Connecting Services to Students: New Technology and Implications for Student Affairs

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Technology is affecting how student affairs professionals work with students to deliver traditional programs and services. This article begins with an overview of the characteristics of current students and their experiences and comfort with technology. This understanding leads to the role of student affairs professionals as creators, designers and developers of programs and services using ever-expanding technology. The authors also discuss potential new applications of technology for student affairs programs while identifying ethical issues that student affairs professionals need to discuss when considering the use of new technological tools.

Are student affairs professionals prepared to deal with the complexities and issues associated with the growing development of technology, and the impact it has on the delivery of traditional student affairs services and programs? This article assists student affairs professionals to prepare for addressing these issues. There are five key questions facing student affairs professionals as the pressure and opportunity for technological innovation increase. First, what is the demographic information and what are personal characteristics of the students coming to college over the next few years, and how will their experiences and comfort level with technology shape program and service delivery? Second, what is the role that student affairs professionals need to play in managing information technology and the staff responsible for its development? Third, what are some of the new innovations and uses of technology that are already being used to improve or alter the delivery of student affairs services? Fourth, what kind of predictions can be made about the possible directions that technology can take student affairs programs and services? Finally, the article considers the ethical issues associated with technology by examining whether having the ability to do something also means that doing it is in the best interest of the students.

The Millennial Generation

Oblinger (2003) identified three characteristics of millennial students that are particularly relevant to technology. The first characteristic is that millennial students are comfortable with technology in all forms (Oblinger, 2003). Students use computers, cell phones, personal desk assistants, and other technological tools

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to make their lives easier. Introducing new systems or services that utilize these tools can be both familiar to, and appreciated by, students.

Second, this generation is described as the "connected" generation, often portrayed as being in constant contact with friends and family (Oblinger, 2003). Through email, cell phones, and other products, students are mobile without sacrificing their connections to others. Students are able to send email messages to faculty and staff whenever they wish, and they are not limited to traditional office hours for communication. By using programs such as MySpace™ and the Facebook™, students are also spending time creating online "communities" that allow real-time communication with others (Barratt, 2000; Schackner, 2004).

The final characteristic of the millennial students which guides the discussion on technology use centers around their high expectations and demand for customer service, both of which impact the delivery of traditional student affairs services (Oblinger, 2003). This generation has grown up with the ability to almost instantaneously gratify their needs through technology. If they want to listen to a song, they do not have to go to the store; they can simply download it directly to their computer. If students want to listen to music, they use a music storage device like the iPod™ and select from over 5,000 musical choices that can be carried in the palm of their hand (Apple, 2005). The expectation that they should get immediate answers to questions or requests can provide obstacles for student affairs offices that operate on a slower or more deliberate operating system. Offices face increasing pressure from these students and their parents to improve response time in meeting requests. An email sent at 9:00 pm has been "sitting there" for almost 12 hours by 8:00 am, which, to this generation, is considered an unreasonably long response time (Moneta, 1997).

Technology and Student Access

Students are becoming more comfortable with technology at earlier ages through early exposure in the secondary education system (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). In a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, researchers found that among high school students, 97% were using a computer either at home or at school, and 80% were using the Internet (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). With students learning to integrate technology in classrooms prior to coming to college, it is understandable that students expect institutions of higher education to further expand that use.

While students may be using the Internet primarily to send and receive email, many are also using it to conduct scholarly research and engage in online learning activities (Newburger, 2001). As a result, many students come to college with high expectations of the kinds of online services available based on their pre-college schooling and home life experiences (Newburger, 2001). Online search engines have grown so much in popularity that many students are using them to research school work instead of using traditional library and academic resources (Thompson, 2003). When students come to campus having spent their entire lives

using programs such as these, how will student affairs identify and meet their needs?

Student Affairs Professionals as Managers of Information Technology

Given these experiences by students prior to their arrival on the campus, how do student affairs practitioners become information technology managers? Generational issues between practitioners and students, campus resources, the change process, the types of electronic services, and technological skills of professionals are all important factors in the effective management of information technology. Learning to operate in an area that may not have been a part of their educational preparations may be difficult for some professionals, but it is a key element in their ability to successfully manage this changing aspect of student affairs work.

