

Students.edu

Guidelines for Online Education Programs

Shifting to a
learner-centered
model affects
all of higher education,
starting with
online programs

By Maureen Lane-Maher and Hanna Ashar

In recent years institutions of higher education have adopted many organizational models and practices from business and industry. Critics attack the corporatization of the academy, while supporters acclaim the positive results of effective management. Both sides agree that the context of higher education is changing dramatically. The drivers of this change — technology, shifting demographics, the knowledge explosion, globalization, productivity, and savvy consumers — are moving institutions away from a campus-centric model toward a consumer-centric model of higher education.¹ Nowhere is this shift toward the consumer or student more pronounced than in the area of online courses, programs, and degrees. In six years, the volume and variety of online education offered by private and public, large and small colleges and universities have soared.

Much online education literature focuses on instructional or technological dimensions and overlooks the fact that effective management is essential for success. For many institutions, traditional administrative services need to change considerably to accommodate a consumer-centered environment. Yet, few models or guidelines exist to assist administrators in creating student-centered online initiatives. In this article, we suggest that higher education administrators can learn from the emerging practices of electronic commerce. Adapting a model laid out by Patricia Seybold with Ronni Marshak in *Customers.com*,² we suggest administrative guidelines that combine sound business practices with information technology to make it easy for students to do business with the institution.

Students as Consumers

The rapid expansion of educational programs and providers is a consequence of the increased demand for post-secondary edu-

cation and the broadened access provided by technology. Diverse players and differing partnerships characterize the competitive environment, offering expanded choices to consumers. Influenced by the quality movement, today's educational consumer seeks accountability, service, and quality at a competitive price. As consumers, today's students use their purchasing power to become more selective about which institution to attend. Their selection depends on specific academic offerings, convenient delivery, and competitive tuition rates rather than geography.³

Adult learners comprise 60 percent of the post-secondary student population.⁴ They don't reside on campus,

Much online literature focuses on instructional or technological dimensions and overlooks the fact that effective management is essential for success.

most work full-time, and many are married with children. They are savvy consumers. Adult learners want academic programs that fit their life and learning styles and enable them to integrate their studies with their work and family. They are practical and career-focused. They demand service and appreciate convenience and efficiency.

Clearly the traditional, self-centric, and somewhat elitist approach common in higher education is changing. The era of the campus-centric model is ending.⁵ The belief that "the student revolves around the institution" gives way to the idea that "the institution

revolves around its students." To attract and retain students, colleges and universities are incorporating a business approach in their administrative operations. Convenient, streamlined, and flexible online programs are emerging as the new approach. If managed effectively, these programs respond not only to the academic and professional needs of the students, but also to the educational and financial needs of institutions of higher education.

The Student-Centered Model

Few rules or guidelines exist for developing online programs, so administrators, accrediting agencies, academics, and students explore the terrain together and become the early adopters and innovators of online education. Trial-and-error and learning by doing are the norm for those creating this new educational model that allows learners to connect anytime, anywhere to a range of educational options. We believe that as the competitive environment of online education intensifies, only those institutions that focus on better satisfying student consumers and look at their institution from the student's point of view will survive and flourish. Administrators must transform their institutional structures and processes to respond to student needs rather than continue to support institutional bureaucracies. Students should find it easy to do business with the institution.

The quality movement of the late 1970s taught businesses the value of a customer-centered approach. But it's with the rise of electronic commerce initiatives that we see customer-centered business models emerging.

Although computer and information technologies have made this possible, new, electronic commerce practices may offer higher education administrators insight into how to implement student-centered structures and processes. Seybold and Marshak's *Customers.com*,⁶ voted a bestseller by *The Wall Street Journal* and *Business Week* among others, proposed a customer-centric model that integrates business and information technology functions to attain the goal of "making it easy for the customer to do business" with the enterprise. In the following section, we elaborate on this model and suggest ways to adapt it to the changing environment of higher education.

The Framework: Eight Critical Success Factors

Jack Rockart at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology popularized the concept of critical success factors: "the limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful competitive advantage; in other words, the areas where things must go right if the effectiveness of the organization is to flourish."⁷ Although an organization may have a small number of critical success factors at any one time, these factors need constant care, attention, and adjustment.

