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#### EDITORIAL

Although distant students share with on-campus students needs relating to registration, advising, communication with faculty, library use, etc., their life circumstances often impose constraints on their ability to access services offered in the traditional manner. A key component in the success of distance education programs is the provision of student support services that are appropriate to the unique needs of distance learners. In this issue of DEOSNEWS Jolene Workman and Richard Stenard of Eastern Oregon State College describe the College's support services for distance learners and report on a study of the perceptions of Eastern Oregon students and administrators regarding provision of distance education opportunities and student support services.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

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#### INTRODUCTION

For more than fifteen years Eastern Oregon State College has made a major commitment for delivery of distance education opportunities. An average of 700 persons are enrolled each year in a variety of course and degree programs sponsored by the College's Division of Extended Programs and Regional Service. A major result of the College's extensive experience with distance education has been the development of effective support services which enhance the student's instructional experience and academic success.

Like any successful educational venture, Eastern's student support services for distance learners are modified and refined continuously. Institutional and government policies and procedures change; new student needs and interests emerge; and staff ingenuity responds to expressed and perceived issues.

During 1991-93 Eastern was a participant in a statewide project entitled "New Pathways to a Degree" funded by the Annenberg Foundation. Eastern's major role in this project was to identify specific student service needs of its distance learning students and

determine appropriate means for the delivery of these services. Sixty students enrolled in distance learning programs were interviewed on the Eastern Campus and regional centers operated by the College in six other communities. The majority of the student interviews were jointly conducted by the authors although demands of schedules required that one or the other author conduct one-on-one sessions at two different sites. The authors also met with Center Directors as a group and individually. Other persons interviewed included the clerical staff in the Extended Studies and Regional Services office, the College switchboard operator, and professional and clerical staff of the Office of Student Affairs on the Eastern campus. All of the staff provided valuable insights in regard to initial inquiries about distance learning opportunities and student requests and needs for services.

The student interviews were open-ended, but all included the following questions:

1. What service needs do you have which are not presently being addressed?
2. What services presently offered are useful and effective?
3. What problems do you have with existing services?
4. From whom do you seek assistance?
5. Do you have problems securing library and other learning materials in a timely manner?
6. Do you feel you are an "Eastern Student"?

The characteristics of the College, its Division of Extended Programs, and its distance education students create the "institutional environment" in which the support services operate. A brief description of this environment may be helpful in understanding the results of this study.

Eastern Oregon State College is a four-year regional state institution located in LaGrande, Oregon (population 12,000). The College seeks to meet the educational, social, cultural and economic needs of time- and place-bound students in the ten eastern-most counties of Oregon, an area larger than Pennsylvania and occupied by fewer than 200,000 persons. Eastern, Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, and Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton are the only educational institutions located in the ten county area. The base of the College's operations is its 140 acre campus in which 2,000 students are enrolled and more than 120 full-time teaching and administrative faculty and 100 support personnel are employed. It is an institutional expectation that all students (2,000 campus based and 700 distance learning) have full access and use of all campus services.

Eastern's distance learning programs are directed by the Dean of Extended Studies and Regional Programs who is based on the campus in La Grande. In addition to the central office staff the College maintains centers operated by center directors in seven communities throughout Oregon: Portland, Enterprise, John Day, Baker City, Pendleton, Ontario, and Burns. It is at the seven external centers that many distance learning students conduct their business with the College.

The distance learning programs range from external degree options, to weekend colleges, to individualized study, to courses offered using telecommunications. Oregon Ed-Net, the statewide

telecommunications system, was established in 1989 using state lottery funds to provide instruction through interactive television and computing. Oregon Ed-Net connects courses being taught from the Eastern campus to a variety of sites in its sparsely populated service area.

The students enrolled in Eastern's distance learning programs are diverse, ranging in age from the early 20s to the mid 70s; the "typical" students are in their mid-30s. Many of the students fall within Campbell and Associates Type 5 classification of adult learners: "Part-time students, employed full-time, signed up for one or two courses, who spend a great deal of time in family activities and have very little free time." An equally large proportion are Type 1: "Full-time students who are not employed, spend more than forty hours a week with their families, and have little free time" (Schlossberg 1989, 5). Nearly all of the students have constraints on geographic access to post-secondary educational opportunities. Two community colleges and Eastern are the only higher education institutions located within the 16,000 square miles of the 10 county region. Students' previous educational backgrounds range from nothing beyond high school or a GED to four-year college degrees. "By the middle of the 1990's traditional college students -- those who proceed directly from high school to enroll full-time in undergraduate programs -- will be a clear minority of all students in collegiate programs" (Policy Perspectives 1990, 1). This "new majority" in higher education typify the distance learners at Eastern. These students are highly motivated self-starters who have "stopped out" (spent considerable time away from school) and who have pursued their education over an extended period of time.