With the technological advances being made on a daily basis, administrators are frequently challenged to think outside the box (Hazen, 1999). The rapid increase of one innovative idea after another has colleges and universities everywhere scrambling to stay abreast of the high expectations of the generation they are serving (Oblinger, 2003). Students want their institution to be more responsive to their technological needs, but they are often unaware of the implications such technologies may have on their overall development. Considering the fact that students are not preparing for the far-reaching implications that technology brings, the responsibility falls on the institution that is competing to be as technologically savvy as its incoming students.

Many student affairs professionals are apprehensive about delivering services via some form of technology. Significant generational issues exist in technology uses, technological change, and information-seeking behaviors (Cockrell, Cockrell, & Harris, 1998; Moneta, 1997). Staff may hesitate and think that our "high touch" profession should not sacrifice personal interactions with students in order to provide services electronically. Barratt (2000) stated, "The underlying paradigms and myths used in student affairs embrace face-to-face, see the color of their eyes, interactions" (p. 1). Communicating with students through technology can be viewed by many as moving away from the very foundation of our profession, but the use of technology can be managed effectively by practitioners who utilize campus resources and become more familiar with technological applications (Broughton, 2000).

Blimling (2000) categorized electronic services in terms of basic electronic student services, advanced electronic student services, and future electronic student services. He challenged student affairs practitioners to think carefully about the decisions they make today regarding technology in planning for technology of the future. This preparation may be a challenged for some student affairs professionals. They many not feel they have the training or knowledge necessary to

manage a change process and implement new technologies whether that is adding a web page filled with information or initiating a new, online process.

Many factors impact the feasibility of staff initiating new technologically based processes, and these factors merit several questions needing attention. Are professional preparation programs informing students about their role in managing technology (Moneta, 1997)? What are divisions of student affairs doing to train staff in developing these online processes and sharing strategies for the oversight of these new processes (Moneta, 1997; Spicer & DeBlois, 2004)? Is funding available for development costs (Spicer & DeBlois, 2004)? Do institutional frameworks exist to make development of new "electronic services," as described by Blimling (2000), easier? Is a communication and information systems infrastructure in place (Maughan, 2001)? These are a few of the challenges facing student affairs practitioners when they examine the issues of using technology in changing service delivery.

Along with the responsibility of managing IT services and/or resources, where is the responsibility for maintaining the required and necessary level of information security for the data? There are security breaches across the country on a regular basis where campus networks are compromised and hackers gain access to servers containing credit card information and/or social security numbers (Angelo, 2005; Spicer & DeBlois, 2004). Professionals who are the managers of IT processes should be in close communication with information security staff on their campus to follow appropriate protocols and procedures for keeping data safe and secure and minimizing the risk of a security breach. In developing new online processes, there are also legal implications. Student affairs staff should regularly consult with legal counsel in the development of new systems. There are significant federal, state, and local laws that may need to be reviewed to implement a new process.

The implications of eliminating paper processes for a seemingly slicker, "easier" electronic one should be carefully examined. Use of electronic processes does not eliminate the need for staff and direct personal communications with students. Staff should assess the institutional environment and think through the potential implications of creating an electronic only communication system. Even though these students are comfortable with technology, it does not mean that complex, online processes necessarily come naturally to them. Reviewing proposed financial aid award information, executing a food services contract electronically, or submitting an online request for a room change in a residence hall requires a higher level of attention to detail by students than downloading music or instant messaging.

For the student affairs practitioner, managing change is a fundamental part of introducing technological initiatives. Understanding of the organizational culture, pressures, and opportunities cannot be overstated in its importance to successfully and creatively managing change and technological advances (Barratt, 2000; Lewis, 1999; Moneta, 1997). Barratt (2000) highlighted the potential challenges in managing change including addressing any possible resistance to change by

individuals and the traditional student affairs approach to service delivery; an approach which favors a high level of interpersonal interaction. Lastly, practitioners should become students of change management as they look to initiate technological advances.

Barratt described adaptations and innovations in his work where adaptations are replacing current processes with technological ones. Sending email messages instead of postal letters and offering online applications to manage various processes instead of using forms or paperwork are both examples of this type of change. Innovations, "things never before possible" (Barratt, p. 10), are now able to be realized in higher education by the implementation and growth of new technologies that offer us opportunities as never before.

Ethical Issues and Concerns

If the purpose of higher education is to promote learning, education must acquire an assumption of certain levels of risk. Winston and Saunders (1998) noted that the one guaranteed method for colleges and universities to use in the avoidance of risks is to cease functioning. In addition to recognizing the risk involved in information technology is the onset of the associated legal and ethical responsibilities. To meet the needs of the current student, higher education institutions have developed and implemented various technologies that begin to question these responsibilities. As these technologies develop, university policies must be evaluated to keep up with these advances.

