Preparing Mid-Level Enrollment Management Practitioners to Implement Quality Services for Fully Online Students

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Abstract

This research gathered data from mid-level enrollment management practitioners to understand how they experienced the implementation processes designed to operationalize student services to support their traditional university's fully online distance education operation. Findings suggest that a strategic implementation plan, readiness assessments, a senior-level leadership support team, pre-implementation training opportunities, adequate resources, and formal and informal communication channels could encourage more formative experiences and quality outcomes. This study has implications for higher education administrators, student affairs faculty, student affairs practitioners, student affairs and higher education professional associations, and any organization committed to facilitating quality outcomes of innovation initiatives.

Introduction

Online distance education has become an acceptable solution to many of the fiscal and accessibility challenges higher education leaders face throughout the 21st century (Allen et al., 2016; Fredericksen, 2017). The disruption to face-to-face instruction caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic has further anchored fully online distance education as a sustaining innovation for higher education. Regardless of the rationale for adopting an online distance education innovation, standards and guidelines lauded for promoting quality outcomes should guide implementation activities. Standards promulgated by organizations such as Quality Matters (QM) Rubric, the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) Quality Scorecards, and State University of New York (SUNY) Online Course Quality Review Rubric (OSCQR) provide faculty, instructional designers, and administrators with standards of best practice for advancing quality in the design, development, and sustainability of online courses (OLC, 2020; QM, 2020). Instructional design teams often serve as principal agents in helping faculty interpret quality standards to understand "what" online pedagogical elements to implement to promote quality outcomes, as well as "how" to implement them.

Standards such as those presented in the OLC's Quality Scorecard for Online Student Support, as well as the Distance Education Accreditation Commission's (DEAC) and Higher Digital's SEA RESULTS Distance Education Effectiveness Assessment assists student affairs practitioners in identifying service gaps and areas of opportunities for facilitating quality online support services (DEAC, 2020). Unlike faculty, student affairs practitioners are often challenged with navigating the "how" associated with implementing online education initiatives without a dedicated team specialized in online education delivery.

Insufficient scholarship examining the successes and challenges of student affairs practitioners who have implemented fully online distance education initiatives has limited the scope of data needed to establish professional standards and competencies for implementing quality services for fully online students (Calhoun et al., 2017; Taylor & Holley, 2009). Consequently, while the faculty, business, and technological components of online distance education may be well-positioned to operate in a state of sustainability, it does not appear that the student affairs profession has reached this threshold (Crawley & Howe, 2016; Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005). This paper will examine the experiences of mid-level enrollment management practitioners, a subgroup within the student affairs profession, to better understand their perceptions of implementation processes involved with operationalizing student services for their traditional university's fully online distance education operation.

Consideration of every identified student affairs professional subgroup and service area is beyond the scope of this paper. Mid-level enrollment management practitioners were the most appropriate study participants because they oversee the online student services administrative core identified by Shea and Armitage (2002). The administrative suite (admissions, registration, student accounts, student records, financial aid, schedule of classes, and course/program catalog) is a critical service delivery component for online learners. It should be available at the start of online programs (Shea and Armitage, 2002). The following research question guided the study: What are the perceptions of implementing online education innovations to support fully online students at traditional universities when considering phases 2-4 of the Quality Implementation Framework (QIF)?

The Quality Implementation Framework (QIF), a meta-framework consisting of 14 steps identified as critical for facilitating quality implementation outcomes, served as the conceptual framework (Meyers, Durlak, et al., 2012). In this paper, fully online distance education is educational delivery in which students are entirely remote; 100% of student learning and access to support services is off campus (Hill, 2012).

Literature Review

Restructuring traditional higher education systems to sustain quality online educational experiences requires significant forethought and acquisition of a new skill set (Nworie, et al., 2012; Smith & Macdonald, 2015). Instructional designers and technologists serve pivotal roles in helping faculty acquire the skills and competencies needed to reform pedagogical practices to promote quality online learning environments (Halupa, 2019). The absence of literature addressing first-hand experiences and knowledge acquisition needs of student affairs practitioners tasked with implementing support services for fully online students suggests that they do not receive support and training comparable to online teaching faculty.