## RESULTS

The results of the student interviews were remarkably consistent from site to site and, for that matter, from student to student. There is nearly universal agreement that the services required by the students address five needs:

1. Clarity of programs, policies, and procedures to ensure consistency for student planning.
2. Building of self-esteem.
3. Identification with the institution.
4. Development of interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty and staff.
5. Accessibility to learning support services including library, bookstore, computers, learning support services (tutoring, testing, counseling, etc.)

Staff interviews, particularly with people who had frequent contact with the students (clerical personnel, Center Directors, switchboard operator), reinforced these findings.

## CLARITY OF PROGRAMS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

The greatest frustration expressed by distance learning students is that they do not find consistency in their constant search for clarity of institutional practices and requirements. A primary source of this frustration is the frequent change of programs, policies, and procedures promulgated by the College. While there is justification and need for such changes, responsible administrators must give explicit consideration to the impact upon distance learning students

when such changes become necessary. It is imperative that frequent, timely in-service training be held for Center Directors to assure that the information which they distribute to students is up-to-date and accurate.

The most powerful barrier for the students in regard to the clarity and consistency of campus practices and requirements is a lack of campus culture. Distance learning students do not have frequent contact with peers and are seldom in the campus "folklore pipeline." It is, therefore, important that distance learning students be provided with frequent orientation activities about campus practices and requirements. A quarterly newsletter is an effective communication device. There is always a need for publications which provide clear, comprehensible instructions and interpretations of institutional practices and policies. Unlike their on-campus counterparts, distance learning students are inclined to carefully read and study college newsletters, manuals, and handbooks as evidenced by the the depth of questions posed to center directors.

Establishing a campus culture for the distance learning student should begin during the recruitment process. A very effective recruitment/information activity held each year at Eastern's campus is "Back to School Night." This event is scheduled just prior to the beginning of each Winter Quarter and targets prospective non-traditional students as its audience. The event includes a presentation by the Director of Admissions about application procedures and admission requirements; a speech by a current non-traditional student about the apprehensions, trials and tribulations, opportunities, and successes that the college experience presents; and an opportunity for the prospective students to visit with campus administrators in an information fair format about specific services which the College offers in support of its students (counseling, tutoring, financial aid, housing, testing, academic advisement, career planning, etc.).

The on-campus "Back to School Night" now has been adapted for the off-campus audience with an interactive televised presentation. Approximately 50 prospective students from seven of the ten eastern Oregon counties participated in the first presentation by representatives from the student services staff. The program included brief presentations about student services programs available "at a distance" followed by a question and answer session. A critical component of these sessions was extensive information packets which were distributed at the Regional Centers prior to the sessions.

Student evaluations of the first session were conducted at each of the centers. The questionnaire, which was distributed to the 50 students attending the sessions, included sections on the audio and video reception of the program, the Ed-Net equipment and facilities provided at the centers, the perceived importance of the information presented, the interaction between and among students and center directors, and the importance of the printed materials which were distributed at the session. Each student participating in the session completed and returned the questionnaire.

The results of the evaluation were very positive. Students rated audio (68%), video (78%) and interactive qualities (78%) of Ed-Net and the classroom environment (78%) as "good" to "excellent." The

student services presentations (90%) , printed materials that were distributed prior to the session at each center (97%), and overall rating for providing useful information (93%) were also rated "good" to "excellent."

A similar interactive format was used to conduct an orientation session for students interested in obtaining information about Eastern's External Degree, including assessment of prior experiential learning. The session combined prerecorded presentations which were shown to students located at the regional centers and an on-line interactive question and answer session. Students at each center were asked to complete a questionnaire after the session. The students were asked to rate the audio and video reception of the Ed-Net presentation; the facilities and environment at their respective center; the importance of the interaction with fellow students, on-campus faculty, and the center director; and the usefulness of the prerecorded presentations, the printed materials and the session in general. Fifty-four students responded to the questionnaire.

