Chapter One

Setting the Stage: The Transformation

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, technology transformed higher education by changing how colleges and universities interact with students, from the first recruitment effort to the last request for alumni contributions. Many see distance learning as the application of technology that has done the most to revolutionize the way students earn college degrees. In the 1980s and 1990s, distance education was a combination of telecourses and correspondence. But once the Internet could support text, graphics, audio, and video, institutions chose web-based delivery to provide distance learning instruction. With this mode of delivery, distance education became known as online learning.

Early adopters of online learning were faculty members who typically took the "lone ranger" approach to online course development and delivery. As instructors, they taught themselves how to use the hardware and software necessary to transform their on-campus courses for online delivery. They developed and managed courses, facilitated instruction, and, equally important, they supported their online learners. These early adopters enthusiastically embraced this new way of teaching, devoting the time necessary to attend to most needs of their students. This approach was laudable but not sustainable or scalable. Online faculty who followed early adopters typically did not, and do not, have the interest, skills, or time to do it all.

Supporting online students is a collaborative effort. Faculty, student affairs, and other student service professionals work with

staff from distance learning and information technology offices to design, develop, and deliver services that facilitate the success of online learners. The approach to student services may be different when delivered electronically, but the goals are remarkably similar. Professionals with expertise in specific functional areas should be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of academic and personal support services for online learners.

Online learners are not the only students who are interested in receiving academic and personal support services at a distance. Today's students are comfortable with and expect to use technology whenever possible. They anticipate being able to interact with colleges and universities to accomplish many transactions whenever they need to and from wherever they are located. Many students apply to the college, register for class, apply for financial aid, access the college library, all from the convenience of their home or dorm computer. Some may be taking all of their courses online, others just a few, and some will never take an online course. But the message is clear: most students coming to colleges and universities expect the efficiency, ease, and effectiveness of using electronic means to interact with their institution.

GROWTH OF ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning has grown exponentially during the first decade of the twenty-first century. For eight years (2003–2010), the Sloan Consortium conducted a nationwide survey that tracks the growth and nature of online learning. During the fall of 2009, 5.6 million students, representing 29% of the total college and university enrollment, took at least one online course. This number of students represents an increase of 21% over the previous year, the largest annual increase in the eight years of the survey. Especially noteworthy is that this large increase occurred when overall enrollment growth in higher education was less than 2% (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

The largest colleges and universities have more online students than any other type of institution. Colleges and universities with a total enrollment of 15,000 or more students represent 14% of all institutions with online offerings. However, they educate

67% of all online students. The smallest institutions represent 18% of all institutions; however, their online offerings educate only 2% of online students. The trend is that online students are concentrated in a relatively small number of large colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Most growth is from institutions that are already offering online courses and programs and that are also the largest colleges and universities. They were the first to offer online courses, have been the most invested, and have grown the fastest. A few schools, around 5% or about 250 institutions that responded to the Sloan Survey, do not currently offer online courses, but even these schools are planning to develop online courses. These tend to be the smallest schools that may view online courses as supplemental and narrowly targeted for a niche market (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Community colleges have experienced significant growth in online courses and programs as shown by the two annual reports that track online learning growth in this sector. The Instructional Technology Council (ITC) reports a 22% online enrollment increase during fall 2009 over the previous year (*Trends in Elearning: Tracking the Impact of Elearning at Community Colleges*, 2010). In the second report, the *Survey of Community College Presidents*, 87% of participants reported gains in online student enrollment, and 54% reported gains in the number of online degree programs (Green, 2010b). Adult students returning to college are interested in enrolling at institutions that offer fully online degrees or certificates (Jaggars, 2011). Particularly significant is the growth of online degree programs at community colleges.

The greatest growth in online programs comes primarily from private, for-profit institutions. American Public University System is the largest institution, with 77,700, a 31% increase from 2009 to 2010. Bridgeport Education follows with 77,100, a 40% increase during the same period. UMassOnline, a public, not-for-profit institution, experienced a 14.5% growth to 45,800, Walden University with a 13% increase grew to 45,600, and Liberty University grew 24% to 45,000. These numbers represent full-time online enrollment. The top institutions for part-time online enrollments are University of Phoenix Online, State University of New York Learning Network, the Ohio Learning Network, Kaplan University, and DeVry (Nagel, 2011). Nonprofit public institutions feel

the competition for students most keenly from for-profit institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2010). This competition factor results in online enrollment growth in both for-profit and large public institutions. From all indications, the interest in online learning will continue to grow.