Contemporary Implementation Practices

Distance education literature on student services generally focuses on student attrition, satisfaction with services and academic programs, and service model best practices (Zawacki-Richter, et al., 2009). Bailey and Brown (2016) presented a comprehensive literature review on research addressing contemporary practices and recommendations for implementing online student support services. Research documenting the importance of adhering to online support service standards such as an institutional website that includes content explicit to online learners, IT helpdesk support, online orientations, counseling services, and streamlined student information portals. Further emphasized were cross-campus collaborations, support from senior-level administrators, and the inclusion of online students in institutional governance. Student affairs professionals were fundamental to fostering a sense of connection and community for students totally at a distance. Nevertheless, the literature did not address the preparation, satisfaction, and overall experiences of student affairs practitioners tasked with implementing support services for online students.

Growth and Sustainability

In their metadata analysis focusing on the delineation of factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of online distance education programs at non-profit, public four-year, post-secondary universities, Angolia and Pagliari (2016) discovered university leadership regarding infrastructure development and faculty support systems to be critical success factors. The analysis included 28 qualitative and quantitative peer-reviewed research articles published from 2001 to 2016. Articles published in 1989 on ideal distance education technology models were also analyzed. The authors accessed research literature through a university's library database and Google Scholar using the following keywords: 1. Distance Education Leadership; 2. Distance Education Pedagogy; 3. Sustainability; 4. Information and Communication Technology; 5. Distance Education Pedagogy; and 6. Distance Education Infrastructure.

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed that the vision set forward by senior leadership ultimately governs the growth and sustainability of quality online education programs (Angolia & Pagliari, 2016). The institutional vision was specifically addressed through three critical categories: 1. university infrastructure, 2. faculty pedagogy, and 3. student responsibility. Angolia's and Pagliari's (2016) analyses concluded that university infrastructure, which encompassed administration processes and policies, instructional support staff, hardware/software, and facilities and training, facilitates faculty success and student success. University infrastructure recommendations for administrators seeking to grow and sustain online distance education programs included establishing and communicating a solid vision, proactive support of requisite policy and process changes, adequate investment in needed resources, proactive planning and budgeting for technology enhancements, faculty incentives, training, and resources. Although keyword searches were not inclusive of terms directly related to student services, consideration regarding the lack of literature addressing student affairs professionals yielded from phrases such as "Sustainability" and "Distance Education Infrastructure" is warranted.

Graduate Preparation Programs

Komives and Carpenter (2016) postulated that quality masters-level programs and quality assistantships, or other discipline-related work experiences, can help strengthen competencies for entry-level professionals. Unfortunately, the literature suggests that graduate programs may not adequately prepare students to support online learners effectively. In their national study of student affairs and higher education graduate programs, Calhoun, Santos-Green, and Burke (2017) observed that 83% (n=51) of surveyed programs formally or informally address support services for online students. Yet, more than 50% indicated that the topic was only covered informally through incidental discussions. Only 12% of program administrators and coordinators noted that their programs are entirely online. The apparent preference for face-to-face instruction suggests that an opportunity exists for administrators and faculty to evaluate whether they are effectively integrating technological competencies and standards promoted by professional associations within higher education and student affairs graduate programs (Calhoun et al., 2017). This study represented less than 6% of the nearly

300 masters-level and doctoral-level programs identified within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' (NASPA) program directory. However, some respondents represented student affairs and higher education programs at multiple levels of graduate study. The previously discussed list of programs in the NASPA directory includes M.A., M.S., M.Ed., Ed.D., and Ph.D. degree options.