Student evaluations of the program indicated that the audio (95%), video (95%) and interactive (87%) qualities of Ed-Net were "good" to "excellent." Students felt the chance to interact with on-campus faculty (79%) and to meet the local Center Director (87%) were "very important" to "essential." The prerecorded segments for the off-campus degree (94%) and assessment of prior learning (84%) were also rated "good" to "excellent." These interactive sessions were videotaped for check-out at the local centers by interested students who were unable to attend the session. The question and answer sessions have been summarized in a print format and are distributed with the videotape and information packets.

The use of videotapes about specific programs, policies, and procedures has proven to be very effective. For example, the Director of the Learning Center created a video presentation of Eastern's . All students must pass the Writing Proficiency Examination as a graduation requirement and this creates a source of great anxiety among all students. This taped presentation describes the test, how it is administered, and the evaluation process. Copies of the tape are available for check-out at each of the College's Centers. The student response has been very positive and all Center Directors report frequent usage.

Similar use of videotaped presentations are planned for topics such as application procedures for financial aid, graduation requirements, registration procedures, etc. A videotape about how students can gain access to library services from distant sites will be particularly valuable, according to the interviewed students and staff.

Colleges should not overlook the power of the telephone for communication with distance learning students. One of the items developed as a result of the study is a "Help: How to Get It" telephone listing expressly aimed at the distance education student. This single page document lists the names and telephone numbers of College personnel who should be able to resolve difficulties and answer questions for these students. As is the case with all such resources, periodic revisions are required and should be done at minimum on an annual basis. The fact that the "Help" card was reprinted three times during the first year of usage indicates it has been a well received and utilized by the students.

Of critical importance is the need for College personnel to be very sensitive about the need to promptly return the students' calls. On several occasions the students stated that they were very frustrated by the failure of College personnel to return calls. Upon follow-up with the personnel the breakdown was usually the result of "telephone tag" rather than neglect. Contact with the appropriate Center Director if the student is not available when the call is returned has helped close this gap.

The Office of Extended Studies maintains a toll-free telephone number for distance learning students. This relatively inexpensive investment by the College has removed a powerful barrier for the students -- the cost of long distance calls. It is inconvenient for some distance learners to conduct their academic business during traditional campus business hours. Messages can be left at any hour on the Extended Studies voice message system. The Extended Studies staff then follows-up with the appropriate campus office on the next business day in behalf of the student and then relays the information back to the student. A side benefit of this service has been the increased knowledge by the Extended Studies staff about the information needs and service bottlenecks for the distance learning students.

#### BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Many of the students interviewed described their initial experience with distance learning as frightening and intimidating. Tremendous energy and time were required for them to overcome the fear of failure and move toward the development of self-confidence in pursuing their educational goals. As students develop this sense of competence they become more efficient and effective as learners. Arthur Chickering, in "Education and Identity," stresses the importance of self-esteem (sense of competence): "Although sense of competence does depend somewhat on how competent one is, it also influences performance and the extent to which development of competence is vigorously, persistently, and fruitfully pursued" (Chickering 1969, 37).

An analogy perhaps best illustrates Chickering's point. When a person inexperienced with construction builds something there is a significant amount of time spent "looking and measuring"; such interruptions can stop progress in its tracks. Once the person has successfully completed such a project a similar venture could be accomplished in a substantially reduced time period. Likewise, students who have once gained confidence in their ability with the process of learning are then able to devote more time and energy to the content of a course and are therefore likely to have greater achievement and satisfaction.

Schlossberg et al. (1989, 21-22) stress the importance of the "need to matter" for distance learning students. Students must feel that they and their needs matter to staff and others at the college. Our interviews consistently supported Schlossberg's thesis of the importance of "mattering" and its five components: attention, importance, dependence, ego extension, and appreciation. One of the students summarized the situation well by describing her enrollment "as a lonely experience."