Seybold and Marshak studied the best practices of 40 successful private and public electronic commerce initiatives. Although hundreds of factors affect e-business relationships, Seybold and Marshak pulled from the best practices and identified eight critical success factors that, if followed, should ensure a "successful electronic commerce initiative":

- Target the right customers
- Own the customer's total experience



- Streamline business processes that impact the customer
- Provide a 360-degree view of the customer
- Let customers help themselves
- Help customers do their jobs
- Deliver personalized service
- Foster community

Seybold and Marshak pointed out that of the e-businesses they studied — from Dell Computers to the National Science Foundation — the successful initiatives focused on several but not all of the eight critical factors. While no organization has succeeded in all eight, the eight factors present a road map for those organizations new to the electronic environment.

In their book, Seybold and Marshak used the Babson College case to illustrate how institutions of higher education can focus on one or more of these critical success factors. In response to student surveys that showed high satisfaction levels with academic programs but general dissatisfaction with administrative support services, the college launched a three-year reengineering effort to improve the quality of student services, mainly by streamlining the

business processes affecting students. Babson College designed a Web-based environment that offers students complete online services from admissions to registration to class discussions. Central to this system is a single student profile database.

Adapting the eight critical success factors to the higher education environment begins with equating the term “customer” with “student.” Ignoring the current debate in academe that questions whether students are customers, we suggest that since students consume educational services, they ought to be the focus of those services.

The following discussion addresses how to adapt each critical success factor to higher education. Together these critical success factors provide a set of guidelines and questions for administrators.

Critical Success Factors: Guidelines for Online Education Programs

The guidelines for online education programs may serve as a basis for program planning or program review. But first, we must isolate them by consider-

ing the individual critical success factors in an academic context.

Target the Right Students

The starting point for any online initiative is to identify the end consumer — the student. No institution can meet the needs of all student populations, so it becomes necessary to target one or more groups. Successful e-business strategies start by focusing on one target set of customers. After “getting it right” with one group, they then expand to additional segments. The same principle applies to educational institutions. The institution needs to identify which groups or segments of students are most efficiently and effectively served.

Numerous institutions follow a strategy of targeting the right students. For example,

- The business education focus of the University of Phoenix led to phenomenal growth of its online programs in a short time frame.
- Prior to expanding to 30-plus online programs, Penn State’s World Campus initially offered courses only in engineering and information systems.
- The University of Maryland’s worldwide network of face-to-face classes provided a sound foundation on which to build its Internet offerings.

An institution needs to decide which groups make the most sense to target for online programs, then determine the specific products and services wanted by each segment and how they prefer to be served. Consider criteria such as, How accessible are these students? Do they have the technology and skills to participate in online learning? Is tuition reimbursement provided for their online program? Does the institution have online programs that meet their academic needs? Can the institution convert existing programs to online formats to meet their academic needs? Are new programs or courses required?

Questions to Ask:

On what basis does the institution segment or group current and prospective student populations?

Can a profile be drawn of the characteristics of each targeted segment or group of students?

Are there student segments that the institution doesn’t currently reach? Would online delivery be an effective means of reaching any of these segments?

Which student segments fit best with or benefit most from online learning and delivery? Are the online learning preferences and behaviors of each group known?

Own the Student’s Total Experience

A successful institution tries to shape, as much as possible, the student’s total experience with the institution. The goal is to provide seamless, easy, and responsive interactions. Students will be more comfortable if all of their Web experiences with the institution feel the same. To understand the student’s experience, the institution needs to put itself in the student’s shoes and “walk through” all interactions with each administrative unit. Map or chart each step or interaction. Recognize that different segments of students have different types of interactions. For instance, members of an adult cohort group may receive textbooks and course materials via mail, whereas on-campus day students may purchase texts at the campus bookstore. How does the institution fare in this mapping? Verify the mapping results with each group of targeted students.

Questions to Ask:

Is the student’s experience with the institution seamless and easy from initial inquiry and contact through issuance of final grade or degree?

Are administrative processes designed to make every student transaction or interaction easy and responsive?

Does a single, common architecture support all Web sites? Do student Web experiences all feel the same?

Streamline Business Processes that Impact the Student

In a student-centered model, administrative processes that impact the student are designed from the outside in, or from the student’s perspective. A business process serves more than the institution’s internal needs; it also should provide streamlined, easy interactions for the student. As mentioned earlier, Babson College spent several years redesigning their administrative functions that interfaced with students.

