Chapter 19
Meeting in the Middle:
Envisioning Postpandemic-Responsive Student Support Services

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ABSTRACT

As institutions of higher education began their full returns to campus in Fall 2021, questions arose about continuing the flexible student support services that emerged during the pandemic, the expectations students might have of the post-shutdown world, and whether there would be equity between the support of on-campus students and those who remained at a distance. This chapter details the literature amassed during the height of the pandemic and the findings of a study focused on the online organizational structures that emerged as campuses were shut down when COVID-19 was sweeping the United States in early 2020. Interview participants detailed the rapid rollout of robust student support services that were offered in a virtual mode during the height of the pandemic. Participants hoped for the long-term continuance of services that offered better support to online and remote students, as well as those that could more robustly support on-campus students who choose to consume services in a more multimodal way.

As institutions of higher education (IHE) began their full returns to campus in fall 2021, questions arose about continuing the flexible student support services that emerged during the pandemic, the expectations students might have of the post shutdown world, and whether there would be equity between the support of on-campus students and those who remained at a distance. The long-standing affinity for

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on-campus services had already started to reappear at campuses worldwide, as some virtual services offered in 2020 and early 2021 began to recede. Key lessons may be quickly forgotten as postpandemic life returns to in-person interactions, even with surges in viral outbreaks causing temporary shutdowns in 2022. This chapter details a call-to-action for a recommitment to online and virtual student support by institutions of higher education by highlighting the literature amassed during the height of the pandemic and the findings of a study focused on the online organizational structures that emerged as campuses were shut down when COVID-19 was sweeping the United States in early 2020. Interview participants detailed the rapid rollout of robust student support services that were offered in a virtual mode during the height of the pandemic, such as learning support, tutoring, and mental health services. Participants hoped for the long-term continuance of services that offered better support to online (students who access their courses primarily through the internet) and remote students (students being taught through methods only particular to the pandemic shutdowns), as well as those that could more robustly support on-campus students who choose to consume services in a more multimodal way (e.g., an on-campus student choosing to access mental health services virtually for convenience).

Multimodality refers to using different modes to do something such as accessing a service in-person or through the internet (Dictionary.com, n.d.). In an educational setting, the term is more often situated within a learning context: "learning environments [that] allow instructional elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (visual, aural, written)" (Sankey et al., 2010, p. 853). Ample literature suggests that any time an institution can leverage student choice through multimodality, learning is activated at deeper levels. This results in increased student motivation and success (Adie et al., 2018; Bahou, 2012; Gordon, 2018; Koops, 2017; Luo et al., 2019). While multimodality has been heavily studied in learning environments, it can also apply to the services students can benefit from (whether in-person or virtually) during their academic journey, including but not limited to the areas of student onboarding (e.g., application for admittance, acceptances, and other orientation and welcoming events), financial aid (e.g., availability of financial aid counselors to assist in electronically completing and filing for educational funding), registration (e.g., class registration and degree planning), learning support (e.g., extended staff hours, tutoring, coaching, and disability accommodations), student activities (e.g., clubs, student events, honor societies), and career development (e.g., career counselor availability on the evenings and weekends, career development activities, and job fairs).

Applying multimodality across the span of services at institutions of higher education lines up with recent societal shifts related to the on-demand economy as well. Technology companies have transformed the mindset of consumers: they want to access goods and services immediately and through the mode of their choice (Jaconi, 2014; Thayer, 2021). This consumer shift has reached different sectors, such as retail and news, and the on-demand economy and what some call "experience liquidity" is also more recently found in higher education. Students now compare services accessed through different modes and express the need for more on-demand support and services (Thayer, 2021). Thayer (2021) argued that institutions that fail to heed the call for more multimodality in learning and student support may fall behind peers that are doing so or already had strength in these areas prior to the pandemic.

This chapter provides a set of clear and actionable recommendations that highlight the need for a balance between student support services that can be accessed in-person and those that can be accessed virtually. This chapter's advice brings attention to the need for multimodal (on-campus and virtual) models of student support at institutions of higher education. These would address equity between online, remote, and on-campus students, as well as the needs of contemporary students. It makes the case for how institutions can: (a) learn from the shutdowns and pivots related to the pandemic and the

offering of virtualized services, (b) leverage the impact of an on-demand culture prompted by companies like Amazon and Netflix, and (c) adapt to the changing needs of employees after the pandemic by deploying multimodal student support models that serve student demand and also offer more flexibility in employee schedules.

