
The Role of Student Affairs in Distance Education: Cyber-Services or Virtual Communities

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Abstract

As distance education technology enables institutions of higher education to offer courses to students throughout the country, it is important for student affairs to offer opportunities for these students to connect with the institution. This article reviews the relevant literature on distance education and discusses differences between providing cyber-services and creating virtual communities for these students.

Four areas for student affairs professionals to address are discussed: (a) the provision of services, (b) the creation of community, (c) the oversight of campus-wide distance education, and (d) graduate preparation program involvement. Recommendations are also made to assist student affairs professionals in framing this topic for their respective institutions.

The recommendations made here are not intended to be a roadmap, but rather a starting point for the involvement of student affairs in distance education. The distance education technologies available today can be used to provide greater access to course curriculum and many of the services provided through student affairs divisions. The next step is to employ these technologies in the development of a campus community that encompasses both the physical and the virtual campus.

Introduction

Distance education is not a recent phenomenon or an educational fad. From correspondence courses, telephone classes, videotaped instruction, two-way interactive to the Internet and World Wide Web, distance education has evolved considerably over the last century. Once viewed as an anomaly on the mainstream campus, distance education has become an accepted and oftentimes expected alternative delivery system for academic content (Boettcher 1999; Kretovics 1998; Levine 2001; Murphy 1996). As Coggins (1988) pointed out over a decade ago, no longer is the chalkboard the dominant teaching tool in the classroom. Additionally, for decades, student affairs professionals have argued that the physical classroom is not the only place in which teaching and learning occur (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999).

The intent here is not to promote distance education as a replacement for the traditional classroom setting but rather as an acceptable alternative to the brick-and-mortar campus. Distance courses can be complementary to an existing curriculum. Many students will still want to have their primary interaction be face-to-face with instructors and classmates in a physical classroom, to live in residence halls, and socialize in student centers. However, a growing number of students prefer the flexibility of asynchronous courses offered via the World Wide Web, which allows them to do the coursework when their schedule permits rather than being

locked into the specific times designated for on-campus course offerings.

The literature is replete with articles about distance education. These articles address many of the current issues surrounding distance education including hardware and infrastructure (Maher, Skow & Cicognani 1999; Whittington & Sclater 1998), learning outcomes (Kretovics 1998; Kretovics & McCambridge 2002; Ponzurick, France & Cyril 2000), student attitudes and satisfaction (Carswell, Thomas, Petre, Price, & Richards 2000; Hirt, Cain, Bryant, & Williams, 2003; O'Hanlon 2001), faculty-student interaction (Dede 1996), pedagogy (Cook 2000; Sprague & Dede 1999; Worley 2000), and virtual communities (McLoughlin 1999; Palloff & Pratt 1999; Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke 1997; Wachter, Gupta & Quaddus 2000). However, there seems to be one area that is noticeably absent from current literature -- student affairs as it relates to distance education programs and the creation of virtual communities. In a recent comprehensive literature review the author was unable to locate a single article in the major peer reviewed journals which discussed the role of student affairs or the delivery of student services within a distance education program. Schwitzer, Ancis, and Brown (2001) also point out that "very little research on distance student services has been conducted" (p 114). Additionally, Woodward, Love, and Komives (2000) acknowledged that "distance education is a topic not being addressed by student affairs" (p 31).

While student affairs professionals have done a remarkable job of integrating technology into many of the services provided to students (Hirt, et al. 2003), this integration has been independent of the development of distance education courses and academic programs. With rare exceptions, student affairs professionals have remained on the sidelines in terms of issues related to servicing distance students. Distance students, like resident and commuter students deserve the attention of student affairs professionals. After all, distance students are essentially commuter students who use a different vehicle (e.g., Internet or video vs. automobile or bicycle) to arrive on campuses.

As technology enables institutions to offer distance education courses to students throughout the country, it is important for student affairs to offer opportunities for these students to connect with the institution. Organizations such as the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (<http://wcet.info/projects/laap/guidelines/index.htm>) and the Southern Regional Education Board Distance Education Policy Lab (http://www.electroniccampus.org/policylab/Reports/Services%20Draft_LG.pdf) have put together resources to assist academic institutions in the development of online student services. These organizations offer suggestions as to the types of services that need to be online and how institutions can go about getting them online in an effective manner. However, they stop short of providing recommendations or suggestions as to the creation of comprehensive student service programs that lead to the creation of virtual campus communities. As discussed below, there are differences between providing cyber-services and creating virtual communities for the students who choose to take classes via one of the many distance education platforms available.