As a starting point, an institution should audit the current administrative functions. Which processes — between functions and within functions — can be improved to make it easier for the student to interact or do business with the institution? If necessary, redesign the front-end systems that interface with the students. Anticipate the kinds of queries students will make and ensure the information they need is available online.

Questions to Ask:

Which functions — from initial inquiry, enrollment, admissions, and advising to financial aid, registration, book ordering, billing, and payment — are designed from the student’s perspective? Are interactions across functions seamless? Can all of these processes be conducted online?

Are any of these administrative processes shared with other parts of the institution or outsourced?

Are the level and quality of service delivered to students by these entities routinely evaluated and held to a standard?

Are information technology priorities based on what has the most impact on students?

Provide a 360-Degree View of the Student Relationship

Most e-businesses know that all customer contacts and transactions should be captured in a customer database and information made accessible to numerous business functions. Customer

databases are a key organizational asset. In higher education as well, appropriate employees need quick and easy access to complete, up-to-date student records to ensure responsive services and interactions. The most current interactions with students are documented in the students’ central database. This information can be used to build or improve relationships. Ownership of the student profile database is a critical decision that senior management needs to clarify.

Questions to Ask:

Can call center staff, enrollment counselors, student and financial aid advisors, financial staff, and academic administrators easily and quickly electronically access current, accurate information about students?

Can or should students access their own records and change information where appropriate?

Are there any outstanding service issues? Are the most current interactions with students documented in the students’ central database?

Let Students Help Themselves

The interactive capabilities provided by technology increase the potential for self-service. Students should be able to obtain information and complete many transactions online. For example, the National Association of College Admissions Counseling reports that 77 percent of colleges offer online applications. These institutions found that the true value of online applications lies in improved communications and support to prospective students. Students encountering problems need assurance that “high touch” complements “high tech” and is available. An important corollary, then, is to provide students with access to human contact 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Finally, you should ask students if the institution’s Web-based services match their expectations.

Our institution, National-Louis University (NLU), is a complex, geographically dispersed, private institution that predominantly serves nontraditional

and adult student populations. Through a partnership with Collegis, NLU is building a technology infrastructure that will support the goal of letting students help themselves. This is a long-term commitment that yields incremental gains. However, it serves as the foundation for all of our strategic initiatives.

Questions to Ask:

Does the institution’s Web site provide adequate navigational tools, create sufficient interactivity, and solicit feedback on the site’s content?

Do students have all the information they need to make decisions and take action?

Can students completely service themselves online? Can they

- Obtain content and descriptions of academic programs, schedules, and services
- Submit admission and financial aid applications
- Register for courses and programs
- Order and receive textbooks and materials
- Pay tuition and fees
- Obtain grades
- Communicate with faculty and administrative staff

If students encounter problems with any of these transactions, can they interact with someone 24 hours a day from anywhere? Large institutions can staff 24-hour call centers. Small institutions might promise a 12-hour response.

Help Students Do Their Jobs

Administrative staff has an opportunity to know and understand students’ needs and preferences, and can then determine which of the institution’s products and services best fit specific student needs. Different segments of students possess different motivations and educational goals — some seek personal enrichment, others degree completion, and others new skills for new careers.

For example, a knowledgeable enroll-

ment counselor may work with a specific corporation in several ways: first, to provide technical skill training for entry-level personnel, and second, to attract individual corporate employees to enroll in an online MBA program. Both groups of potential students have differing needs and goals. Administrative staff should understand the students’ rationales and goals for selecting specific online courses and programs. This information is captured and shared across university functions.

Questions to Ask:

Do administrators and staff know why students select specific online courses and programs?

Do administrators and staff understand the motivations and preferences of individual students so that they can advise students accordingly?

Do administrators and staff build relationships with students? Is the information about preferences captured in student information records and shared across the institution?

Deliver Personalized Service

Although it has become a cliché to advocate “high touch with high tech,” ensuring a personalized experience requires a personal touch. Electronic tools help institutions to establish one-on-one relationships with students and personalize interactions and transactions. Opportunities abound for institutions to tailor communications and programming to individual students.

Questions to Ask:

What does the institution do to ensure a personalized or “high touch” experience for each student?

- Are students queried for further topics or areas of interest for online courses or programs?
- Are students asked to provide feedback on each online experience?
- While enrolled in an online course or program, are students solicited for feedback about satisfaction with administrative processes?
- Are any or all of these contacts coor-

minated, and do they present a consistent message?

