liaison with bursar, registration, financial aide
FACULTY DEPLOYMENT		Compensation model Full-time faculty Commitment to student /faculty ratio		Authorship assistance Funding for: - authorship - royalties - certification - conferences	10:1 student /faculty ratio Full-time faculty from on-campus department
ACADEMIC	Primary-Secondary		Academic Director	Ongoing program reviews and	Academic

SUPPORT	Instructors		oversight and advising	continuous quality improvement	Director oversight and advising
STUDENT GROUPING	Cohort learning team On-campus residency		Cohort learning team collaboration and support	Student relationship building	Cohort learning team support On-campus residency bonding
COURSE FORMAT	Teaching presence Intense interaction Asynchronous/ Synchronous		Asynchronous Synchronous learning	Emphasis on teaching presence Asynchronous Synchronous	SWW Best Practices SWW Teaching Presence Expectations
NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORT	Program Administrators liaisons with bursar, registration and financial aid		24-7 HelpDesk Online library access & reference librarian Online platform tutorials		24-7 Help Desk Online library access & reference librarian Online platform tutorials

IX. APPENDIX B: SETONWORLDWIDE
TEACHING PRESENCE BEST PRACTICES

TEACHING RESPONSIBILITY	EXPECTATIONS OF PRESENCE
Strategies to maintain teaching presence in threaded discussions	See SetonWorldWide "Teaching Expectations for Threaded Discussions"
Instructional expectations to maintain teaching presence in threaded discussion	See SetonWorldWide "Teaching Expectations for Threaded Discussions"
Frequency of direct faculty presence in threaded discussion	At least daily and more if required
Feedback time-frame for student written assignments	Within 5 week-days *(e.g. if the assignment is due on Monday, faculty feedback should be provided no later than Friday of that week)*
Response time-frame for student email, telephone calls and student inquiries and questions	Within 24 hours. If unable to respond within this time period, a confirmation of the communication must be provided to the student as to when they may expect to hear from faculty
Student grading time-frame	Grades to be posted within one week of the assignment due date
Deadlines for assignments and consequences of late submissions	Deadlines for assignments and consequences of late submissions must be clearly stated in course

X. APPENDIX C: SETONWORLDWIDE
TEACHING PRESENCE EXPECTATIONS FOR THREADED
DISCUSSIONS*

The SetonWorldWide online learning environment is characterized by strong teaching presence. The stronger the teaching presence, the stronger students' sense of learning community—a close-knit learning community is an essential component in a high-quality online learning environment. There are a number of teaching presence expectations required of all instructors who teach in the SetonWorldWide online programs.

Teaching Presence Expectations in Threaded Discussions

1. **Identifying areas of agreement and disagreement**
    (*identify areas of agreement and disagreement in the threaded discussion*)

2. **Seeking to reach consensus and understanding**
    (*guide the class towards agreement/understanding in the threaded discussion*)

3. **Encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing student contributions**
    (*acknowledge student participation in the threaded discussion – e.g. reply in a positive, encouraging manner to student submissions*)

4. **Setting the climate for learning**
    (*encourage students to explore concepts in the threaded discussion - e.g., encourage "thinking out loud" or the exploration of new ideas*)

5. **Drawing in participants and prompting discussion**
    (*keep students engaged and participating in productive dialog in the threaded discussion*)

6. **Assessing the efficacy of the process**
    (*keep students on task in the threaded discussion*)

Instructor Responsibilities for Teaching Presence in Threaded Discussions

1. Presenting content and questions

2. Focusing the discussion on specific issues

3. Summarizing discussion

4. Confirming understanding

5. Diagnosing misperceptions

6. Injecting knowledge from diverse sources

*Adapted from:

"The Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, "Chickering and Gamson, 1987

"Assessing Teaching Presence in a Computer Conferencing Context," Anderson, et al. JALN, 2001

"Follow-up Investigation of 'Teaching Presence' in SUNY Learning Network," Shea, Pickett, Pelz, JALN, 2003