Background

Definitions

It is important to operationally define some of the terms used in this paper. Moore's (1989) definition of distance education as "all teaching -- learning arrangements in which the learner and teacher are normally geographically separated..." (p. 1) encompasses all of the distance technologies available today. Additionally, it is important to distinguish between distance courses and distance programs and between virtual class, virtual community, and virtual institutions.

These terms, as used in this paper are defined below.

Asynchronous in the context of distance education is attributed to a course in which the student and the instructor do not have to be present (in the classroom, on the web) at the same time.

Distance course is a single course developed and offered through any of the available distance technologies, independent of other distance offerings on that campus.

Distance program is operationally defined as a series of courses or defined curriculum leading to a certificate or degree offered via any distance technology.

A virtual class as used in this article is defined as a single distance class that is offered via Internet or Web technology.

Virtual communities are communities that are created in a single class, a program, or the entire campus using Internet or Web technologies. Rheingold (1992) defines a virtual community as "cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace." (p 1)

A virtual institution (college, university, corporate) is one in which 100% of their coursework is offered via distance technologies. Maher et al. (1999) define a virtual campus as "anything from a collection of web pages describing courses to 3D virtual reality environment for learning" (p. 332).

Technology and Distance Education

The industrial economies of the world have been transformed into information- based economies creating a greater need for higher education (Levine 2001). This increase in demand combined with technological advances has had a significant influence on the way higher education is delivered. From correspondence courses to audio taped lectures to video taped classes to online web based courses, technology has allowed education to be delivered in multiple ways to learners throughout the world. Today, it is possible for a student to enroll in a degree granting program at an accredited institution and graduate from that institution without ever having to be physically present on the campus (Fornaciari, Forte & Mathews 1999; Kretovics 1998).

The nature of distance education has changed dramatically over the years as technological advances have led to innovations in distance education delivery (Carter 1996). The explosive growth of personal computer usage and the Internet have fueled the rise in distance learning available via the World Wide Web. Instruction using such technology is typically asynchronous in nature allowing students access to course materials whenever time permits and from wherever they may have access to the Internet (Barber & Dickson 1996).

Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin (1999) found that 78% of public four-year and 62% of public two-year institutions offered distance education courses during the 1997-1998 academic year, generating over 1.3 million student enrollments. Additionally, the results of the 1999 National Survey of Information Technology in Higher Education, which collected data from 557 two- and four-year institutions across the United States, found that 47% of the institutions offered at least one course that was delivered completely via the Internet. The use of the Internet is growing in popularity as the medium of choice for distance education. Boettcher (1999) and Levine (2001) commented that the increased demand for education is creating the need to take learning activities off campus: to the home, the office, the field, or wherever the learner happens to be.

To date, the focus of distance education has been at the course level with few degree programs completely offered via distance technology: Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin (1999) point out that in 1997-1998, only 8% of all two- and four-year postsecondary institutions offered degree or certificate programs that were designed to be completed totally through distance education. When the focus is at the class or course level, it often follows that a greater emphasis is placed on faculty or instructor preparation (Austin 2002; Levine 2001; Paulson 2002) rather than on student services. Likewise, because virtual communities have been class specific they have had little breadth and do not extend to the campus as a whole (Palloff & Pratt 1999; Wachter, Gupta, & Quaddus 2000).

The creation of virtual institutions such as Capella University (1993), Jones International (1995) and Western Governors (1996) has begun to change the way distance education is perceived. Prior to their arrival, distance education was viewed as another delivery methodology or a small program within an institution. Now, at least in a few instances, distance education is the sole delivery method of instruction. These virtual universities represent a new model for postsecondary education (Kisner, 2002).

Student Services and Distance Education

Technology has had a significant impact on the structure and delivery of student services. During the past decade many student services offered on college and university campuses have evolved enabling students to access them from home or other off campus locations. The 1999 National Survey of Information Technology in Higher Education found that 70% of the institutions surveyed provide on-line access to their undergraduate admissions application and 77% provide on-line access to their catalog. As technology improved, higher education and student affairs professionals have adapted such technological advances providing greater access to student services. In recent years these advances have resulted in cyber-services such as on-line course registration and financial aid applications, virtual career fairs, and on-line academic check-sheets among others. While this evolution has made it easier for distance students to access such cyber-services, there is no evidence in the literature indicating that these students were the reason for the changes in the service, but merely one of the beneficiaries of the service. Blimling and Whitt (1998) state that "[b]ecause student affairs work has traditionally been campus based, little consideration has been given to how student affairs might confront the issue of distance education" (p 7).