Many reasons account for the increasing growth of online courses and programs. Green (2010c) states that colleges and universities are motivated to develop and grow their online programs because they can attract more students at a lower cost. Forty-two percent of the ITC Survey participants identified the economic downturn as a reason for recent growth in online learning at community colleges (*Trends in Elearning: Tracking the Impact of Elearning at Community Colleges*, 2010). From the last two Sloan surveys, 54% of the respondents in 2009 and 75% in 2010 identified the economic downturn as a reason for the increased demand for online courses and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As the economy improves, some predict a possible decline in online enrollments.

Frequently, reports cite student demand as a reason for institutions to develop or increase online course and program offerings. Because of the economic downturn, students themselves are asking for more online courses. In their view, they save money when they do not drive to campus, and they are still able to maintain their work schedule while completing their educational goals (Green, 2010c). In the report *Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006–2007* (Parsad, Lewis, & Tice, 2006), 68% of the colleges and universities responded that they implemented or expanded distance learning programs to meet student demand.

Regarding community colleges in particular, 67% want to expand student access, 46% want to increase the number of course offerings, and 45% want to increase student enrollment (*Trends in Elearning: Tracking the Impact of Elearning at Community Colleges*, 2010). For community college presidents, student demand is the number one reason for increasing online offerings (Green, 2010b).

Institutions see little indication that student interest in online learning will subside, especially when the governor of Minnesota and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities announce statewide initiatives that 25% of college credits would be offered

online by 2015 to save tax dollars and to reach more students. The same announcement reported that students who earn the ACHIEVE scholarship in Minnesota would be given a $150 bonus if they complete an online course while in high school (Young, 2008).

In the *2010 Campus Computing Survey*, Green (2010c) identified two other reasons for persistent growth in online learning. Because institutions have been delivering online programs for more than a decade, newer programs can be up and running more rapidly by using established programs as models. Green also stated that technologies that support online learning are more reliable and robust than they were a decade ago. Because these enhanced technologies provide students and faculty with a smoother online teaching and learning experience, institutions are more likely to begin or expand online programs. As institutions increase their use of technology in the classroom, that increased usage may lead to growth in web-enhanced, blended, and eventually fully online courses and programs. It appears that online courses and programs will continue to grow, at least in the near future.

Definitions and Terminology

This section provides definitions of an online course and the electronic platforms used to deliver online instruction and student services.

What Is an Online Course?

At the outset, writing about online learning is challenging because no current, universally accepted definition of online learning exists. However, the Sloan Consortium has identified ways of classifying types of online learning. All of Sloan's eight annual reports have used the following definitions: A *fully online course* delivers 80–100% of its content through web-based technology and typically has no face-to-face meetings, although such an online course might require on-campus orientations, labs, or testing. A *blended or hybrid course* is delivered 30–79% online. These courses use web-based technology to provide a substantial proportion of the

content to students, with some reduction in the number of face-to-face meetings. A *web-enhanced course* uses web-based technology to facilitate between 1 and 29% of an essentially face-to-face course. A *traditional course* does not use web-based technology (Allen & Seaman, 2010). This book uses the Sloan Consortium's definitions to describe where learning occurs and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 to describe the technology and methods for delivering instruction.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act, passed by Congress on August 14, 2008, defines distance education as "education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interactions between the students and the instructor, synchronously or asynchronously." The HEOA's list of technologies include the Internet, one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, wireless devices, or audio conferencing. The HEOA also includes video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if they are used in conjunction with the interactive media previously listed. While HEOA mentions a variety of technologies, most online courses primarily use the Internet. HEOA differentiates distance education from correspondence courses. Distance education must include substantial interactivity between students and instructor (*Final Regulations Implementing Accreditation Provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008*, 2009). Interactivity is equally important for engaging students both inside and outside the online classroom.

This book uses several terms interchangeably to describe instruction that is mediated by technology and delivered via the Internet where students and instructor are separated by time and place. The terms are *online learning, e-learning, web-based learning, distance learning*, and *distance education*. For purposes of this book, the key component of all terms is that the learning and services are mediated by an Internet connection.

