
The "Virtual Face" of Distance Learning at Public Colleges and Universities: What Do Websites Reveal about Administrative Student Support Services?

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This study investigated how higher education institutions support their distance learning initiatives through their institutional websites - their "virtual face." The population was 40 institutions, of which 10 each were doctoral/research, master, baccalaureate, and community college, located in 40 different states. Using a researcher-developed instrument that included input from distance learning professionals, websites were analyzed based on the location of administrative student support services for distance students from the institution's distance learning office home page. The descriptive study answered three research questions: (1) How are higher education institutions establishing a "virtual face" for their distance learning initiatives? (2) How well do distance learning offices support distance students?, and (3) What does the "virtual face" of distance learning offices say about the commitment to distance learning students by higher education institutions? Findings indicate that many institutions have centralized distance learning offices and have made a concerted effort to serve their distance students. These efforts can be improved further by providing access to all necessary administrative student support services online from the distance learning office home page. Missing services and information for most of the analyzed sites included distance student retention, success, and satisfaction, as well as assessments for potential students to gauge their distance learning readiness.

Introduction

Students continue to demand for distance learning courses and programs. According to *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011*, 6.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in fall 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2011), which was a 10% increase over fall 2009 online enrollments. With enrollments in online courses contributing to 31.3% of total postsecondary enrollments in fall 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2011), colleges and universities must address demands for distance learning and the technologies and services that support it. Distance students want flexible and convenient access to courses and degree offerings, and expect to have equal access to student support services as their on-campus peers. As distance learning has evolved, online student support services have been added on to existing student services, which served the needs of students while enrollments in distance learning were small (LaPadula, 2003). Colleges tend to expand existing services versus developing those unique to the needs of distance students. As distance students continue to make up a large percentage of overall institutional enrollments, it is imperative that colleges and universities evaluate their online student support systems to ensure that distance students receive the services that can support their success. As institutions move into the competitive distance learning market and utilize increased enrollments in distance learning to generate new revenues, they must provide online support services for students, beginning with the institution's website.

It has been well over a decade since colleges and universities started promoting themselves through their websites. In order to evaluate the progress of distance learning in higher education institutions, it is appropriate to ask how well college and university websites perform as a tool to provide potential and current distance students the support they need to make informed decisions on distance courses and degree programs. For purposes of this study, the definition of distance learning is courses delivered online and through interactive audio- and videoconferencing. An important question for distance learning offices at colleges and universities to ask themselves today is, *How do higher education institutions support their distance learning initiatives through their institutional websites?*

Literature and Research Questions

Students and Institutional Websites

As colleges and universities increase their distance learning presence, they must seriously evaluate the institutional website -- their "virtual face" -- which is viewed and used by potential and current students. Today's college students have options and are no longer geographically bound to local institutions, due to the development of the Internet and distance education. Students expect to interact with potential and current institutions through their websites (Shea, 2005). Excellent web-based services available through an institution's website are a necessity for distance students who do not expect to travel to campus to take courses, much less to access support services in person at the campus. The importance of websites was confirmed by Noel-Levitz (2007), which asked 1,000 prospective graduate students about their "e-expectations" and found these students wanted information about programs of study and financial aid in an electronic form (i.e., on the web or email). In other words, "graduate programs need to put as much information as possible within a few mouse clicks of their target audience" (Noel-Levitz, 2007, p. 1). Prospective graduate students, in ranking the importance of different types of information from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important), ranked "graduate program detail" as 4.77, scholarship/assistantship information as 4.62, tuition/cost/fees as 4.38, and details on the faculty as 4.03 (Noel-Levitz, 2007, p. 3). These studies support the assertion that an institution's "virtual face" is essential to recruiting graduate students. The reliance on the web for high school students investigating colleges has been confirmed by Noel-Levitz (2012), which found that 50% of potential students eliminated a college from further consideration based on its website, and 55% specifically mentioned difficulty with site navigation as a challenge to doing research on institutions through the web.

This web-based interaction with institutions can be either positive or negative based on the experiences students have with institutional websites as well as students' ability to locate desired information. Institutions continue to struggle to "provide time- and location-independent access to a complete array of student support services" (LaPadula, 2003, p. 120). As noted in *Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-Based Student Services for Online Learners*, when developing online support services, institutions focus on the common administrative services of admissions, financial aid, and registration (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Secondary considerations include academic and student services support.