Innovation Implementation

Zaltman et al. (1973) introduced innovation as "any idea, practice, or material artifact perceived to be new by the relevant unit of adoption……a single individual, a business firm, or city" (p. 10). However, Van de Ven et al. (1989) helped inform a more comprehensive framework for examining, understanding, and managing innovation as an extended process, influenced by adoption and implementation decision-making processes. Klein and Sorra (1996) contended that implementation failure, rather than innovation failure, maybe a more valid reason for an organization's inability to achieve planned outcomes. As such, they offered an integrated model that addressed innovation implementation as a multi-level process that involves cultivating alignment between employees' perceptions and values about innovation, their requisite skillset, and organizational needs. According to Klein and Sorra (1996), these factors are critical influencers of innovation and implementation effectiveness.

Implementation effectiveness, or the consistent and efficient use of an innovation, involves securing "targeted organizational members' appropriate and committed use of an innovation" to achieve maximum benefit from its adoption (Klein & Sorra, 1996, p. 1055). Full benefits are achieved when an organization has successfully cultivated a climate for implementation. Within environments primed for innovation, members receive support to acquire the requisite skills for sustainable engagement with innovations, are appropriately incentivized, and experience minimal infrastructure obstacles to potentially disrupt productivity (Klein & Sorra, 1996). Figure 1 below illustrates the innovation process described by Van de Ven et al. (1989) and Klein and Sorra (1996). The literature presented throughout this section suggests that although student services infrastructure needs may be included throughout each phase of online education innovation processes at post-secondary institutions, stakeholders critical to implementing these services are not receiving adequate consideration and support. Consequently, compared to faculty, business, and technological components of online distance education, student affairs professionals may not be well-positioned to operate in a state of sustainability (Crawley & Howe, 2016; Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005).

Figure 1: Innovation Adoption and Implementation Process

Methods

The Quality Implementation Framework (QIF) (Meyers, Durlak, et al., 2012), a synthesis of 14 steps (see Table 1), four phases necessary for high-quality implementation, served as the guiding conceptual framework. The QIF was utilized in the design of 13 semi-structured open-ended interview questions. For feasibility purposes, interview questions commenced with Phase Two and incorporated questions related to pre-implementation assessments and pre-innovation staff training from Phase One. Furthermore, a full evaluation of Phase One would have been more appropriate for senior-level administrators.

Table 1: The Quality Implementation Framework (QIF)

Phase 1: Initial Consideration Regarding the Host Setting	Phase 3: Ongoing Structure Once Implementation Begins
Assessment Strategies	*Ongoing Implementation Support Strategies*
1. Conducting a needs and resources assessment	11. Technical assistance/coaching/supervision
2. Conducting a fit assessment	12. Process evaluation
3. Conducting a capacity/readiness assessment	13. Supportive feedback mechanism
Decisions about Adoption	**Phase 4: Improving Future Applications**
4. Possibility for adoption	14. Learning from experience
Capacity Building Strategies	
5. Obtaining explicit buy-in from critical stakeholders and fostering a supportive community/organizational capacity	
6. Building general/organizational capacity	
7. Staff recruitment/maintenance	
8. Effective pre-innovation staff training	
Phase 2: Creating a Structure for Implementation	
Structural Features for Implementation	
9. Creating implementation teams	
10. Developing an implementation plan	

One-on-one interviews were conducted with mid-level enrollment management practitioners who experienced the phenomenon of implementing student services to operationalize a fully online distance education innovation at their respective universities within the last 5-10 years. All interviews were conducted in-person, at the respective campus site, for approximately 1 to 2 hours. The interview guide containing interview questions was emailed to participants one week before the formal face-to-face interview. Six participants were interviewed for this study. However, data from two participants were excluded, as they fell outside the unit of measure. Participants' profiles are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Mid-Level Enrollment Management Practitioners' Profile Summary

Participant	University	Job Title (Implementation)	Student Affairs/Higher Education Graduate Course(s)/Degree(s)	Student Affairs/Higher Education Professional Associations
Emily J.	South State University	Director of Admissions	Yes	NACAC & SACAC
Lindsey F.	West State University	Associate Director Academic Support Services, WSU Online Center	Yes	None
Allison A.	West State University	Executive Director, WSU Online Center	No	NACADA & NASPA
Robin S.	East State University	Director, ESU Online Enrollment Services	No	ACRO, OLC, UPCEA