VIRTUAL STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES BACKGROUND

Student support services are critical components of supporting student success in higher education. Student support services in the college or university setting permeate throughout the entire student life cycle, beginning with recruitment; continuing to wraparound services such as advising, tutoring, financial aid, mental health counseling, residential life, student activities, and other non-instructional services; and ending with program completion support. Research has shown that "student services play a direct, vital role in success, including academic performance, psychological growth and program or certificate completion" (Pullan, 2011, p. 72). Thus, some suggest elevating student support services from a complement to learning to a more intentional partnership with academic divisions in service of college students' holistic journeys (Berry, 2019; Higbee & Goff, 2008; Tait, 2014). Although most institutions of higher education have established broadly available student support services to meet the needs of traditional on-campus students, support services for online and remote students are still emerging and have mostly not met the same standards as on-campus offerings (Barr, 2014; B. L. Brown, 2017; V. S. Brown et al., 2020; Hicks, 2016; Luedtke, 1999; Ozoglu, 2009; Tait, 2014; Thompson & Stella, 2014).

Further, the presence of online and virtualized programming in the higher education setting poses unique challenges to institutions because of the students' geography, time zone, and varied access to technology making the conceptualization, implementation, and sustainability of multimodal student support services that more complex. Too, the online student population is often composed of a mix of traditional on-campus students who occasionally take online courses, students from different regions of the same state, students from different states, and international students; thus, offering a unimodal (i.e., only on-campus) support service model is neither sufficient nor equitable. Online and virtual programming and this new student population challenge the "this is the way we have always done it" mindset, further highlighting the need and opportunity for institutions of higher education to be more flexible and innovative in how they support students, overall.

Studies have shown that, similar to how online education divisions vary in their organization from one institution to another, student support service models that serve both on-campus and at-a-distance populations vary across institutions (Bouchey et al., 2021; Garrett et al., 2020). Virtual student support service models tend to be centralized with some services (such as recruitment, orientation, and advising) provided by units specifically intended for online and remote students (Bouchey et al., 2021; Garrett et al., 2020) and others (such as tutoring and mental health counseling) offered to all students through the same delivery models (unimodally through services offered only on-campus). While it may be more efficient to offer student support services unimodally, this model may be inherently inequitable because it becomes difficult for an online and/or a remote student to access some support services since they are not able to come to campus.

Beyond equity and accessibility, providing equitable student support services to students is a component of online and virtualized programming that is often required by accrediting bodies as well (Barr, 2014; Pullan, 2011). The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (2011) stated, "The institution

[is required to provide] effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in online learning offerings" (p. 3). Unfortunately, at this time, even though institutions of higher education have increased their virtual offerings, the development of student support services for students who remain at-a-distance lags. These gaps are increasingly observed by those students, contributing to lack of satisfaction too (V. S. Brown et al., 2020; Pullan, 2011).

Virtual Student Support Services Before COVID-19

Providing high-quality, equitable student support services is not only important for meeting student expectations (Dolan et al., 2009) and promoting student success, it also required by other authorizing and accrediting bodies, which further elevates the importance of providing equitable services across student populations (Barr, 2014; Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2011; Currie, 2010). A more comprehensive set of student support services must be intentionally designed to "enable and empower students to focus more intensely on their studies and personal growth, both cognitively and emotionally. They also should result in enhanced student learning outcomes and, consequently, higher retention and throughput (graduation) rates" (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020, p. 10), no matter the mode of their program. As such, Smith (2005) identified three key objectives institutions of higher education should meet in providing virtual student support services: (a) identify the needs of its online and on-campus learners; b) ensure that services are available when the learner wants them, rather when the institution is ready to provide them; and c) ensure that the virtual services are as good as or better than the on-campus equivalents.

Beyond required supports, it is also important to remember that one of the key roles of student support services is to provide a sense of belonging to students through various activities that serve to build community and connection for students (Pelletier, 2020), but prior to COVID-19, many institutions of higher education's student support services were exclusively offered on-campus. Because student support personnel tended to have less physical contact with students who did not come to campus, they also may not have fully appreciated the online student population's expectations and perceptions of the availability of services (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006).