THE PLATFORMS

The primary tools for delivering online courses and online student services are learning management systems, institutional websites,

and social media applications. A learning management system (LMS) is a software application that provides a centralized location for course materials and a variety of tools for instruction, communication, assessment, and grading. The LMS is also used to deliver support services to online students.

Historically most online courses are taught asynchronously (that is, instructor and students are not online at the same time). Desktop conferencing software such as WebX or Elluminate and Wimba (now known as Blackboard Collaborate) is being used increasingly for both instruction and student services to enable students, faculty, and student service professionals to interact online synchronously (at the same time). This software includes functionalities—audio, video, whiteboard, file sharing, web tours, and others—to create a virtual classroom that most closely resembles a traditional classroom. Learning management systems that include virtual classroom software provide a dynamic platform for the delivery of instruction and student services.

Institutions frequently have well-developed external websites that include all public information. Secure internal websites, sometimes referred to as student portals, are for students and college employees. Institutional websites are discussed in context throughout the book. The following section about social media introduces how these applications are changing the way institutions communicate with their constituencies.

Transformation of Relationships via New Media

Emerging technologies, including social media, may have the potential to transform the way students and higher education professionals interact with each other. Institutions are making decisions about which applications provide the best platforms for particular communication goals. Those institutions are challenged by the speed with which these applications come in and out of use: today's innovations can be tomorrow's mainstream applications, and today's mainstream applications may be overtaken by more useful products. This fluidity is exemplified by use of email, which has gone from being the only means of electronic

communication to sharing the landscape with a multitude of Web 2.0 technologies: instant messaging, Facebook, Twitter, wikis, and blogs.

As this chapter was written, President Obama had a live streamed town hall meeting at Facebook; Storify was released—a web-based application that aggregates responses to local, national, and international news by contributors from several social media sites; *U.S. News and World Report* noted that leading graduate business programs at Columbia, Harvard, and Stanford were offering courses such as "The Power of Social Technology," "Competing with Social Networks," and "Social Media and Entrepreneurship"; and the Museum Special Section of the *New York Times* included the article "Is Social Media Changing Museums." The following quote from this article in the *New York Times* museum section foretells the potential social media might have not only for museums but also for the support of online students: "Talk to anyone involved with museum technology and the conversation inevitably boils down to one universal word: engagement" (Vogel, 2011, n.p.).

What guidelines will institutions use to select communication tools that best meet institutional goals and student needs? Institutions engaging students at a distance may require different methods of communication, but the goals remain the same: communication must be accurate and timely and messages must reach intended recipients and accomplish the intended goals (Sheehan & Pirani, 2009). Institutions are exploring various means of electronic communication, including the use of social media to establish a supportive virtual community for all students, especially those who do not come on campus. If an institution develops and implements virtual communities, then student affairs and other support specialist professionals have a platform from which to engage online students and facilitate their success.

In successful virtual communities, students learn about and use available resources and services, and understand how those resources and services can support their success. They are able to interact with support specialists and one another. In sum, they become part of a community that acts as an organizing agent on their behalf, resulting in improved quality of information, products, and services (Wachter, et. al. as cited in Kretovics, 2003).

Students are coming to college well versed in the use of social media and software needed for most academic courses. Here is a

portrait of undergraduate student social media and other application use based on the *ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology:*

- 42% contribute video to websites such as YouTube.
- 90% use presentation software.
- 85% use spreadsheets.
- 40% update wikis.
- 36% contribute to blogs.
- 25% play online multiuser computer games.
- 25% use social bookmarking/tagging websites.
- 40% use Voice Over Internet Protocol such as Skype.
- 90% text message and access social networking sites (Smith & Caruso, 2010).

Many students are no longer passive consumers of electronically delivered information but are actively involved in creating online content, as illustrated by the preceding list. Students are coming to colleges and universities prepared to use technology to become actively involved in the learning process.

From these statistics, institutions may surmise that a significant portion of students know how to use these tools both for entertainment and for academic purposes. When 2010 undergraduates rated themselves in the following areas, they thought themselves expert or very skilled in the following:

- 81% in conducting Internet searches
- 51% in evaluating the reliability and credibility of online information
- 48% in understanding ethical and legal online issues (Smith & Caruso, 2010)

Although institutions may reasonably consider the possibility that these self-assessments may be somewhat inflated, they may also conclude that students have sufficient confidence in their technical skills to be successful in the online environment.