And yet two studies stress the importance of academic and student services for students. In a study of graduate students admitted to the online and blended programs in higher education at Texas Tech University and the University of Memphis, Meyer and Jones (2011) asked a total of 42 students open-ended questions about information they needed, could not find, or found with much effort on their university's website. Their responses paint a picture of busy adult students who often struggle to find basic information or services (e.g., email login, registration) on institutional websites that are important functions for graduate students. They were also asked what messages the websites conveyed and should convey and who the intended audience was. The students perceived the audience to be students, but still found the messages mostly to be about marketing the institution rather than addressing their educational needs. In Meyer and Jones (2012), the 42 graduate students rated 30 web-based services as "must have," "nice to have," "delighted to have (but not necessary)," or "I'm indifferent to this service" based on the Kano, Seraku, Takahashi, and Tsuji (1984) model of marketing research on customer satisfaction. The majority (11 of 17) of services in the "must have" category are essential for functioning as a student (e.g., course registration, program costs, helpdesk), while the social media services (e.g., podcasts and iPhone applications) were in the "nice to have" category. Items of importance to the institution (history of the university, strategic plan, contributions to community) were in the "nice to have" or "delighted to have" categories. The continuing interest in viewing photos (of the campus, students, athletics) as a "nice to have" is intriguing for students in online and blended programs. These two studies appear to imply that graduate students find their institution's websites to be serviceable, but less than optimal for their needs. In other words, the information and services needed by these distance learning students had room for improvement.

The Evolution of Web Services

In the early years of Green's (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) Campus Computing Project, he tracked the implementation of a number of online services as well as the institutional home pages of two- and four-year colleges and universities. Green continues to survey annually 496 senior campus information technology managers about current technology issues at their institutions, but institutional websites and online services no longer seem to be a

critical need; these services appear to be standard expectations of institutions.

Several studies of institutions' "virtual face" have been conducted, focusing on general information and student services applicable to all higher education students and the messages such websites have for visitors to the institutions' home pages (Meyer, 2008a). These studies focused on higher education websites and their roles in providing specific information that legislators and parents want (Meyer, 2008b), the specific services and information of importance sought by minority students (Wilson & Meyer, 2009), and a process for using website information to assess competitive advantage (Meyer & Wilson, 2010). Only Meyer and Wilson's (2010) study dealt specifically with information needs of planners or administrators of distance learning programs, but not the needs of distance learning students. The current study is the first to investigate how well the "virtual face" of an institution's website for its distance learning office is working to support students throughout their distance learning studies.

Based on this review, it is clear that the literature on college and university websites is modest, but the research on these websites for distance learning within these institutions is even more limited and therefore necessary to undertake. This study describes distance learning's "virtual face" at higher education institutions and answers three research questions:

1. How are higher education institutions establishing a "virtual face" for their distance learning initiatives?
2. How well do distance learning offices support distance students?
3. What do the "virtual faces" of distance learning offices say about the commitment to distance learning students by higher education institutions?

The Study

Study Design

This research is best categorized as descriptive of distance learning offices within higher education institutions' websites. The lack of a prior body of research literature means there is little basis for making predictions of the analysis. One methodology, which may help in this study is "focused synthesis" (Majchrzak, 1984, p. 59), which depends on a synthesis of various information sources to develop insights into the information. A focused synthesis may develop answers to specific questions or add to our understanding of an issue. Traditional questions of reliability and validity depend on the ability of the researcher to explain the data and provide transparent reasoning about the data as well as its limits or holes in the analysis.

Sample

A list of 40 colleges and universities was drawn from the population of public higher education institutions using three types of information. First, public institutions were grouped by Carnegie classification using the definitions from 2006 and aided by The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education™ website (http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/lookup_listings/institution.php). Only four categories of institutions were used: doctoral/research, master, baccalaureate, and community college. Second, institutions were grouped by state. Third, the states were grouped by geographic region: northeast/middle; north central/midwest; southern; and northwest/western. Although some of these designations are the same as the relevant regional accrediting associations, some are not; the grouping by region was not critical to a research question, but an attempt to ensure institutions were drawn from all regions in the U.S.