Distance students are often older (Carr 2000, Schwitzer et al. 2001), more motivated, and self-reliant than traditional-aged college students (Workman & Stenard, 1996). Being motivated and self-reliant are characteristics often described as desirable outcomes by student affairs professionals and should be fostered by the college environment (NASPA 1987; Nuss 1996; Young 1996). However, nearly two decades ago, Robinson (1981) warned that students in distance learning programs may be more likely to experience isolation and alienation from the institution. These students are not only physically separated from the institution and other students; they are also separated from the services and staff that can be of assistance to them. Workman and Stenard (1996) suggest that this alienation and disconnect may be mediated by providing services which clarify regulations, build self-esteem, improve campus identity, create opportunities for interpersonal contacts and provide access to learning support services. The provision of such services will increase the probability of academic success.

Lewin (1936) suggested that behavior is a function of the person and that individual's environment. This implies that if either the environment or the individual changes then so will the behavior. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to assume that the behavior of distance

students will be different than the behavior of on-campus students. This translates well into Banning's (1980) model of campus ecology which suggests that student affairs professionals need to consider the total environment in which learning takes place. Banning and Hughes (1986) define ecology as the study of the relations between organisms and their environments which on the college campus would imply the study of the student and the campus environment. When considering the case of distance students it is important to realize that the campus environment is one that exists virtually and it will take more effort to create a virtual community than solely offering cyber-services.

Recommendations

There are four areas that student affairs professionals must address regarding distance education: (a) the provision of services, (b) the creation of community, (c) the oversight of campus-wide distance education, and (d) graduate preparation program involvement..

Provision of Services

Internet and Web technologies have made it possible for student affairs to offer many of their services (e.g., on-line applications, career services, class registration) to students from remote or off-campus locations. However, much of the development of these services has been independent rather than coordinated, and operationalized with resident and commuter students in mind not the distance student. (Dine 2000; Kroehler 1999; Roth & Jones 1991) Now it is important for student affairs professionals to ensure the services provided are not only accessible to distance students but are integrated with one another. As one begins to re-conceptualize the services provided, applying the lens of campus ecology (Banning & Kaiser 1974; Strange & Banning 2001) may prove beneficial. Banning (1980) argued that applying an ecological perspective helps ensure that a campus promotes "optimal growth and development" (p. 225) of the students.

Banning and Hughes (1986) addressed a similar issue when discussing the relationship between commuter students and their respective institutions. In an effort to explain how to maximize the growth and development of commuter students an ecological model was used. Banning and Hughes (1986) posited that "if, however, campus ecology is understood to infer the ecology of the student, then the physical/social environment that resides outside of the university's property boundaries is of great importance." (p 18) Therefore, the university must begin to concern itself with the environment outside its physical boundaries to include other environments that also impact the student. Banning and Hughes were still referring to the student's physical environment, i.e. their home or work settings. However, when considering the distance student of today, outside the university boundaries has a slightly different meaning; student affairs practitioners must now consider the ecology of the virtual university.

Applying the ecological lens to distance education will require a new set of skills. What was adequate for success in 1980 may not necessarily be adequate in today's high-tech high-touch environment. The basic competencies needed by student affairs professionals to be successful in distance education can be incorporated into four skill sets: (1) systems thinking, (2) facilitation, (3) technology, and (4) assessment.

1. Systems thinking is best summed up by Senge (1994): "It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots" (p. 68). The ability to see the big picture rather than individual pieces is critical for a systems-thinking administrator. The evolving nature of the technologies used in distance education delivery and increasing complexity of the

college and university environment require a change in the way administrators view problems and create solutions. For the student affairs professional this may mean looking at the comprehensive offering of services rather than at the individual services offered. Are the services connected? Is it easy for the students to navigate from one service to another? Can students go to one location (website) to have their service needs met?