The most effective means of developing a sense of mattering on the

part of these students was face-to-face contact with staff. In most instances, this contact was with the Center Director. The most consistent positive feedback received from the students was about their gratitude to the Center Directors. The Center Directors are the cheerleaders, shoulders to cry on, and dependable contacts for the students. Many students stated that they need strong personal support when coping with setbacks. Faculty must also be encouraged to provide positive feedback to the students whenever possible and appropriate. A periodic note of encouragement or a telephone call to the student can have monumental impact on a student's self-confidence and motivation.

#### IDENTIFICATION WITH THE INSTITUTION

Distance learning students do not view themselves as members of the College community. Much of the sense of being an outsider can be attributed to students' infrequent presence on campus. It should not, however, be assumed that these students are content with this status. Without exception, the interviewed students expressed an interest in having stronger ties with the college community.

A simple but effective way of enhancing a sense of citizenship is the issuance of student identification cards. This is now being done at all of the Extended Studies Centers. All students appreciate the easier entry the ID cards have given them to facilities (library, gym, college center) when visiting the campus, and some have found them useful when visiting other nearby campuses. A few students have also reported use of the cards to obtain discounts from local merchants and special offerings for purchase of computers and travel opportunities.

On the other hand, terminology used for campus based students is not always appropriate or relevant for distance learning students. An example is the use of the term "probation" by the financial aid staff to refer to students who did not complete course work by the end of an academic quarter. External degree students, for example, are on an open entry/open completion calendar and, more often than not, are not expected to complete work on a academic calendar basis. To say that such students are on "financial aid probation" because they did not complete credits each term has a negative connotation and reinforces their sense of being outsiders. A glossary of terms used in the campus culture is provided in the degree orientation packets to help students understand how these terms are used.

The issuance of the "Help: How To Get It" information card was another positive step for campus identity. Occasional issuance of inexpensive but visible items such as bumper stickers, lapel pins, etc. are also helpful. Occasional celebrations of milestones for the students at the Centers also effectively develop institutional identity. Congratulatory letters for achievements from the Dean or President contribute to a sense of belonging.

Four years ago Eastern created a chapter of Pinnacle, an honorary organization for high-achieving non-traditional students. The Center Directors have nominated several distance learning students for induction and those selected have enthusiastically accepted membership. It is very gratifying to witness the number of family members of these students who attend the induction ceremony.

A simple means of keeping students taking courses by television is to broadcast campus announcements. The College has developed a local channel dedicated to campus announcements and this can be transmitted before and after the class presentations. Special short campus informational presentations could be developed for the distance learners and could also be broadcast at these times.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A major factor which assists students in building self-esteem and in developing a strong identity with the institution is interpersonal relationships with peers, faculty and staff. Without exception students interviewed expressed their need for and interest in establishing links with other students and faculty. Again, one student summarized her feelings best by stating, "It (distance education) is a lonely experience." When the students were asked what aspect of their total academic program they enjoyed most their consistent response was "The Weekend College," an on-campus weekend with an accompanying post-weekend assignment/examination. When asked why, they stated that the personal contact with the faculty, staff, and peers not only was a pleasant experience at the time, but also helped them through their other work as well. It is reassuring to know that other students have similar misgivings, frustrations, moments of insecurity, problems, and uncertainties. It is also helpful for students to know that completion of the program is a real possibility and that their personal progress is equal to or better than the progress of their peers. Personal contact with other students and faculty is a welcome change from the solitary work of the other learning options available to students at a distance.

The importance of residential opportunities such as the Weekend College for distance learning students is evident and has been reported in the literature. During the British Open University's formative years, it was noted that summer residential experiences created a strong renewal of confidence and commitment among the students: "If the summer school does one thing more than any other, it gives a new confidence to the students -- additional strength to go back to their home-based studies" (The Times Educational Supplement 1973, 6) Chickering urges that residential experiences be created for all non-traditional and commuter students because of the strong positive influences on the students personal academic development (Chickering 1974).

Regularly scheduled peer support group meetings, often with a social agenda, help students realize that they are members of an academic community. There is strong value for students in knowing that their peers are facing the same challenges, problems, frustrations, and sense of uncertainty as they are. Students engaged in portfolio preparation expressed a very strong interest in having peer support groups meet on a regular (monthly) basis. A very simple but effective means to improve peer communications and support is to publish directories for individualized study and Ed-Net "classes." These directories include the student names and telephone numbers. Those who wish not to be listed are, however, given an opportunity to prevent their inclusion in such directories (e.g., by a check off on the course registration).