From these groupings, a recursive process was followed to develop the sample of 40 institutions, to represent 40 different states (states that are not represented in this sample are Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Iowa, New Hampshire, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). Then, 10 institutions were drawn from each of the four regions. Similarly, 10 institutions were drawn from each of the four Carnegie types. Last, as the sample took shape, an effort was made to ensure that both urban and rural, main campus and branch campus locations were included. Therefore, this sample was drawn to maximize representation of different types of institutions in different states and regions. Clearly, these were not random selections, but purposeful in the sense that there was an attempt to be representative in regards to geography and Carnegie type. The institutions included in the sample are displayed in Table 1 below.

It was not the intent of this research to identify the home pages of distance learning offices at individual institutions,

so the remainder of the study will focus on differences by Carnegie type and/or characteristics of the sample as a whole. In other words, the name of an individual institution will not be associated with any result.

Table 1:
Sample (by Region, Carnegie Type, Name, State, Home Page Address)

Carnegie Type	Name	State	Home Page
Region: Northeast/Middle			
Doctoral/Research	University of Virginia - Main Campus	Virginia	http://www.virginia.edu/
	University of Massachusetts-Amherst	Massachusetts	http://www.umass.edu/
	University of Connecticut	Connecticut	http://www.uconn.edu/
Master's	University of Baltimore	Maryland	http://www.ubalt.edu
	Rhode Island College	Rhode Island	http://www.ric.edu/
Baccalaureate	University of Pittsburg - Johnstown	Pennsylvania	http://www.upj.pitt.edu/
	University of Maine - Farmington	Maine	http://www.umf.maine.edu/
Community College	Erie Community College	New York	http://www.ecc.edu/
	Warren County Community College	New Jersey	http://www.warren.edu/
	Community College of Vermont	Vermont	http://www.ccv.vsc.edu/
Region: North Central/Midwest			
Doctoral/Research	Western Michigan University	Michigan	http://www.wmich.edu/
	University of North Dakota	North Dakota	http://und.edu/
Master's	University of Minnesota - Duluth	Minnesota	http://www.d.umn.edu/
	Fairmont State University	West Virginia	http://www.fairmontstate.edu/
	Pittsburg State University	Kansas	http://www.pittstate.edu/
Baccalaureate	Indiana University-Kokomo	Indiana	http://www.iuk.edu/
	Chadron State	Nebraska	http://www.csc.edu/

	College Northern State University	South Dakota	http://www.northern.edu/Pages/default.aspx
Community College	Terra State Community College	Ohio	http://www.terra.edu/index.html
	Lincoln Land Community College	Illinois	http://www.llcc.edu/
Region: South			
Doctoral/Research	Georgia Southern University	Georgia	http://www.georgiasouthern.edu
	University of Arkansas - Little Rock	Arkansas	http://ualr.edu/
	University of Louisiana - Lafayette	Louisiana	http://www.louisiana.edu/
Master's	University of North Florida	Florida	http://www.unf.edu/
	Langston University	Oklahoma	http://www.langston.edu/
Baccalaureate	Lander University	South Carolina	http://www.lander.edu/
	Athens State University	Alabama	http://www.athens.edu/
Community College	Madisonville Community College	Kentucky	http://www.madisonville.kctcs.edu/
	East Central Community College	Mississippi	http://www.eccc.edu/
	Bladen Community College	North Carolina	http://www.bladenccc.edu/
Region: Northwest/West			
Doctoral/Research	University of Nevada - Las Vegas	Nevada	http://www.unlv.edu/
	University of Wyoming	Wyoming	http://www.uwyo.edu/
Master's	Weber State University	Utah	https://www.weber.edu/
	Southern Oregon University	Oregon	http://www.sou.edu/
	California State University - San Marcos	California	http://www.csusm.edu/
Baccalaureate	Metropolitan State College	Colorado	http://www.mscd.edu/

	of Denver		
	Lewis-Clark State College	Idaho	http://www.lcsc.edu/
	University of Hawaii - West Oahu	Hawaii	http://westoahu.hawaii.edu/
Community College	Dawson Community College	Montana	http://www.dawson.edu/
	New Mexico Junior College	New Mexico	http://www.nmjc.edu/

The Instrument

An instrument to aid data collection was developed by the researchers based on the literature already reviewed as well as consultation with four distance learning support professionals; items common to all of those consulted as well as the literature were included in the final instrument. The items related to administration of distance learning, and in particular student support services, can be found in Table 2. Data collection was conducted over a four-week period in mid-December through mid-January 2011-2012. This period was chosen because any major revisions or upgrades to an institution's website would likely have been completed in advance of the start of the fall term.

