Online Career Services:  
What do College Students Want and Expect?  

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Introduction

Higher education is faced with a number of trends related to technology and delivery of education and services. One of these trends is a shift in student needs. This shift requires a reaction that is service oriented with the student in the role of customer (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). Krauth and Carbajal (1999) advocate that online student services appeal to all students, distant and traditional (Shea, 2005; Smith, 2005).

Characteristics of a “typical” student are becoming harder to define as the student population becomes increasingly diverse in all aspects. Students in higher education today are very different from those in past decades. Having an understanding of the characteristics of this population is important in understanding not only how to approach this group, but also how this group will interact with the Baby Boomer generation, born 1946 to 1954 and Generation X, born 1965 to 1977. Members of the Baby Boomer and Generation X generations are currently filling faculty and administrative positions in higher education, including career centers (DeBard, 2004).

The continuous advancement of technology makes the delivery of a wide variety of online student services more possible than ever. The existence of effective online career services may help students with the difficult task of balancing life and work by offering these services in alternative time frames and delivery modes. Mancuso (2001) stated that “convenience and accessibility characterize the structure of student services which, like delivery of instruction, breaks time and place barriers” (p. 176). Mancuso’s “convenience and accessibility” could be successfully addressed through online delivery (2001).

Student Preferences

Distance Enrollment

The line between on-campus students and distance students is quickly fading. Higher education is becoming less of a transition from high school than that experienced by previous generations. It is more and more likely that first-year students will have completed online courses before they even begin college (Howell, et al., 2003). Setzer and Lewis (2005) report that in the 2002-2003 academic year, 36% of public secondary school districts had students involved in distance education. This shift is advanced by the desire of administrators at all levels to get students through academic programs in faster, more efficient timeframes (Howell et al., 2003). In addition, “the distinction between distance and local education is disappearing” (Howell et al., p. 14). Blended and hybrid approaches, online assignments, use of portals and course management systems such as Blackboard are all ways that instructors are incorporating technology. These approaches are often not considered to be online, even though they have an online component (Howell, et al., 2003).

Distance enrollment is indeed on the rise. Stokes (n.d.) reported that “in 2005, 1.2 million higher education students were enrolled in fully online certificate or degree programs (p. 4). This enrollment was expected to increase to approximately 1.8 million students in 2007 (Stokes, n.d.). The biggest high school class in the history of the United States will graduate in 2009. In anticipation of this population resulting
in a rise in higher education enrollment, many institutions are developing more distance options for students as an alternative to building larger physical facilities (Howell, et al., 2003).

Millennial Characteristics

The millennial generation, those born since 1982 and in college since 2000, is a generation characterized by convenience. They have an expectation for efficiency of service (Lowery, 2004). This efficiency includes service that is of high quality, with responses that are fast and provided when they are needed or requested (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000, p. 32). Howe and Strauss (2003) also note that millennial generation students expect to use technology and to have the tools necessary to “streamline their educational experience” (p. 81).

Millennial students generally consider technology to be an “advantage” (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 78). They seek structured, module based coursework and have a preference for active learning techniques. This group of students can also be characterized as multitaskers with “zero tolerance for delays” (Career Libraries Adapt to Changes in Student Expectations, 2006; Howell et al., 2003, p 3).

Shea (2005) states that students expect that support services will be online and that this delivery mode is “no longer an option for colleges and universities” (p. 15). For students of this generation, using technology has become, or always has been, a part of their everyday existence. This level of familiarity with technology breeds a level of expectation for availability of services and information on an around-the-clock basis (Shier, 2005).

Convenience seems to be a recurring theme in the literature surrounding the issues related to distance education. Timm (2006) states that “students (and other customers) look for convenience and ease of use in [sic] technology” options (p. 35). “Many students with full-time jobs can take classes only in the evening and often find [sic] offices closed at that time” (Gordon & Habley, 2000, p. 400). Students who choose to take online or distance courses, regardless of their physical location to campus, often find that they are not able to access support services (Gordon & Habley, 2000; Howell et al., 2003). These students seek convenience, efficiency, and a student centered approach (Shea, 2005).

Online Career Services

Moore and Kearsley (2005) outline a number of features of a distance course or program that should be addressed when planning for student success. Online delivery of student support services is one of these features. Specific suggestions in this area are listed including guidance and counseling as an important service. Integration with on-campus services is also recommended, as well as 24-hour access for students. Having a robust website that works in tandem with existing on-campus services is an important part of this integration (Dare, Zapata & Thomas, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Advantages and Disadvantages

Offering career interventions online has advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages are any-time, any-place options for students; the ease of updating computerized programs and web pages; the ability to link and refer students to other relevant service organizations; and a student-centered situation where they have ownership of the process (Davidson, 2001). Students using web-based services essentially do not have to stop and request information at the front desk. They can instead move beyond to the information itself (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000).

However, the disadvantages of offering career services online include difficulty in tailoring services to individual needs. Finding a balance in offering flexible services to meet these needs with the right mix of
technology and human contact can be challenging. Staffing also becomes an issue. Students with any-
time, any-place access often expect feedback at the time and place of their choosing. This feedback is also
expected to come from technology-savvy career professionals (Career Libraries Adapt to Changes in
Student Expectations, 2006; Smith, 2005). Privacy and confidentiality also become important issues with
online delivery of career services, especially career counseling. Career services can include a discussion
of a student’s context in a way that involves personal information (Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno,
1997).

Technology Integration

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WECT) study examined distance student
expectations of online services. The results revealed expectations of personalized services that were more
than just simple websites offering generic information. The students wanted “integrated information”
relevant to their programs and needs. This study also reported a need for integration of services for
distance and traditional students. Creating separate and duplicate services online is not the answer, but
instead is an inefficient use of resources (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications,
2003).

While today’s college students are known for preferring technology, and having an existing familiarity
with technology in general, it is quite possible that they will need training as well. An EDUCAUSE report
presents research to support the idea that students tend to overestimate their own skills with technology
(Kvavik, 2005). First-year students are particularly susceptible to this kind of overestimate. The specific
technologies they are familiar with may not match those being used in higher education. While today’s
students are likely to be skilled in the use of e-mail, instant messaging, and Internet searches, they are not
necessarily skilled in the use of specific software applications (Kvavik, 2005).

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each institution and career center must assess its own needs and
those of its students to inform an approach to service delivery (Wunderlich, 2006). Meeting the needs of
the users should drive decisions, not using a particular application because it is new or popular (Krauth &
Carbajal, 1999). Technology is ever changing and evolving. Making a decision about what to buy and
support means taking a risk that the selected technology will be around awhile, as opposed to something
that may be a short-lived trend (Career Libraries Adapt to Changes in Student Expectations, 2006). There
is a widespread call for a strategic approach that can address the choices involved in detail. Such an
approach should allow for consideration of a dynamic rate of change in the technologies available as well
as the changes that take place in student demographics (Howell, et al., 2003).

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