Research verifies that institutions of higher education are simply not providing equitable student support services to online and remote students, with the most significant gaps identified in student advising and counseling services (Barr, 2014; B. L. Brown, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019; Currie, 2010; Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Hicks, 2016; Luedtke, 1999). Arguing for more textured context on this issue, Calhoun et al. (2017) showed that the gap in service between on-campus and online students may be related to inadequate coverage of online student needs in student affairs preparation programs, which suggests a more systemic issue within the discipline to resolve. Traditionally, student support services leaders have seen their roles as complements to the academic divisions, with a clear focus on providing support services that lay the foundation for student success and beyond as students graduate and contribute to society at large (Ludeman & Schreider, 2020). However, more cohesive and intentional coordination between the academic and student support services divisions might increase retention and support student success from a more holistic perspective. Not surprisingly, the sudden pivot to a fully virtual environment because of COVID-19 brought gaps in student support services to light and emphasized the importance of high-quality teaching and learning experiences *in addition to* robust virtualized student support services.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Virtual Student Support

The onset of COVID-19 and the ensuing pivot to emergency remote teaching, learning, and work tested the preparedness, nimbleness, and flexibility of student support service models as well as the overall infrastructure and readiness of institutions to work with students in a completely virtual environment (Doyle, 2020; Garrett et al., 2020; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020). The rapid pivot to remote operations by colleges and universities around the world further substantiated studies that had highlighted gaps in the support services offered to online students (Barr, 2014; Beaudoin, 2013; B. L. Brown, 2017; Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Hicks, 2016; Jones & O'Shea, 2004; Luedtke, 1999; Mitchell, 2009; Ozoglu, 2009).

The *CHLOE 5: The Pivot to Remote Teaching in Spring 2020 and Its Impact* report highlighted that the pivot to emergency remote teaching and learning at colleges and universities consisted mostly of moving existing in-person courses into a virtual environment, onto learning management system (LMS) platforms, to real-time or recorded web-conference meetings, or to other internet-based tools. This occurred for an average of 500 in-person courses per institution—a most impressive endeavor (Garrett et al., 2020). The report also indicated that most students, faculty, and staff were not familiar with teaching and learning in the virtual space, nor were they familiar with the technology, software, or services and support that could be offered to online and remote students (Garrett et al., 2020). To compound the issue, the researchers illuminated additional challenges related to students' lack of technology or inadequate bandwidth at home, suggesting that the availability of virtual student support services was not the only gap that needed to be immediately filled to ensure uninterrupted learning (Garrett et al., 2020).

In addition to under preparedness and technology challenges, students had to deal with the extra life disruptions brought upon by COVID-19, such as getting sick, losing a job, homeschooling their children, and taking care of sick loved ones (Blankstein et al., 2020; Educationdata.org, n.d.; Fishman & Hiler, 2020; Garrett et al., 2020). Students found it even more difficult to stay motivated in their learning as they balanced employment obligations and heightened family needs during the peak of the pandemic (Blankstein et al., 2020; Fishman & Hiler, 2020; Hinton, 2020). As institutions and students faced longer term needs for at-a-distance teaching and learning, experts cautioned that students needed support related to social, emotional, and financial health matters more than ever (Blankstein et al., 2020; Burke, 2020; Hinton, 2020). As students, faculty, and staff return to campus, many of these issues and fatigue have persisted and warrant the need for additional support on an ongoing basis. Indeed, these timely studies suggested a critical need for more robust student support models that could be readily offered in multimodal formats: in-person, virtually, and perhaps those that could be offered through artificial intelligence, and other means. By offering student support services in a multimodal way and extending their availability, institutions of higher education could ensure more equitable and inclusive services to all students, whether the institution was back to on-campus learning or not.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

During the same time period when other researchers were responding to the need for more data on the impact of the pandemic on at-a-distance teaching and learning, 31 chief online officers (COOs) from institutions of higher education across the United States were interviewed as part of a larger study on the organizational structure of online units. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure diversity of institutional type and geographic location within the sample. The sole criterion for participation was that the partici-

pant must have served as their institution's COO, defined by Garrett and Legon (2017) as the position that has the most decision-making authority over online programming. Serendipitously, the round of interviews that focused on virtual student support services was conducted at the height of the pivot to remote teaching and learning because of COVID-19, during spring 2020. The results encapsulated the thoughts of COOs during the pandemic, compared the experiences of COOs before the pandemic, and described their hopes for the future.

In order to explore the constructs that led to the structure and landscape of virtual student support services at their institution, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed and utilized. Bouchey et al. (2021) defined *student support services* as:

The functions at the institution that take place outside of the classroom experience in which the students are active participants. This includes retention services (e.g., orientation, advising, coaching, course registration), student engagement (e.g., student activities, athletics, student government), student well-being (e.g., student counseling, health services, Title IX administration), and learning support (e.g., library, writing center, tutoring, career services, technology support). (pp. 30–31)

The interview questions focused on the current organizational structure of the unit offering virtual student support services, the benefits and consequences of the model, institutional historical context, and any planned changes to this structure or model of student support.