The classification of distance learning office was determined by the ability to locate a centralized organizational structure at the institution. If an institution did offer distance courses, but the information on them was housed only on individual department websites, the researchers deemed the institution not to have a centralized distance learning office. Second, the number of "clicks" or actions with the mouse to locate a centralized distance learning office was counted from the home page of the institution's website. Once the distance learning office page had been identified, then clicks to the identified sources were determined. If locating the information required clicking on a "Quick Links" button (which would then reveal a list of options) or a pull down menu was revealed when the cursor was over an item, these were counted as one click. Then the researchers mapped the quickest route to the information, counting the clicks it would take to get there from the home page. Because information was sometimes hard to find, the researchers often used the search function to find the information and map the shortest route back to the home page. However, if the information could not be found in a reasonable amount of time and/or effort, the information was declared "not found." This is a subjective decision, but since one of the purposes of this research was to see how accessible important information was for novice users, this decision recognizes that some users will and do give up searching at some point. The distance learning office home pages of the sample were saved in order to capture the site as it looked on the day of data collection and to allow for verification of findings.

One of the researchers analyzed the distance learning home page by noting the data associated with the important qualities of information that should be provided, based on a review of the literature and discussion with distance learning professionals, related to administrative online student support services. To help ensure accuracy of the evaluation of the websites, two graduate assistants under the direction of one of the researchers of this study also analyzed 5% of the institutional websites each to ensure accuracy of the measures.

Table 2
Administrative Online Student Support Services Analyzed

Administrative Online Student Support Services	
Student Training for Learning Management System	Online Admissions Application
Technology Needs for Distance Students	Online Textbook Ordering
Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	Online Course Registration
Costs of Distance Education Courses/	Online Payment Tuition/Fees

Programs	
Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	24 x 7 Help Desk
Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	Tips for Learning Online
Distance Program Requirements	Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning
Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	Online Directory of Offices

This is a long list of items, so examples of each type of information are included in the discussion of the results.

Analysis

Because this study is exploratory, the analysis will be largely descriptive and use frequencies and percentages. To answer research question 1, "How are higher education institutions establishing a "virtual face" for their distance learning initiatives?", the analysis focused first on the identification of a centralized distance learning office, and then identified availability of online administrative support services from that location. The researchers focused on a centralized location versus individual sites, as this demonstrates the institution has built distance learning into its organizational structure. To answer research question 2, "How well do distance learning offices support distance students?", the analysis focused on the average number of "clicks" to reach important information and information that was not found. To answer research question 3, "What do the "virtualfaces" of distance learning offices say about the commitment to distance learning students by higher education institutions?", the analysis looked at whether institutions had committed to a centralized distance learning office organizational structure, the title of the office, and its location within the institution (e.g., academics, student services, information technology). Conclusions, if warranted, ought to be considered tentative until a larger study can be completed since these findings are clearly limited to only 40 institutions out of the 1,656 public institutions in the U.S. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012).

Findings

Research Question 1

How are higher education institutions establishing a "virtual face" for their distance learning initiatives? Answers to this research question can be found in Table 3. In Table 3, the home pages of distance learning offices were analyzed for the existence of links to each of the 16 online administrative support services noted in Table 2 above. The results indicate that 50% (8 of the 16) of the online administrative student support services were available at 42% of the 40 institutions analyzed. Presented in the order of most frequently found, the online student support services found on the distance learning office sites were:

- online application to the institution (57%)
- online ordering of textbooks (55%)
- online application for financial aid (52%)
- online registration (50%)
- technology needed by students, faculty contacts for degree programs, and costs of distance learning programs (all three at 45%)
- learning management system training for students (42%)

These categories seem to be consistently important to institutions in two of the four Carnegie classification types: doctoral/research and community college. The researchers assume this finding is twofold. One reason is that large doctoral/research institutions tend to have mature information technology departments, which can support website development and maintenance. Community colleges tend to have extensive student support services due to their missions of open-access and their roles in social mobility of a diverse student population. They enroll more students

nationwide then all other types of institutions, enrolling close to 50% of undergraduate students, and are the pathway to education for underserved and nontraditional student populations (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). As noted by Aud et al. (2011), 24% of students at two-year public colleges take distance courses, compared to 14% at public four-year colleges.