Findings

Phase 2: Creating a Structure for Implementation

Capacity and Readiness Assessments

Robin was the only participant to engage in a formal process designed to evaluate institutional capacity and readiness. In less than one year of East State University's (ESU) soft launch of their fully online undergraduate initiative, Robin was selected to lead the implementation of their online undergraduate recruitment center. Recruitment and pre-admission activities were previously contracted through an OPM (Online Program Management) company. In preparation to implement ESU's internal recruitment center, Robin facilitated a capacity and readiness assessment to evaluate internal enrollment management services. Robin attributes four years of experience in undergraduate and graduate admissions and recruitment at an OPM (a different company than ESU originally contracted with) as being instrumental in her ability to conduct activities for implementation of the online recruitment center swiftly. Robin shared the following narrative regarding her experience facilitating pre-implementation assessment activities:

> …it was really putting together all the pieces I had known professionally into one document, and that proposal was really the basis for…how we were going to do things…it was a challenge to launch things quickly, but that's also what was kind of the fuel…we got it done, with a lot of help and support. [**Robin S. – East State University**]

Emily, Lindsey, and Allison did not participate in any pre-implementation assessment sessions; however, activities could have ended before their involvement with the initiatives. Allison affirmed that the West State University (WSU) implementation team did not anticipant many challenges outside resistance from academic departments that did not fully understand the objectives of the fully online initiative. There was an assumption that WSU's existing infrastructure could be heavily leveraged to support the fully online delivery unit. Allison validated the importance of conducting pre-implementation assessments when reflecting on the "soft challenges" (i.e., fostering credible relationships with academic units) and "hard challenges" (i.e., coding/identification of fully online students, student accounts set-up, new CRM set-up, etc.) that materialized once implementation activities began. Allision described the process of discovering and mitigating these challenges as follows:

> …the softer pieces came when we stood up the harder pieces…it took us doing a deep dive into the harder side of WSU Online…it comes back to the old cliché, we really didn't know what we didn't know…It quickly became apparent that the harder elements were what needed to be put in place before we could really get this thing launched and rolling.
> [**Allison A. – West State University**]

Training

Allison engaged in a considerable amount of self-training through LinkedIn Learning and conducted independent research to prepare for operationalizing WSU Online. In addition, Allison received sponsorship from WSU's senior leadership to attend the University of Michigan's Business Processes Lean Office and Service on-site four-day training. Allison and Lindsey participated in on-campus training sessions facilitated by an OPM company. WSU contracted with the OPM for approximately one year to provide recruitment and retention training and support for front-line staff. As a new supervisor, Lindsey participated in various supervisory, and leadership professional development opportunities sponsored by WSU's human resource department. However, Lindsey did not have the chance to participate in training intentionally designed to help her acquire new skills to implement, manage, and sustain an online education initiative.

Emily and Robin discussed relying more on previous experience to inform implementation and management cadence. Emily, Robin, and staff from traditional, on-campus enrollment management areas were solely responsible for front-line staff training. Emily's response suggested that she would have appreciated the opportunity for formal training; however, training was not offered by leadership. Lindsey asserted that the speed of implementation activities did not permit sufficient time for formal training. Responses from Allison, Lindsey, and Emily regarding their training and preparation experiences were as follows:

> …one of the things that I find that really benefits me…because we are so heavy in business solutions and workflows and processes, was process mapping…I do a lot…LinkedIn Learning… [**Allison A. – West State University**]

> …we were just kind of figuring it out as we went, we were just doing all the research that we could do, trying to meet with other institutions to find out what they were doing and how they were supporting students…we were building the airplane as we were flying it.
> [**Lindsey F. – West State University**]

> …Our Online Learning Center does put together many seminars and webinars, but I would say most of them are more targeting the curriculum piece, the technology piece, but from a teaching perspective. [**Emily J. – South State University**]