STUDY FINDINGS

Through data analysis, key findings arose from COOs' perspectives on the criticality of virtual student support services. These were: (a) COOs have been steadfastly advocating for multimodal student support services since the inception of online programming under their leadership, (b) virtual student support services provide access for *all* students, (c) COVID-19 forced the expansion of virtual student support services, and (d) COOs had hopes for the future of multimodal student support services.

COOs as Advocates for Multimodal Student Support

One of the most universal pain points expressed across the participant interviews was that they had been advocating for more comprehensive virtual and multimodal student support at their institutions for some time. The stark discrepancy between services for online and on-campus students had been apparent to COOs and those who work with online students. Eighty-four percent of participants ($n = 26$) said online students had less access to student support services than those who were attending classes on-campus prior to COVID-19, regardless of tuition and fee differentials.

The chief online officers identified an ongoing challenge around the ability to distinguish virtual student support models from those for on-campus students well enough for institutional leadership to take action. Essentially, COOs were struggling to prove to institutional leaders that multimodal student support was necessary to serve what may have been a small subset of the overall student population at the institution. These leaders had tirelessly advocated to increase student support services for online students without gaining much traction—until the onset of COVID-19, when that would all start to change.

The COOs indicated that an unintended benefit of the pandemic was that institutional leaders, faculty, and staff had become aware of the benefits of providing virtual support services to all students, regardless of whether they were enrolled in online, remote, or on-campus programming. They expressed hope that this awareness would continue, not only because of the lessons learned during COVID-19 but also because of changing student demographics and students who had adapted to services being offered multimodally during the pandemic.

Virtual Services Provide Access for *All* Students

One of the most prominent results of this study was that there had been a shift to broader access and better equity in student support service models across all the participants' institutions as a result of the COVID-19 pivot to remote teaching and learning. This shift seemed to serve as an impetus for institutional leaders to gain a greater appreciation and understanding that providing virtual student support serves *all* students, not only those who do not come to campus. This change in perspective was highlighted by nearly half (48%) of participants. One participant elaborated on the change in mindset about the availability of virtual student support services:

One of the silver linings in having gone through what we've gone through is that the units that were maybe hesitant to really try to think outside the box to build capacity for meeting students in a more virtual way have had to and have successfully done so. We've certainly had bumps in the road. But by and large, all of our units across our campus have stepped up in amazing ways to serve the needs of our students.

The emphasis on serving all students was highlighted by this interviewee's statement:

When all of a sudden you have to serve your students remotely, you move more quickly to develop those resources because you understand that all students need them, whereas before you might say, 'Well, you can access these on campus, you really need to be here to do that.' COVID has given us an incredible boost in terms of online student support services.

The lessons COVID-19 brought to institutional leaders and student support services overall was discussed by most participants, perhaps most succinctly in this comment: "[Student support services were] important pre-COVID, and we've seen it's taken on a whole new dimension and importance. When you're not in person, you've got to be more intentional about these...supports. Ultimately...it's going to benefit all our students," suggesting that this unexpected disruption enabled staff and leaders to experience being in a virtual setting, leading to more empathy and understanding of why additional supports for online and virtual students are critical.

Plainly stated, participants discussed how the pivot to virtual student support services provided all students with broad access, regardless of their registration status in an online, remote, or on-campus program. Their comments called out the importance of multimodal student support services, as well as the validity of providing both synchronous and asynchronous support to students, and finally, the need to intentionally design services to be accessed at-a-distance, much like the principles of universal design for learning (UDL). One participant related designing virtual student support services to UDL, specifically: "We really didn't have a whole lot for the online students.... It's kind of like universal design with accessibility.... If we're designing for the online student, it's going to make it a better experience for all of our

students." Some participants speculated that the provision of student support services will go through a transformation in order to serve all students, regardless of their modality. As one said, "If you haven't brought the support services online, how are you really taking care of our students? So, I suspect this whole thing is going to make us all rethink how we do support." This broader realization, based on the experience of being at-a-distance, themselves, seemingly has lead staff and leaders to a more nuanced and clear understanding of the possibility of a multimodal student support model.

Even without an emphasis specifically on UDL, the value of multimodal student support models was universally expressed and is evident in this participant statement:

A lot of what we do online is asynchronous, and definitely has its place, its value. There's value in synchronicity as well. And so, find the right balance.... That can be really important for us. That applies not only to teaching, learning, but also to services. And what this is going to do...is that every student can benefit from these online services, not just students that are going to be 100% remote.