Table 3:
Links Found from Distance Learning Office Main Page by Carnegie Classifications

	Doctoral/ Research	Master	Baccalaureate	Community College	Percent of Total
Online Resources					
Student Training for Learning Management System	5	4	1	7	42%
Technology Needs for Distance Students	8	3	1	6	45%
Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	5	5	2	6	45%
Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	7	6	1	4	45%
Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	0	0	0	0	0%
Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	1	1	0	0	5%
Distance Program Requirements	4	2	1	3	25%
Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	0	0	0	2	5%
Online Admissions Application	7	4	4	8	57%
Online Textbook Ordering	6	5	4	6	52%
Online Course Registration	8	5	2	7	55%
Online Payment Tuition/Fees	6	5	3	6	50%
24 x 7 Help Desk	2	1	1	2	15%
Tips for Learning Online	2	1	2	5	25%
Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	1	2	1	6	25%
Online Directory of Offices	2	2	2	3	22%

Research Question 2

How well do distance learning offices support distance students? Table 4 answers this question by detailing the average number of "clicks" to reach important administrative online support services. What is intriguing about the information in Table 4 is the relative ease of connecting to resources to apply online to institutions, but once students apply, other resources are more difficult to locate and access. For a majority of the institutions, resources that provided tips for distance learning (80%) as well as student self-assessment of skills for distance learning readiness (70%) were missing, which can lead to higher attrition rates for unprepared and uninformed students who enroll. Community Colleges did a better job of providing these resources to their students than the other three classifications of institutions. In fewer than three clicks, students could access online services for self-assessment of readiness for distance learning at 60% of Community Colleges as well as tips for distance learning success at 50% of these institutions. Clearly, these resources should be easily accessible for potential distance learning students and could help in alerting them to the requirements to be successful in distance courses prior to enrolling.

Another interesting finding was that the costs of distance courses, access to pay tuition and fees online, and access to the online application from the distance learning office home page were on average three plus clicks away for all classifications of institutions. It was noted that institutional home pages clearly marketed the ability to apply online, but once a potential student moved from the main page of an institution's website to the distance learning office, these features became more difficult to locate and access. Why this may be so is difficult to understand since access is available from the institution's home page and a link from the distance learning office site would be relatively easy to add.

Table 4:
Number of Clicks to Online Resources from Distance Learning Main Page by Carnegie Classification

Carnegie Category	Link to	Average Clicks	Not Found
Doctoral/Research	Student Training for Learning Management System	2	5
	Technology Needs for Distance Students	2.75	2
	Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	3.4	5
	Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	3	3
	Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	0	10
	Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	3	9
	Distance Program Requirements	3.5	6
	Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	0	10
	Online Admissions Application	3.87	3
	Online Textbook Ordering	2.62	4
	Online Course Registration	2.66	2
	Online Payment Tuition/Fees	2.75	4
	24 x 7 Help Desk	1.5	8
	Tips for Learning Online	2	8
	Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	2	9
Master's	Online Directory of Offices	2	8
	Student Training for Learning Management System	3	6
	Technology Needs for Distance Students	2.66	7
	Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	2.6	5
	Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	4	4
Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	0	10	

	Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	2	9
	Distance Program Requirements	3.5	8
	Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	0	10
	Online Admissions Application	3.5	6
	Online Textbook Ordering	2.5	5
	Online Course Registration	3	5
	Online Payment Tuition/Fees	5	5
	24 x 7 Help Desk	1	9
	Tips for Learning Online	3	9
	Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	2	8
	Online Directory of Offices	2	8
Baccalaureate	Student Training for Learning Management System	3	9
	Technology Needs for Distance Students	3	9
	Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	4.5	8
	Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	4	9
	Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	0	10
	Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	0	10
	Distance Program Requirements	3	9
	Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	0	10
	Online Admissions Application	3	6
	Online Textbook Ordering	3.5	6
	Online Course Registration	3	8
	Online Payment Tuition/Fees	3.5	7
	24 x 7 Help Desk	3	9
	Tips for Learning Online	2	8
	Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	2	9
	Online Directory of Offices	1	8
Community College	Student Training for Learning Management System	2.5	3
	Technology Needs for Distance Students	2.83	4
	Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	1.83	4
	Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	3	6
	Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	0	10
	Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	0	10
	Distance Program Requirements	3.33	7
	Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	4.5	8
	Online Admissions Application	3	2
	Online Textbook Ordering	2.42	4
	Online Course Registration	4.33	3
	Online Payment Tuition/Fees	4.33	4
	24 x 7 Help Desk	3.0	8