2. Facilitation skills have been an important aspect of the student affairs profession for decades. They will continue to grow in importance as colleges and universities embrace distance learning. Student affairs professionals will continue to work with students and facilitate the development of their psychosocial and cognitive competencies on-campus and in these virtual settings. The ability to facilitate the on-line connections between students and between students and the university will be paramount when student affairs professionals begin working with the academic departments and faculty to assist in creation of virtual communities within distance education courses and programs. Palloff and Pratt (1999) note that technology is a facilitative tool when trying to create community within cyberspace.

3. Basic technology skills have become requisite for student affairs professional (Kretovics 2002). This technical savvy includes an ability to utilize a standard office software package that contains word processing, presentation software and a spreadsheet. In addition, when working with distance students an understanding of the institution's distance learning platform is also necessary. The student affairs staff must be able to navigate the system and understand how to post information, and send and retrieve messages. When providing a high level of service it is important to understand how to communicate with the recipient of those services.

Expert systems and other technological advances will help student affairs professionals provide uniform services to all students. However, the ability to create a sense of community among distance students will take a more in-depth understanding of the technological capabilities of one's institution.

4. Assessment continues to be an important topic within higher education (Burke & Modarresi 2000; Graham & Gisi 2000; Kretovics 1999). Student affairs professionals must have an understanding of outcomes assessment and how to apply assessment principles to their distance students. While the research detailing learning outcomes in distance courses is plentiful (Arbaugh 2000a; Arbaugh 2000b; Baldwin, Bedell & Johnson 1997; Kretovics & McCambridge 2002) there is a paucity of research regarding developmental issues and developmental needs of distance students.

Institutions of higher education that develop and implement a comprehensive assessment program will benefit by gaining a greater understanding of who distance students are, what are their expectations, developmental needs, and what they stand to gain by participating in distance education programs. Student affairs staff members have an opportunity to collaborate with other departments on campus in these assessment efforts and contribute to the assessment of the whole student not just learning outcomes or satisfaction levels.

Creation of Community

"When we consider fostering community, we are constrained by a view of community tightly

bound to the notion of people living close to each other, interacting face-to-face..." (Haythorntheaite, Kazamer & Robins 2000, para. 3). This view is beginning to change as more is written about creating virtual communities within higher education (Haythorntheaite et al. 2000; McLoughlin 1999; Rovai 2000; Straus 1996; Wachter, Gupta, Quaddus 2000). To date, this topic has not been addressed within the peer reviewed student affairs literature. Even though community building has been a theme within higher education and student affairs for decades (Strange 1996), student affairs professionals have not yet redefined this concept to include distance students.

Austin (2002) points out that many campuses are hiring technology and instructional design support for faculty in the delivery of their on-line and distance courses. Unless carefully designed, computer-based distance learning courses can favor linear, analytical thinking through the design of instructional sequences and navigation tools (McLoughlin 1999). Herein lies an opportunity for student affairs practitioners to become involved in the design and development of distance education courses and programs. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999) "community is no longer a place-bound concept..." (p 21). Perhaps student affairs experts can position themselves as "community building experts" and offer their expertise to assist faculty and distance program managers in the design of virtual communities that are adaptable to all learning styles. As Strange and Banning (2001) note, "the features associated with the traditional sensual communities are applicable, as well, to virtual communities" (p. 197). Additionally, it is important to note that "it is essential for educators and designers to respect cultural identity, participation styles and expectations of the learner" (McLoughlin, 1999, p. 241).

The use of web sites (Barratt 2000) and web portals (Looney & Lyman 2000; Volchok 2000) hold a great deal of promise regarding the creation of virtual communities. These technologies give student affairs divisions the opportunity to customize the student's virtual experience of the campus. Students are able to access services, receive updates on current events, chat with other students and access their virtual classes from a single point of entry. It is this type of "one stop" technology that has the potential to accentuate the difference between a distance program and a virtual community.

Oversight of Distance Education

Many campuses that have ventured into the distance education arena have a designated individual or a committee of educators and technology specialists to oversee or review the distance education courses and programs (Penrod 1990; Presta & Moller 2001). Having a student affairs staff member on such a committee could bring a "whole person" perspective to the development of distance education programs. Other campus committees or groups that influence or advise distance offerings may also benefit from the insights of student affairs staff.