Further addressing not just the need to offer a virtualized offering of student supports, but critically evaluating *how* to offer each service is essential in moving towards multimodal support services. Providing true multimodal support is not as simple as offering a web-conferencing option to all students, but recognizing that some services might be more suitable and accessible to students through an online portal, drop-off (submit) service, and/or virtual chat-enabled option.

COVID-19 Forced Expansion of Virtual Student Support Services

All 31 institutions represented in this study shifted to virtual student support services models during COVID-19. Most student support service departments (advising, success coaching, learning support, library, mental health counseling, financial aid, health, and clubs and activities) were effectively moved to virtual delivery so they could provide services to all students, regardless of their formal registration (e.g., online, remote, or on-campus modalities). To the delight of COOs, student support services had suddenly and rapidly expanded to include virtual delivery. Without prompting, almost half (42%) of participants discussed this process and its overall necessity for all students. Indeed, COVID-19 forced departments and staff into creating spaces where they were designing virtualized offerings as quickly as possible. The previous luxury of remaining in their comfort zone—only providing services the way departments had always done (i.e., on-campus)—was no longer feasible or appropriate. One participant said:

We were all kind of thrown off the deep end of the pool, into...working remote and teaching and learning remote this spring. There was a lessening of the expectations. That was 'Do the best you can.' People had to try. They've now gotten over the hurdle and the initial step of 'We've never tried that—we don't know that it can work.' They've...seen what's possible.

After the shift to virtual student support services, students adapted to new and improved availability and access to the support they needed, when they needed it, and in the mode they needed or preferred. One interviewee stated, "Student services is one of those areas where the writing center went fully virtual and it's working. Students are making appointments and getting support.... They're not meeting in person...but people are learning to use the tools that are available."

Furthermore, pre-existing virtual student support services and departments were more easily able to expand their services to the entire student body. One participant said, "We can scale up our online program really quickly.… With this recent change to remote learning, all of our students switched online within 5 days, but were still able to access all the student support services that they needed." The forced pivot serendipitously created an environment in which institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students could now see the possibilities and value of virtual services as well as on-campus ones.

Hope for the Future of Multimodal Student Support Services

While COOs expressed satisfaction with the increased robustness of a more multimodal student support model, questions remained for them on what the future of virtual student support services would look like postpandemic. While COVID-19 provided urgency for a pivot to virtual services, COOs wondered whether institutional leaders would keep at-a-distance students as a priority as colleges and universities moved back to on-campus learning. They expressed interest in whether virtual student support services that were established during the pandemic would be sustained and grow into robust multimodal offerings meant to benefit all students in the long term. Many of the participants expressed specific, sincere hope about the future of multimodal student support services on maintaining the level of student support provided to students during COVID-19, as well as on reduced resistance to multimodal offerings at their institutions, and in the wider higher education landscape. Approximately 20% of participants also expressed, on their own accord, interest in leveraging lessons that might have been learned during the pivot on whether student support service units would continue to make these offerings more efficient and accessible over time. Participants made statements such as:

How do we make sure we take the lessons learned, and...aspects of how we have shifted our processes, procedures, operations in light of COVID-19? How do we institutionalize those gains—the things that we've iterated on and taken steps for— and that we don't go backwards?

Another participant observed, "I am really hoping this will really be the forward momentum that will stay, and things will change that will cater more [to all students]." Relatedly, a few participants (16%) expressed hope that there would be less resistance to, and perhaps even increased affinity toward, online and virtual programming and support of these students now that institutional leaders and support departments had successfully offered virtual services during the pandemic. One participant affirmed, "There's a new connection with not only our different departments now going online, but there's a connection to them so that we're not working in silos. We can understand their world better. They can understand ours." Another participant noted the potential change in providing training and services:

There's going to be less of a barrier to continue to offer [online trainings]. We will still offer the face-to-face...but we can also continue to offer these remote sessions so we can reach people who can't come to campus.

Participants were able to make the connection to this unexpected disruption and its associated response and the empathy developed by faculty and staff to more robustly address the needs of online and virtual students, longer term.