A number of successful peer activities have been established at the

initiative of the Center Directors. One Center Director created a weekly study group for a set of classes that meets at 4:00 a.m. in her home because that was the only time when everyone had the same three-hour block of time to devote. Another Center Director created a support group open to all distance learning students in the vicinity who use the time to set up study sessions, share concerns, or simply visit. Students at another center share pizza an hour prior to the telecast of their weekly class. Whenever Campus officials visit learning sites, social hours should be planned to facilitate student visits with campus personnel and, perhaps more importantly, to have the opportunity to socialize with their peers.

One need that must be addressed is the development of support systems for family members of students. Occasionally students mentioned that their spouses or children were frustrated because they always seemed to be studying. Family members need to be invited into the Eastern community circle. Orientation activities for spouses such as potlucks, picnics, etc. might be helpful in accomplish such a goal.

#### ACCESSIBILITY TO LEARNING SUPPORT SERVICES

The Eastern Oregon Information Network, a group of multi-type libraries linked together through a computer-based information delivery system, provides electronic mail, interlibrary loan, and a regional list of serials; a CD-ROM Reference Center; facsimile document delivery to remote sites; on-line data base searching capabilities, and simultaneous remote searching. These are services available to Eastern students, including distance learners, and to members of the public through any public library in Eastern Oregon. Interlibrary loan requests from within Oregon are transported by a courier service which travels throughout the State on a daily basis.

The College's Bookstore received very favorable comments from all students. The Bookstore personnel accommodate distance learning students circumstances and needs. There is a genuine willingness to be helpful and to do business by mail promptly. There is very good communication between the Extended Education and Bookstore personnel. Consistently the students expressed appreciation for the promptness with which the Bookstore personnel responded to their orders for books and materials. Students are encouraged to order books by telephone and to charge the cost to a major credit card. Telephone orders are mailed out on the same day.

It is possible, and likely to be effective, to provide learning support services such as tutoring, study skill training, and supplemental instruction by the use of interactive television or interactive computing. Preliminary attempts with such projects indicate much potential but the distractions created by the technology need to be minimized. Too much time has to be given in training people to use the technology, and the complexity of the processes discourage participation.

The College offers math placement testing at each Center. Once the test is completed it is sent to the Learning Center for scoring. Results are communicated to the Center Director by telephone and a written confirmation is sent by mail. This model can be used for many other standardized tests with a modest level of training for the Center Directors.

Distance learners have multiple career planning concerns and needs. The interviewers quickly learned that it is foolish to believe that distance learners, due to their age and experience, have well-developed career plans as compared to traditional students at the campus. Career counseling for these students assists them in identifying realistic career goals and in developing the level of self-esteem needed to achieve these goals. This process requires considerable individual assessment and attention by professional staff. It is not simple career exploration which can be offered in a classroom setting. Confounding the career counseling process is the fact that many of these students will remain place-bound upon completion of their studies. Career counselors must have a knowledge of work force opportunities in the specific communities in which the students reside or that are within daily commuting distance. Some collaboration with local business leaders by the career counselors is absolutely essential if the students are to be assisted effectively. Cooperative Education opportunities have great potential for distance learners if such opportunities can be identified and developed within reasonable proximity. Distance learning students are eligible to receive job placement listings at no cost from the Career Center on campus. Soon it is hoped that current position listings can be broadcast on Ed-Net.

#### WORDS OF CAUTION

Basic telephone service is often more user friendly, less expensive, and more effective than is interactive computing for providing basic information about campus services. If students have to spend time dealing with the means of delivery they are likely to stop using the service.

Technology should always be viewed as a means of enhancing personal service. Each student interviewed explicitly stated that Center Directors were the most important source of service to them. Consistently the students reported that they would have dropped out if it were not for the patient support and effective intervention of their respective Center Directors.

#### CONCLUSION

Distance learners are highly motivated, mature students. They are relatively self-reliant as compared to traditional campus-based students. It is erroneous to assume, however, that their level of self-reliance means support services are not required for them. The probability of their academic success is enhanced when services are provided to clarify regulations, build self-esteem, improve campus identity, create opportunities for interpersonal contacts, and provide access to learning support services. Often such services can be modifications of existing campus operations by the same technologies utilized for distance delivery of instruction.

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