Senior student affairs professionals have an opportunity to provide expertise necessary in the development of a comprehensive, learning centered distance education program that includes appropriate student services and the establishment of a virtual campus community. It is up to these individuals to promote this expertise within their respective campuses and begin the dialog with their academic and technology colleagues. While student affairs involvement at this level will not guarantee the presence of a virtual community it may bring the distance programs closer to realizing the potential of such a community.

Graduate Preparation Programs

A significant number of student affairs professionals have received their initial academic training

in a higher education administration, student personnel or student affairs administration graduate preparation program. At present few of these programs offer their coursework via distance education technology. It is being recommended here that these programs begin to offer one or more of their courses via distance education in an effort to give future administrators a first-hand experience with the technology. This experience may prove beneficial when the need arises to work with distance student populations.

The recommendations above are not meant to be a roadmap, but can be a starting point for student affairs' involvement in distance education. The student is the heart and soul of higher education regardless of the institutional type, teaching pedagogy, or residency status (resident, commuter, or distance). Higher education is being transformed by new technologies. These technologies can be used to provide greater access to course curriculum and to many of the services provided through student affairs divisions. However, merely putting services on the web does not create a community. The next step is to employ these technologies in the development of a campus community that exists on the physical campus and the virtual campus as well.

Discussion

Levine (2001) points out that "[s]ixteen percent of today's college students meet the traditional stereotype--attending full-time, being 18 to 22 years of age, and living on campus. Higher education is not central in the lives of the new majority of students as it was for previous generations. It is just one of the many activities with which they are involved every day" (p 256). Historically, as student demographics changed, student affairs departments adapted the services provided to meet the needs of the new students. Whether it was adding new services (commuter student services, advocacy offices, services for students with disabilities, etc), changing hours to meet student needs (evening & weekend students, commuter students), or adapting new technologies student affairs continues to evolve.

The next evolutionary step for student affairs may very well be the realm of distance education and virtual communities. One of the major criticisms of distance education has been the perceived lack of interaction between the student and the instructor (Kruger 2000). Paulson (2002) maintains that "mediation -- student-instructor interaction -- is considered the soul of collegiate learning" (p 132). On many campuses there are still academics who believe that this interaction must be face-to-face in order to be successful. However, in a pilot study, Maher, Skow, and Cicognani (1999) "found that students were more prepared and participated more readily online than did students in face-to-face discussions" (p. 331). These authors also point out that "the virtual campus provides two types of interactivity - interaction among people in the learning environment and interaction between a student and online learning material" (p.330). These types of interactivity can lay the foundation necessary in the creation of a virtual community. Research indicates that members of virtual communities demonstrate behaviors that parallel those of members of physical communities (Haythorntheaite et al., 2000).

Virtual communities can be developed in an individual class, in the program or on the campus much the same as a sense of community can be fostered on the physical campus. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity and ability to work with faculty and technology experts in shaping these virtual environments. In the 1970s and 1980s student affairs placed a great deal of emphasis on the services provided to the increasing number of commuting students (Girrell & Jacoby 1981; Harrington 1972; Jacoby 2000). Now may be the time to address the student services needs of distance students and the virtual communities that exist within cyber-education. Wachter, et al. (2000) describe four characteristics of successful virtual communities:

1. Successful communities help students understand which resources and services they are likely to find within and to determine what kinds of information and resources are necessary to serve their needs.
2. Successful communities integrate content with the capability of communications, whereby students can hold discussions among themselves to clarify content, to exchange ideas, and to ensure credibility
3. In successful communities, member-generated content is appreciated and is actively solicited. Students can aggregate and compare their experiences independently of faculty and staff.
4. Successful virtual communities act as organizing agents on behalf of their students. They seek to increase the quality of information, products, or services which are provided to them through it. (p.477)

These characteristics are not a recipe for success but rather indicators of the potential for success as a virtual community.

According to Terkla (2001) the Council for Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) has recommended that overall effectiveness of distance education be determined by the following criteria:

1. The extent to which student learning matches intended outcomes, including for degree programs, as both the goals of general education and the objectives of the major.
2. The extent to which student intent is met.
3. Student retention rates, including variations over time.
4. Student satisfaction, as measured by regular surveys.
5. Faculty satisfaction, as measured by regular surveys and by formal and informal peer review process.
6. The extent to which access is provided to students not previously served.
7. Measures of the extent to which library and learning resources are used appropriately by the program's students.
8. Measures of student competence in fundamental skills, such as communication, comprehension and analysis.