In addition to characterizing COOs' perspectives on virtual student support during the pivot to remote teaching and learning because of the pandemic, this study also revealed and confirmed the gaps between the services available to on-campus students and their online counterparts. Moreover, the findings illuminated shifts in the mindset of institutional leaders and support departments about the availability of virtual student support services. When COVID-19 forced shutdowns and the shift to remote teaching and learning, institutions of higher education closed student support services gaps with relative speed and agility. Accordingly, institutions established virtual student support services models that increased the availability and accessibility of these services to all students, thereby setting the foundation for potential, permanent multimodal offerings of services that benefit the entire campus community. Study participants described the timely and critical way that institutional leaders and student support service units can also leverage the lessons learned during the pandemic to further enhance their practices, their processes, and the availability of multimodal student support models.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study, as well as the ample literature amassed during the pandemic and over the last decade, indicate that as online and remote teaching and learning continue to expand throughout higher education, institutions must commit to a student support model in which services are designed around the needs of the student, not just those of the institution (Bouchey et al., 2021; Garrett et al., 2020; Lowery, 2004; Newberry, 2013; Pullan, 2011; Shea, 2005; Southern Regional Educational Board, 2007). By leveraging the lessons learned from shutdowns related to the pandemic, institutions can address the changing needs of students and their employees. Redesigning student support services by extending their availability into multimodal formats has many benefits, such as reduced time spent on administrative processes, improved student engagement in courses and learning outcomes, enhanced sense of belonging on the part of students, and expanded access to working students. It also creates desired and needed flexibility for students, faculty, staff, and administrators so they can better balance professional and personal responsibilities (Thayer, 2021).

In the end, forward-thinking leaders should make efforts to learn from shutdowns caused by the pandemic of 2020 and how their institutions offered virtualized services as a result. In doing so, they can also capitalize on the needs of students accustomed to an on-demand culture like other private sector companies such as Amazon and Netflix. And relatedly, by offering virtualized student services that may include more flexibility in staff schedules, this shift can also help leaders respond to the changing needs of their employees.

Using the Past to Inform the Future

As institutions of higher education recommit to on-campus operation, it is critical that senior leaders, administrators, staff, and faculty reflect upon shutdowns of 2020 due to COVID-19. Most institutions were able to rapidly introduce multimodal offerings for student support and for student learning. With the wisdom of the past and a commitment to the future, it is important that each institution analyze the consumption of student support services in the multimodal forms offered during the pandemic in order to gauge overall need and interest on the part of students and employees. Surveying students asking for their satisfaction with the current set of multimodal student support offerings, as well as their needs, would

send a message of commitment to students, and also provide a critical roadmap to the future of these offerings as well. Once the institution has identified the most needed support services, it is prudent to design a system for tracking their utilization and ongoing satisfaction for continuous improvement as well.

Learning from Private Industry

A chief variable to consider in evaluating the need and form of multimodal student support is the concept of experience liquidity: students have now experienced services in multiple modes (e.g., on-campus and virtual) and have likely developed either emerging or fully formed attitudes about or affinities for them. This idea of comparing service levels across modes is not unlike what other sectors in the United States have experienced during the advent of Netflix (rather than renting movies from a physical store) and Amazon (rather than purchasing books in-person). Institutions of higher education would be well-served to emulate innovative companies that disrupted the status quo with on-demand services during the last decade. One could posit that simply reverting to only on-campus student support services may present cognitive dissonance not only to on-campus students who consumed student support services virtually during the pandemic but also to online and remote students who have now benefited from more equitable offerings of support.

Towards a Multimodal Student Support Model

Institutions interested in exploring the continuance of multimodal student support or the expansion of such services could begin by considering the use of universal design (UD) principles to evaluate their offerings. Higbee and Goff (2008) used UD principles to:

Create a framework for inclusion for student development programs and services and can serve as a 'safety net' to ensure that no student is lost in the shuffle…. These guiding principles considered side-by-side with those created for instruction and learning support provide a multifaceted institution-wide approach to inclusion. (p. 200)

Higbee and Goff (2008) outlined nine guiding principles that can be used by an institution interested in exploring its student support offerings. They argued that student support services could be evaluated to indicate whether the service:

- creates welcoming and accessible spaces, on-campus, and virtually;
- develops, implements, and evaluates pathways for communication among students, staff, and faculty;
- promotes interaction among students and between staff and students outside of the classroom that "lead to students feeling a sense of connection to the institution and foster the belief that someone cares about them, which leads to increased student satisfaction and retention" (p. 197);
- ensures that each student and staff member has an equal opportunity to learn and grow;
- communicates clear expectations to students, supervisees, and other professional colleagues using multiple formats and taking into consideration diverse learning and communication styles;

- uses methods and strategies that consider diverse learning preferences, abilities, ways of knowing, and previous experience and background knowledge, while recognizing each student's and staff member's unique identity and contribution;
- provides natural supports for learning and working to enhance opportunities for all students and staff;
- ensures confidentiality; and
- defines service quality, establishes benchmarks for best practices, and collaborates to evaluate services regularly.