	Tips for Learning Online	z.u	5
	Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	2.16	4
	Online Directory of Offices	2.0	7

Table 5 presents the same information as in Table 4, but collapses the information that was not found across Carnegie classifications to highlight the number of items and amount of institutions with missing information. Of interest are the missing links to information deemed important for distance learning students. The researchers were unable to locate links to information on any of the institutions' distance learning office websites that provided information on 1) additional fees for distance students and waiver of some on-campus fees (0% of institutions provided), 2) assessment data pertinent to distance learning courses and programs relative to student retention, satisfaction, and academic success (5% of institutions provided), 3) states institution has permission to deliver distance learning to (5% of institutions provided), and 4) the 24 x 7 help desk (15% of institutions provided). This means a distance student will not know how much a course of study may cost, whether he or she may be successful in the program, whether the institution can operate in his or her state, and how to access help in the wee hours. This finding confirms an earlier finding by Meyer (2008a) where links to information about tuition and fees and assessment data were hard to find.

The issue of distance learning sites that lacked links to assessment data of distance student retention, satisfaction, and academic success is particularly intriguing given recent legislation in Texas. In Texas, House Bill 2504 requires all public institutions in the state to publish information on undergraduate education that includes costs of attendance, faculty vitas, results of course evaluations of faculty, as well as other information, which must be available on the institution's home page within three clicks (Texas Legislature Online, n.d.). This move by the state may provide the precedence for other states to mandate the transparency of assessment data of faculty credentials and performance, as well as student success at public institutions.

Table 5:
Information Not Found Across Carnegie Classifications

Link to	Not Found	% Institutions
Student Training for Learning Management System	23	58
Technology Needs for Distance Students	22	55
Faculty Contact Information / Distance Degree Programs	22	55
Costs of Distance Education Courses/ Programs	22	55
Additional Fees for Distance Learning / On-campus Fees Waived	40	100
Information about States Institution has Permission to Deliver Distance Learning to	38	95
Distance Program Requirements	30	75
Assessment of Distance Learning Programs (Retention, Satisfaction, Academic Success)	38	95
Online Admissions Application	17	43
Online Textbook Ordering	19	48
Online Course Registration	18	45
Online Payment Tuition/Fees	20	50
24 x 7 Help Desk	34	85
Tips for Learning Online	30	75
Self-assessment of Readiness for Distance Learning	30	75
Online Directory of Offices	31	78

Research Question 3

What do the "virtual faces" of distance learning offices say about the commitment to distance learning students by higher education institutions? Perhaps it is not surprising that 73% of the institutions analyzed had a centralized distance learning office site that was accessible from the institution's main home page. This is supported by Allen

and Seaman's (2011) study that found that 65% of institutions surveyed indicated that online learning is a critical part of their institutional strategy. Categorized by Carnegie classifications, 90% of doctoral/research, 90% of community colleges, 70% of master's institutions, and 40% of baccalaureate institutions had centralized distance learning offices for 72.5% of our sample indicating, albeit implied through their web-based distance education efforts, that such learning was critical to their future success.

The predominant location of distance learning offices was under the academic division (85%), with the second most common location being continuing and professional studies (10%). The names of the office sites ranged from the most common of Distance Education (55%), to the more unique, Center of Online Learning (2%), and Online Services (2%).

Now is the time to develop themes across the data collected, comparing and contrasting administrative online student support services provided for students by Carnegie type and drawing inferences. In many ways, the differences between Carnegie types are not as stark as one might suppose: doctoral/research institutions focus more on research than community colleges, but both classifications of institutions have centralized distance learning office home pages that appear to provide assistance to potential and current distance students at most of the institutions studied. However, if there is a modest surprise in this analysis, it is the lack of online student support services provided by baccalaureate institutions. It appears, based on the development of their online resources, that these institutions still serve the traditional college student population (18-22 age range), which is on campus. This is supported by the research of the U.S. Department of Education (2011), which found that nontraditional students seeking their undergraduate education through distance learning often do so at for-profit institutions or other non-traditional routes. Therefore, this finding may be capturing the tendency of baccalaureate institutions in our sample to serve traditional students.

However, the results also disprove some perceptions that higher education institutions have neglected online student support services. It appears that many institutions have made a concerted effort to serve distance students. The predominance of services for prospective and current distance students belies the perception that institutions are behind in their distance learning student support systems. With 73% of institutions analyzed having centralized distance learning office sites with links to important administrative online support services, it appears that distance students do matter to the institution and the websites convey a message of these students' importance to the institution. The issue is not whether this is happening, but whether these institutions can improve their services; our results seem to indicate that this latter conclusion is justified.