- Are former students asked if they would like periodic electronic contact with information about upcoming offerings or events that might be of interest or value to them?
- Which students can be identified as loyal supporters of the institution?

Foster Community

Virtual communities are one of the most significant outcomes of the Internet. Businesses attempt to create and leverage online communities to build customer relationships. Administrators of online programs can also tap into this valuable opportunity to create virtual learning communities as part of the institution. Sponsoring learning communities can build relationships and loyalty.

The newly formed University Alliance for Life-Long Learning is an elite virtual college for alumni of Oxford, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale, seemingly founded on the principle of community building. This partnership expects to offer online courses, interactive seminars, and live video links to lectures to 500,000 alumni.⁸

Questions to Ask:

Does the institution’s Web site offer a “place” — chat room or discussion forum — where students can interact online, separate from administrators or faculty?

Does the institution’s Web site sponsor a “place” for students to stay in touch with each other once the course/program ends? Is a link provided to alumni activities and programs?

Does the institution’s Web site offer content or some other value-added information or process to enhance the online community of learners (past and present)?

Conclusion

In this article we argue that Seybold and Marshak’s eight critical success factors can be adapted to the higher education environment. These eight

factors provide a framework for institutions that want to become more consumer-centered or student-focused. Today’s students, especially adult learners, expect higher education institutions to be responsive to their needs and to provide flexible, anytime, anywhere education. The growth of for-profit degree granting institutions and corporate universities attest to this demand, as does the intense competition among all providers. These critical success factors offer administrators a set of guidelines that, if satisfactorily implemented, monitored, and adjusted, will provide their institution with a competitive advantage.

Because the culture of higher education isn’t well suited to change and transformation,⁹ the implementation of these guidelines by colleges and universities will require significant efforts. In fact, such implementation may demand a change in an institution’s culture. One way an institution can begin this transformation is by incorporating

the critical success factors in its strategic plan. The eight factors offer a road map toward a successful electronic environment. They do not imply strict and inflexible execution. Integrating them in the strategic plan and continuously monitoring and adjusting them will move the institution in the right direction — toward a successful future. *e*

Endnotes:

1. C. Twigg and D. Oblinger, “The Virtual University,” A Report from a Joint Educom/IBM Roundtable (held in Washington, D.C., Nov. 5–6, 1996) [http://www.educause.edu/nlii/vu.html].
2. P. B. Seybold and R. T. Marshak, *Customers.com: How to Create a Profitable Business Strategy for the Internet and Beyond* (New York: Times Business Random House, 1998). See http://www.customers.com for an introduction to Seybold’s company and http://www.psgroup.com/book/Overview.html for an overview of the book.
3. Twigg and Oblinger.
4. J. H. Dubois, “Guidelines for Implementing Online Courses at Your Institution,” presented at the College Board

Seminar on Delivering Online Courses (Washington, D.C.: College Office Board of Adult Learning Services, May 1999).

5. Twigg and Oblinger.
6. Seybold and Marshak.
7. F. Voehl, “Corporate Measurement and Critical Success Factors: Overview of Critical Success Factors,” Part 2 of 3, *The Standard* (Spring 1998), (American Society for Quality, Measurement Quality Division) [http://www.metrology.org/Standard_spring98/spring98_corporate_measurement.html].
8. J. Kelly, “Oxford Online with Ivy League,” *Financial Times* (Sept. 29, 2000) [http://globalarchive.ft.com/].
9. L. W. Rottmeyer and L. H. Linamen, “Just Around the Corner: A Marketing-Oriented Look at the Future of Higher Education,” *Proc. of the Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education* (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1999), pp. 10–18.

Maureen Lane-Maher (maher@rma.edu) and Hanna Ashar (hannaashar@aol.com) are associate professors in the College of Management and Business at National-Louis University in McLean, Virginia.

MEET 2001

Networking 2001

The premier conference on federal policy and network development in higher education

April 10–12, 2001
Hilton Washington and Towers
Washington, D.C. 20009

For more information or to register, visit www.educause.edu/netatedu/events/net2001, call EDUCAUSE Member Services at 303-449-4430, or contact netatedu@educause.edu.

Sponsored by EDUCAUSE, ALA, ARL, CASC, CNI, CRA, CREN, and Internet2

Networking 2001 brings together leaders from higher education and federal, regional, and state governments to review and evaluate network policy issues.