Students expect their institutions to have the latest electronic devices and gadgets, but they do not consider the ramifications of this new technology. They often forget that this technology can be used to locate them when they make a purchase from a vending machine with their "smart card." A key question for student affairs professionals is how will they determine what uses of technology are ethically permissible and what are not?

There is a fine line between seeking out a student in need and tracking down a student who has neglected to call home. The University of Rochester (Hazen, 1999) was able to use its I.D. tracking program when they located a student who was able to give them information concerning the well-being of another student. While some students may appreciate the security of such a program, how will other students react when they learn that their institution is acting as a new "big brother"? Institutions may vie for the latest and best electronic devices, but it will be interesting to know at what point the student population will not share the excitement over the use of these devices and had rather the institution not use them.

The ethical implications of technological advances are endless, constantly changing, and must continually be addressed. In response, colleges and universities need a set of policies and guidelines that outline the evolving legal and ethical issues that have emerged. Traditionally, student affairs practitioners have not been

the developers of information technology, and they may need to look to others on campus for that expertise. Many different academic partners have a great deal of this necessary knowledge, and they may be able to assist departments in developing the necessary tools to respond to demand. Efforts by student affairs to develop policies and guidelines regarding information technology that lack coordination from other campus units can appear disjointed, confusing, and leave students facing conflicting expectations and responsibilities being articulated by different entities on the campus. In some instances, "individuals stumble into areas of legal liability or ethically dubious conduct because of a lack of forethought about the action's long-term consequences or its appearance to persons unfamiliar with the situation" (Winston & Saunders, 1998). This situation may often be avoided if carefully designed procedures are developed to handle potentially risky activities.

Student affairs professionals must remain knowledgeable about all aspects of their work. Likewise, "it is essential that practitioners read the professional literature and research findings in order to be able to gain as complete an understanding as possible about the potential or likely consequences of various approaches to work with students" (Winston & Saunders, 1998). Through the use of available resources, administrators have the potential to provide student service, programs, and activities that promote learning while also improving the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of administrative operations. If student affairs can form appropriate ethical standards and step up as leaders in this area, information technology has the potential to improve student learning beyond the current realm.

What It All Means

With technology continuously advancing and creating new opportunities for applications and use on the campus, it is critical that student affairs staff stay educated on the advances and be proactive in their implementation. While the technology may exist to allow a program such as placing GPS locators in student ID cards is that an ethical choice to make? Will parents be able to use the same system to locate their son or daughter? Will the GPS be used to identify someone who is breaking a visitation rule or monitor who is attending events in order to improve assessment efforts? Are technological developments progressing so fast that personal privacy will no longer be valued?

Technology offers institutions the potential ability to do a great deal with fewer resources by coordinating some efforts and eliminating others. The problem is that the potential savings resulting from these changes may be offset by the costs associated with the new technology. Reducing printing, mailing, and filing costs is a definite benefit, but the implementation of a paperless office requires a great deal of effort in the beginning in designing the programs that will replace the paper, and paying for the expertise to create and support this new technology. It is important that student affairs professionals seriously consider the implications and issues associated with implementing any new technological innovations, but at the same time they cannot be fearful of this technology. As previously discussed, each new

class of students coming to our campuses is becoming more technologically savvy and adept than previous classes.

Discussions for the Future

The ethical and management issues regarding technology highlight the need for further discussion about what technology means, how it will affect our professional foundations and beliefs, and our role in integrating this technology into the campus environment. Defining and measuring the campus community requires new paradigms and tools as student expectations have truly changed because of their exposure and experience with technology. Reviewing student development theory-based programs and the learning outcomes anticipated for programs can be very different for this new generation of student if they define friendship, communication, and service significantly different from their predecessors.

Some institutions, such as the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh (2004), are creating programs and statements to deal with a growing lack of civility and personal responsibility that has become associated with the growth of online interactions that appear to be replacing personal communications with many of today's college students (University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, 2004). While we are not advocating the abandonment of the principles that are the foundation of student affairs practice, it may be time for the profession to re-examine those principles and how they are made manifest in our work on campus. Technology has tremendous potential to impact students in all aspects of their lives in higher education both in the classroom and in the co-curriculum, but if that potential is going to be directed to the best possible outcome, academic professionals in both student affairs and academic affairs need to begin planning for that impact.

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