Several of these criteria are directly applicable to student affairs professionals and the services provided to students. Learning outcomes, student retention, student satisfaction, and accessibility are areas in which student affairs professionals may have some expertise. Perhaps it is time for these professionals to partner with the faculty and technology staff and contribute to the development of distance education programs. Many student affairs divisions have begun developing other types of partnership across their respective campuses (Schuh 1999), these new partnerships, then, represent an extension of what may already exist on some campuses. Similarly, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2001) developed

a comprehensive set of standards and guidelines for institutions offering distance education. The Council indicates that services for distance students must be intentional but what it does not address is the need for these services to be offered in a coordinated fashion and the need for institutions to create a sense of community within their virtual or distance offerings as is done on the physical campus. Also, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications has put together a Guide to developing online student services (<http://www.wcet.info/resources/publications/guide/guide.htm>) which provides readers with some excellent examples of cyber-services currently being provided by institutions throughout the country.

Future Research

This article is intended to begin the dialogue around the involvement of student affairs and distance education. There is still much to learn about the impact of distance technologies on the campus community (physically present and distance) and on the individual students. Additional research needs to be conducted on the impact or outcomes of distance education in regard to student development. Are the principles of student development as discussed in Evans, Forney, and DiBrito (2000) applicable to distance students? This article looked at the campus ecology model but there are other models in the psychosocial and cognitive domains that may also be explored. What types of students prefer to take distance courses or enroll in distance programs? Are students at virtual universities significantly different than students enrolled at traditional institutions? How successful are distance students, academically and professionally? Finally, additional research needs to be conducted regarding the needs of distance students and how their needs compare with commuter and residential students. This research should include studies that employ quantitative and qualitative methods, use national and regional samples, are institutional specific, program specific, and include longitudinal studies in an effort to give student affairs professionals a more comprehensive view of distance education, its students, and the ability to create a virtual community.

Conclusions

The current status of student affairs and its relationship to distance education is perhaps best summed up by Blimling and Whitt (1999):

In this market, what may emerge in student affairs is a similar array of functions whereby basic student services such as academic advising, registration, and financial aid are offered over the Internet to students who are involved in distance education, while campus-based programs remain geared primarily to traditional undergraduate and on-campus graduate students. (p 7)

This view of separate but equal services should be unacceptable to current student affairs practitioners. Schwitzer et al. (2001) challenge student affairs professionals to include distance students in the life of the institution. The technologies of today enable institutions of higher education to do so through the development of virtual communities rather than simply providing web-based services. Just as commuter and residential students have the opportunity to participate in the campus community on a daily basis, so to may distance students wish to participate in a campus community only via the Internet instead of through their physical presence.

At present the cyber-services provided to distance students may not look much different than the services provided to those who happen to be physically present on campus. However, there is a significant difference: coordination. Many campuses have housed a large percentage of their

student affairs division within close proximity of one another to maximize the convenience to the student. In the distance realm, student affairs has taken the first step by incorporating technology into the delivery of services but there is no evidence in the literature indicating that the profession has embraced these distance students and the virtual community in which they learn and develop. As technology continues to evolve, educators will find ways to integrate these advances into the delivery of course material. Will student affairs professionals be there to assist in the process by encouraging community building as a planned and developmental process or will the profession remain on the sidelines? Numerous professional journals such as *Distance Education*, *The American Journal of Distance Education*, *Innovations in Higher Education*, *Virtual University Journal*, *Computers & Education*, *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, and *Internet and Higher Education* among others are reporting on the innovations of distance education and how technology is changing the landscape of today's postsecondary educational institutions. The comprehensive role of student affairs in creating virtual communities within distance education has remained absent from these discussions.

While the challenges of providing services to distance learners and creating a virtual campus community may appear to be overwhelming at first, the opportunities presented for student affairs professionals are abundant. The opportunity is here for student affairs professionals to make the move from offering cyber-services to developing virtual learning communities by participating in distance learning in a planned and concerted way. Presently, distance education's emphasis is at the course level. However, it will not be long before that emphasis shifts from individual courses to programs and degrees. Colleges and universities spend time and energy trying to create loyal students that will hopefully turn into loyal graduates. This is often accomplished by establishing a sense of community or connectedness and today's distance students could be tomorrow's honored alumni/ae.

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