Institutions may want to consider two trends when planning new ways to communicate with students. One is the use of mobile devices and the other is the use of social media by older students. Three 2010 annual reports predict an explosion in the use of

mobile devices such as smart phones and tablet PCs (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Johnson, Levine, Smith & Stone, 2010; Smith & Caruso, 2010). The *2010 Campus Computing Survey* confirms these predictions by reporting that across all sectors, institutions are planning to enhance instruction and services through the use of mobile applications (public universities, 79%; private universities, 81%; public four-year colleges, 71%; private four-year colleges, 68%; and community colleges, 68%). At the same time, fewer students are coming to college with desktops and laptops. With mobile devices, students are able to maintain continuous communication with each other and the institution. Setting aside any drawbacks from students' always being online, institutions may want to consider ways to leverage the potential for delivering online student services, knowing students are able to access information throughout the day or night.

Institutions may want to consider another trend of note: the decreasing gap of social network use between students 25 years or older and those students younger than 25 (Smith & Caruso, 2010). While social network usage among the younger group remains consistent at 95%, older students are catching up. When institutions consider the use of social media to support online learners, they may find that the age of the learner may not be as much of a consideration as it was a few years ago. For all age groups, social media applications increasingly are being used to communicate with friends and family and for entertainment. However, institutions continue to ponder whether students will also use social media in educationally meaningful ways, how to most effectively communicate electronically, and how to determine which tool to use for a particular purpose. Chapter Eight discusses these issues in the context of delivering services to online students.

Responsibility for Supporting Online Students

The term *online student services* is used to describe all administrative, academic, and personal services that online learners need from their first institutional contact to the last interaction they

have with the institution. This book focuses on those services provided by professionals throughout the institution, in addition to services provided by the online course instructor. Although many of these professionals report to deans and vice presidents of student affairs, the term *student service professionals* is used as an inclusive term that also includes professionals from such areas as enrollment management, library, and tutoring, in addition to student affairs professionals.

An institution's distance learning program typically has several components: assuming responsibility for selecting and supporting the LMS, developing online courses, training and supporting online faculty, and making a variety of policy decisions. Early programs focused most attention on developing online courses and training faculty to teach those courses. Institutions may not have considered the importance of supporting online students until someone compared retention rates for online courses with traditionally delivered instruction. When the numbers were disappointing, the institution responded.

Perhaps because these students do not come to campus and are sometimes "faceless," they may be easy to ignore. At some institutions, it is unclear which department(s) are ultimately responsible for developing and implementing the services to support their success. Staff from offices of distance learning may become the primary support personnel because they are the online student's initial point of contact and the most knowledgeable about the demands and methodology of online learning. However, distance learning staff rarely have the expertise to assist online students with a variety of decisions that accompany course registration: required placement testing, prerequisite requirements, and course selection, to name a few. Generally students are assisted with these decisions by academic advisors or student affairs professionals. Online learners might be recognized as a unique population of students with specific needs to facilitate their success. This book suggests innovative approaches for service providers throughout the institution to meet the needs of remotely located online learners.

When institutions ensure that students are prepared before starting their first online course and are supported academically and personally throughout their enrollment, institutions

contribute substantially to the successful completion of online students' educational goals. However, not all institutions that offer online courses are providing adequate support for online students and, more important, it is often unclear which departments are responsible for the many support services needed by online students. This book will explore these issues.

CONCLUSION

Institutions familiar with the growth of online learning are likely to conclude that online learning is here to stay. They know that students use electronic means to take their online course and that they must provide these students effective support services via the same technology. These students fully expect that the institution will provide services that are accessible around the clock.

Given the expectations of online students and concerns with online student retention and success, institutions might consider reassessing the mission of their student service departments and rethinking their approach to supporting online students. Traditionally, student service professionals have engaged students through face-to-face relationship building that relies on interpersonal skills, nonverbal cues, voice intonation, and body language. Online communication is very different, since it is frequently conducted without the assistance of these visual cues. However, care and concern are important components for successful communications in both environments. Student service professionals must learn how to accomplish the same goals with different methods of delivery. Student affairs professionals, with a commitment to educate the whole student, will want to contribute to the support of online learners by devising ways to maintain the high-touch quality of student services, a core component no matter what the method of delivery.