The helpful lens of UD could be used in concert with other empirically driven frameworks developed by trusted leaders in online education, such as the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) Online Student Support Scorecard (OLC, n.d.) and the Quality Matters (QM) Online Learner Support Program Certification (QM, n.d.). Both frameworks offer concrete, measurable benchmarks an institution can use to self-evaluate and to identify gaps between on-campus and virtual student support services that could be closed through strategic action. Even without a formal evaluation of current offerings, institutions can borrow lessons already learned from other institutions with high percentages of online students, or those that are 100% online focused by offering these types of services.

Student Onboarding. The ease by which an online student can submit their application for admittance electronically and move through the process of matriculation virtually should be evaluated. This includes all of the subsequent acceptances and welcoming activities. These should not require students to visit campus, yet at the same time foster their connectedness to their new student community. This may include an application and acceptance online portal, a robust and engaging online student orientation, a virtual campus tour, and/or virtual means of forming connection with other peers entering the institution at the same time through social media or other technology solutions that may integrate with the institution's learning management system.

Financial Aid. In addition to ensuring that financial aid counselors extend their hours to accommodate time zone differentials and the working hours of online students, assistance through completing and filing critical educational funding documents should be made available via phone and web-conferencing and be designed in a way that students do not have to visit campus to meet these requirements. If possible, an on-demand "push-to-connect" service through a webpage and/or a virtual chat assistant are helpful compliments to this technical, and sometimes anxiety-producing function in a student's journey.

Advising and Learning Support. While many institutions now have electronic methods of class registration, it is critical that online students benefit from the same support as their on-campus peers when selecting courses and making progress towards their degree completion. Advising staff hours should extend into evenings and weekends as well as be offered via phone and web-conferencing. While seemingly a cost increase, these changes to schedules should only add incremental cost, if at all, due to the shift in students on-campus during the same time where schedules can be balanced according to demand without adding more staff or paying overtime. Degree plans should be made available in an online student portal and reflect the real-time status of the student's progression. As much technological advancements have been amassed in online tutoring platforms in recent years, "live" learning support hours should be extended in a similar fashion and through phone, text, and web-conferencing, when possible. The inclusion of "drop-off" services where student work can be evaluated asynchronously is a helpful time management tool for students and learning support staff, alike. In institutions that are able, embedding learning support into online courses with high failure and withdrawal rates is also a

way of providing more proactive support and one that simulates the experience an on-campus student might receive when learning support staff visit a class or offer co-curricular support hours. Online study groups, as well as lab hours, can also be effectively hosted via web-conferencing, even from the same room that the in-person one is being offered.

Student Well-being. For the past couple of decades, there has been an increasing concern regarding mental health of college students (Blanco et al, 2008; Flatt, 2013; Gallagher, 2009) and COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue (Gravely, 2021; Son et al, 2020). It is imperative that institutions equitably offer student well-being (mental health) services to their online students, now more than ever. In a similar fashion, with the increase in virtual health services, institutions could bolster their medical services provided to online students as well. Accordingly, it may be necessary for institutions to reevaluate their tuition and fee models to cover the expense of these types of coverages for online students, along with calculating the opportunity cost of losing students to competing institutions who have found ways to fund these types of services either through a cost passed through to students, grant funding, or simply incorporating the fees into the existing operating costs of the institution. With the uprising of third-party companies offering these services such as BetterMynd, uWill, and SilverCloud, it is increasingly easier for institutions to procure these types of services for their students as well.

Student Activities. This area is of particular interest given the profile of a more typical online student—adult learner, employed, and returning students (Friedman, 2017)—often prohibits them from participating in on-campus based activities. Yet, the same students often yearn for more connection and want to establish a sense of belonging to their college or university (Peacock, 2020). Ensuring that student clubs are inclusive of online students through offering web-conferencing options is a simple way of incorporating multimodality, and most meetings and ceremonies can be easily augmented through this method. Depending on the technology in meeting rooms, most on-campus events can also have a web-conferencing option, though it is also prudent to coach speakers and meeting organizers on how to equitably engage web-conferencing participants as much as those on-campus (e.g., repeating questions asked in the room into the microphone before answering, monitoring the chat of the web-conference, designing break-out rooms to similar small group discussions).

Career Development. As a key area of student support, the hours and modes should be extended for career counseling and development similar to other departments for online students. Additionally, career services can be extended to accommodate virtual job fairs, online employer interviews, and virtual career counseling. Advances in artificial intelligence have also been incorporated into new service and product offerings that can provide career advice on-demand (e.g., WithLloyd).