Because this is an exploratory study of centralized distance learning office home pages, several areas should be studied further. First, institutions should consider adding a category of student of "distance student," in addition to their common categories of "current students" and "prospective students." It appears obvious that distance students must be able to perform all necessary application and registration functions from a distance. Though many institutions are enforcing an online application process for all students, distance students cannot drive to campus to meet with financial aid personnel, advisors, or faculty to discuss their needs. An example of this issue is that the researchers found some institutions still asked students to call and make an appointment to meet on campus, which does not recognize the support needs of distance students. Only 20% of the 40 institutions had online chat available to students for immediate contact with a college or university employee.

Conclusions

What then does the "virtualface" of distance learning offices say about higher education's commitment to distance learning and support of distance students? Insight from the analysis described earlier seems to indicate that higher education institutions still have work to do to ensure potential and current distance students have access to the administrative online support services necessary to help them be successful in not only applying and registering for courses, but also assessing student readiness for distance education. Current distance learning office home pages do not appear to provide access to information such as distance student retention, success, and satisfaction. Such data provides transparency and can help potential distance students make informed decisions about their ability to be successful in the distance learning environment.

In addition, if the number of institutions that do have centralized distance learning offices is any indication, higher education institutions have demonstrated an effort to serve the needs of their distance students. Two cautions are

pertinent, however. First, despite this basic message, many of the online support services took an extensive amount of time to locate. It was difficult for the researchers to identify distance learning offices without using the website search function. Both of the researchers have extensive experience in distance learning and are familiar with higher education terminology. This is more than likely not the case for a potential or current student in higher education. Second, students will not likely spend the dedicated effort that the researchers did to locate the help they need. Students have many opportunities for distance learning courses and degrees, and institutions that do not provide the information students need may lose out to institutions that are more readily accessible and who have demonstrated more of a commitment to support distance students through their "virtual face."

The predominant administrative online support service for colleges and universities appears to be application for admittance. Though institutions make it easy to apply, they do not make it easy for distance students to do very much else. This is the conclusion to be drawn from the low incidence of locating resources needed for students at a distance. Institutions seem to have widely adopted the online way of doing business as far as course offerings, but they do lack many of the necessary administrative online support resources for distance students.

Higher education institutions need to find ways to remove the distance from their distance learning offices' online support services. It appears that many institutions' websites still cater to the traditional on-campus student population. This is evident when viewing support services at many of the study institutions, which still require students to "set an appointment" on campus to meet with advisors, faculty, and financial aid personnel. Someday in the future, clicking on the "Contact Us" link on a home page ought to make available phone numbers and email addresses, rather than hide them behind contact forms. New technologies enable departments to provide ways for students to ask questions through a chat or instant messenger feature. New students often do not know the meaning of higher education terminology (e.g., what is FAFSA?), and there needs to be continuing recognition that higher education can seem both foreign and imposing to many students.

In other words, the "virtual face" of distance learning offices in higher education has made some strides over the past decade, but needs to further maximize the technologies available today to serve the needs of distance students. Furthermore, improving the efficiency of distance learning offices' "virtual face" by improving access to time- and location-independent online support services (LaPadula, 2003) can go a long way toward indicating that higher education institutions value their distance students and recognize their unique support needs. Not only will these services be beneficial to distance students, but all college students who rely on technology as a way of life. In retrospect, if students are able to "self-serve" their needs through online support services, it could save institutions money in on-campus support staff. This area needs further evaluation. The essential step, however, is for distance learning offices to think like their customers, to see its "virtual face" through the eyes of novice and expert Internet users. It helps to see oneself as others do; it will also help distance learning offices to see themselves as their customers do. Distance learning administrators may learn that though they may perceive that navigation structures are clear and all online student support services are available and accessible, information may be confusing or even lacking in the eyes of others. Learning to see ourselves from the outside – and creating and modifying not only home pages, but also providing necessary online resources -- could lead to better student retention, which is noted as problematic in the current literature on distance learning. In other words, attending to the "virtual face" of distance learning offices may allow us to see how we really appear to be to those outside our unique culture, and then to make the necessary changes that will present distance learning in ways that reflect our ultimate values and what we strive to achieve, which is student success.

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