Multimodal student support practices are not just limited to adapting and augmenting critical student support functions to online access. With the learnings gleaned from experience liquidity and the on-demand culture of modern times, services for on-campus students should also be evaluated for multimodality as well. Services to on-campus students and their online counterparts could be extended to incorporate artificial intelligence-enabled student assistants, physical hubs for in-person meetups of online students, and "digital Residential Assistants" that would offer more robust experiences to both on-campus and online students (Thayer, 2021).

Through intentional redesign of support services, using frameworks such as UD principles or frameworks from leaders in online education such as OLC and QM, institutions can set the stage for engaging and impactful multimodal student support. This would not only provide equitable and inclusive services but also enable the institution to meet contemporary students' expectation of "high-tech, self-service, mobile-friendly processes across academic affairs and student services" (Thayer, 2021, p. 8).

Equity for All Institutional Stakeholders

Offering multimodal student support services positively impacts the institution's ability to meet the needs of its students. It also has an indirect benefit for employees who have enjoyed the flexibility of working from home during the pandemic. As a possible mechanism to combat the so-called great resignation (Chugh, 2021), offering student support services in multiple modes and at different times of the day, evening, and weekend may provide opportunities for employees to work different shifts from their home. With over 60% of American workers (with jobs that can be done from home) indicating they do not wish to return to full-time in-person working (Parker et al., 2022), it is critical for institutions of higher education to look for ways to incorporate a flexible schedule for staff. Moreover, web-conferencing, virtual chat management, and asynchronous work from home can be used to support students and to empower and retain employees who would prefer more variability in their schedules. The opportunity to offer employees flex-time based on evening and weekend hours can lead to better work-life balance. Additionally, it could lead to higher rates of overall job and life satisfaction as people work to balance their busy schedules and varied roles (e.g. parenting, the sandwich generation caring for their parents, community commitments).

Other benefits of multimodal student support include (a) mitigating virus spread by rotating employees through on-campus and at home hours, thereby creating more physical distancing on-campus while providing more equitable support services to all students, and (b) opening up remote worker recruitment avenues to attract the best talent into student support roles. Especially for those institutions that are located within cities where affordable housing is sparse and the cost-of-living is high, remote worker recruitment can provide a mechanism for attracting talent at current salary rates as well.

While institutions and their leaders may find the call for multimodality in student support as an overwhelming and a potentially expensive proposition, this critical work should be evaluated through the lens of commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as the opportunity cost of students choosing other institutions more mature in their support of contemporary students' needs. Moreover, real cost-benefit analyses should illuminate modest increases in costs associated with multimodal student support, unless institutional leaders decide to invest in newer technologies incorporating artificial intelligence or machine learning to augment services. Arguably, these investments should provide the same service and would be offset with a reduction in human resource time allowing staff to spend the same time dedicated to other duties or, more dramatically, reductions in headcount within departments over time.

To be sure, the inclusion of multimodal student support is characterized here as a set of recommendations, though over time they will simply become part of the overall day-to-day operations of a contemporary institution of higher education. This shift in support modality is indicative of our shift in mindset around human connection and our previous notions of how personal and educational connections were made through and tied to physical proximity. The impact of the pervasive integration of technology into daily living is uncertain, but there is little doubt that it must be incorporated in our colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

Research over the last decade and during the pandemic of 2020, including this study, indicates that institutions of higher education need to critically and aggressively engage in offering multimodal student support services. There is a clear case for the continuation and perhaps expansion of services offered

to both on-campus, remote, and online students through virtual and other modes. This would not only provide a robust set of services to students, but it would also create more equity of service between student populations. Moreover, as American society continues to evolve digitally, institutions of higher education should respond to the growing needs of students as they approach their educational journey, knowing that they have grown accustomed to accessing all parts of society in multimodal ways. Students are already placing more emphasis on the importance of their experience than on their investment in their education (Thayer, 2021). The concept of a full-service, one-stop shop is something that most of today's college students have already experienced in other sectors, and there is reason to think they would have those same expectations for their educational journey. Students are accustomed to obtaining real-time, personalized support in all other areas of their lives. Their education should be no exception.

Institutions of higher education that self-reflect and align to the needs of their students, rather than to their own preferences and affinities, will develop competitive advantages over institutions that revert to prepandemic service levels and those that risk losing employees who have either committed to the equity argument related to multimodal services or who have enjoyed flexible working environments. Moreover, institutions that fail to continue to evolve, learn, and respond to changing conditions in their environment will find themselves relegated to the obsolete, akin to Blockbuster Video and physical bookstores. It is time for higher education to embrace the future.

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