Creation of Implementation Teams and Action Plans/Timelines

Emily did not participate in a college-wide implementation team that met regularly to receive status updates, discuss new challenges, and mitigate risks. However, she incorporated discussions related to implementation activities into her weekly and bi-weekly admissions departmental meetings. The senior-level administrator with primary responsibility for operationalizing South State University's (SSU) fully online delivery operation attended departmental meetings and was readily available to answer ad hoc questions presented via emails and phone calls. Emily shared the following narratives about her role in proactively establishing a forum that provided regular opportunities for discussion of implementation activities, as well as the implications of not working for a detailed action plan:

> …I established…the [group] and the [senior-level administrator] was part of that group…I think we had a very good working relationship…they [senior-level administrator] understood the importance of working together and the synergy between our areas…
> [**Emily J. – South State University**]

> …It was more as needs arise…there wasn't a cohesion in how one thing connected to the other…definitely the impact was there, and it wasn't positive…And that's why organizations like OPMs exist…a lot of the

time you don't have the time to do those things. You're just putting out fires that we already have in the office. [**Emily J. – South State University**]

Lindsey, Allison, and Robin recalled their involvement with purposefully assembled project implementation teams that met weekly and bi-weekly. WSU created what Lindsey and Allison referred to as the "smaller" and the "larger" teams. WSU's smaller implementation team included WSU Online Services' leadership and staff. The larger team had individuals representing various stakeholder groups through WSU. These teams met regularly to work through multiple components involved with implementing WSU Online Services. ESU's implementation team also included university-wide representation. Both Lindsey and Allison were involved in developing a project timeline; however, they did not recall a systematic adherence to either throughout implementation. Robin recalled having very little involvement with creating and updating an implementation timeline. The following excerpts depict Allison's perspectives of their experience with structured implementation teams:

> …over 43 different units from around campus. I'm very proud of this group… undergraduate admission, graduate admission, student accounts, financial aid, athletics, the student health was with us, housing was with us…different support units… [**Allison A. – West State University**]

Phase 3: Ongoing Structure Once Implementation Begins

Resolution of Unexpected Challenges

Robin did not experience many unexpected challenges. Conversely, Emily encountered several unexpected challenges, including fully online program applications' impact on their admissions funnel. At the onset of implementation activities, SSU relied on an antiquated "homegrown admissions application" that did not allow for efficiency in the tracking and processing applications, thereby creating a backlog. Lindsey and Allison also discussed the unexpected challenge of high lead volume and difficulty classifying and tracking students enrolled in conflicting course delivery modalities (WSU supported online courses and non-WSU supported online courses). In addition, a significant number of traditional students wanted to opt-in to WSU's fully online programs.

Ultimately, the WSU team decided to purchase a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to aid in the tracking of leads and applicants, restricted the number of existing WSU students who could opt-in to WSU Online, and revised the method for calculating tuition for WSU Online students. At the time of Emily's interview, SSU had purchased a new CRM; however, they continued to work through challenges associated with implementing the system. Emily and Lindsey recalled the challenges related to the unexpected lead volume, student tracking, and reporting as follows:

> …everyday there's a lot of data uploads and downloads that we have to run …but it's been challenging…we have, like 10 different platforms and every night, it's a nightmare of data moving from here to there…
> [**Emily J. – South State University**]

> We began with a report that we ran daily to connect with students…then moved to a new way of calculating tuition…we were using Excel spreadsheets to track our engagements and where they were in the funnel…
> we were manually going through student records and trying to get things straightened out. [**Lindsey F. – West State University**]

Technical Assistance, Coaching, Mentoring, Evaluation, and Feedback Mechanism

Ongoing implementation support strategies associated with technical support, acquisition of additional resources, coaching, and other needs were primarily managed through the university's implementation teams, as discussed in the previous section. Emily asserted that established communication channels created through the admissions task force that she convened were responsive and beneficial. Challenges emerged due to a lack of alignment between the larger institution's philosophical position on fully online programs and the overall objectives of the SSU's Online Center. Emily offered the following insight:

> …we had a very good relationship with the staff and good lines of communications…the main challenge was that they [Online Center] were given some goals, and maybe the philosophical side of the university was not aligned with those goals yet.
> [**Emily J. – South State University**]

As previously mentioned, West State University's senior leadership collaborated with Lindsey, Allison, and their colleagues to resolve various issues and concerns. Directors and managers worked judiciously to provide data to support their needs and requests whenever possible. Although senior leadership was highly proactive and supportive, according to Lindsey and Allison, there were some delays due to the novelty of implementing WSU's fully online support system. Lindsey and Allison shared the following regarding support from WSU's senior leadership team

…they (senior leadership) were as responsive as they could be. So much of this was new to us…they wanted to give things a lot of thought before, you know, rushing into making any decisions. [**Lindsey F. – West State University**]

At East State University, Robin and her colleagues communicated ongoing needs by submitting proposals outlining needs, objectives, and measurable outcomes. In addition, Robin leveraged internal stakeholder relationships when warranted. Nevertheless, Robin experienced challenges in securing appropriate technical support throughout the implementation process. Robin asserted that she probably could have been more proactive in identifying and enduring proper IT support.

Phase 4: Improving Future Applications

Student Affairs Colleagues

Emily advised enrollment management colleagues selected to support online education initiatives to advocate for early inclusion. The siloed culture and thinking that exists within many colleges and universities, as well as consideration of the existing operational infrastructure, requires a "well-thought-out" yet "flexible" plan of action. Emily felt strongly that mid-level managers should be involved with pre-implementation planning to help mitigate risks. Lindsey and Allison encourage enrollment management colleagues at other institutions to consider CRM modification and set-up needs as soon as possible. Several of the challenges experienced by the WSU team were due to delays in setting up a new CRM. Allison further advised colleagues to establish coding and tracking systems that will allow them to quickly identify students who have opted to "permanently" enroll in a fully online "program" from those enrolled in select fully online "courses." Accurate classification of students enrolled across various online learning modalities can help enrollment management divisions determine who should be restricted from specific courses and assess different tuition and fee rates. Lindsey and Allison offered the following statements to describe the impact of WSU's delay in establishing an infrastructure to effectively track fully online students enrolled in WSU Online supported programs:

> …we really struggled with keeping up with students and knowing who we had talked to...Leadership was asking for a lot of reports and data that we just couldn't provide them…we're still working on developing our CRM system three years later…we're not even close to where we could be if we had started this much earlier. [**Lindsey F. – West State University**]

> …what they [Research Analysis Team] had to do was go semester by semester...if all of my courses were online for that term, I was an online student…If, in the summer, I took a mixed mode course…that counts me out as an online student. So, we never had data around who are our true online learners. [**Allison A. – West State University**]

Robin advised enrollment management colleagues at other institutions to gain a clear understanding of their mission. Furthermore, she cautioned against viewing the implementation as a replication or "copy paste" of existing on-campus services. Robin shared the following insight regarding the importance of acknowledging fully online students as a unique student population with different needs:

> …you need to first understand who your students are…who you serve is going to directly dictate what models of service you set-up. How we do admissions and recruitment for online is drastically different… even if you're rushed…take the time to understand what your university is currently doing. [**Robin S. – East State University**]

Senior-Level Administrators

To promote quality implementation outcomes of fully online distance education initiatives, Emily advised senior-level administrators to adequately resource managers and staff to accomplish the overall objectives of online distance education innovations. Emily perceived a disconnect between leadership expectations, the overall goals of innovation, and the units' capabilities; therefore:

> …they [administrative leaders] need to take the time to look at the units and see if they have the resources to make it happen…not…it's setting them up for failure…we need to understand that it's a shift in culture and service…units are going to need the support from administration in terms of their resources to make it happen. [**Emily J. – South State University**]

Allison advised administrators about the importance of having "thinkers, doers, and receivers" at the table throughout implementation. Key administrators (the thinkers) are often responsible for driving innovation strategy and decisions. The doers are conducting implementation activities, and the receivers are the front-line staff who "put the thing into motion," they interact with the innovation almost daily. The following statement illustrated Allison's argument:

… they [administrative leaders] must have enthusiasm around it. It's not enough just to say I'm cutting you the money…where most initiatives go awry is…they don't have a champion at the top…if they're not invested in it, from a personal standpoint, it's a lot harder to continue to move that initiative forward. [**Allison A. – West State University**]

Robin identified ESU's online enrollment management structure as a significant leadership decision that positively impacted her implementation experience. Although many institutions have designed fully centralized structures that position every function involved with operating a fully online system within the same unit and physical space, Robin thinks that the expertise and synergies gained when organized under the same division can be lost. As such, Robin shared the following insight as to why she feels that organizational structure matters when establishing student services systems for fully online students:

…I think the reason why the two units here, and the enrollment growth consistently…we've been able to grow the program at this rate is because we did put (online) enrollment management functional units in enrollment management. I'm able to work with my colleagues that do the same type of work. [**Robin S. – East State University**]

Post-Implementation Ability to Provide Quality Sustainable Services

Emily consistently affirmed experiencing positive and constant communication between the admissions department and the SSU Online Center. However, she feels that due to a lack of resources needed to effectively integrate the new responsibilities associated with partnering with the SSU Online Center, her department could not adequately meet the needs of fully online students. Emily offered the following statement to illustrate the impact that a lack of resources had on the implementation:

…We sometimes were not able to meet their [SSU Online Center] immediate demands for request for a report that they needed now...not being able to meet their needs [students], not because we didn't want to, but because we didn't have the resources…was an area I wish I could have done better… [**Emily J. – South State University**]

Although WSU continues to build out its CRM, the new system has allowed them to effectively track and identify students for proactive outreach and foster relationships with other units across campus. Adequate human resources have helped maintain a good staff-to-student ratio as leads and enrollments continue to increase. Nevertheless, Lindsey asserted that there is still opportunity for improvement in the following area:

…leadership is continuing to work through, making sure that the colleges are getting what they need to handle the increase in students who are enrolling in their online classes. I think that's still a work in progress. [**Lindsey F. – West State University**]

Robin's implementation experience was "super-fast." ESU worked quickly to convert elements of immediate need and concern to what would work for online students. However, Robin believes if additional time was allocated to implementation, they would have created more effective services in the beginning. There was a lack of electronic forms at the onset of launch activities; however, due to the truncated timeline, they could not immediately redesign all the documents. Therefore, Robin offered the following insight related to the impact that sufficient time could have on implementation outcomes:

…we did a great job for the time that we had. But my…advice for...whether it's a legislative board, or administrators is…the more time you can have to actually have people dedicated to before you have to press the go button, I think the more effective right out of the gate. [**Robin S. – East State University**]

Discussion

This study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how a subgroup of student affairs professionals, specifically mid-level enrollment management practitioners, experienced the charge to implement student services to support fully online education innovations. Interview participants consisted of student affairs practitioners serving as executive directors, directors, and associate directors overseeing enrollment management services for fully online students at their respective institutions.

Phase 2

Robin's pre-implementation activities were led by her independently and focused primarily on the existing enrollment management operational infrastructure. Furthermore, ESU did not use data to develop a detailed timeline that identified tasks or stakeholders responsible for each task. Meyers, Durlak, et al. (2012) asserted that leaders should answer two essential questions before the conclusion of Phase 2: 1. Is there a clear plan of action that details "what will happen" and "when it will occur"; and 2. Who will be responsible for specific tasks and overseeing the monitoring of the overall implementation (p. 10)?

Each participant experienced implementation challenges because their respective institution did not establish a plan for tracking and assessing its engagements with fully online students until after implementation commenced. Institutions were delayed in acquiring and setting up their centralized CRM system, which proved critical to participants' ability to provide efficient services to students and reports to internal stakeholders. Challenges were further compounded once the universities decided to acquire new CRMs because they did not proactively identify IT staff with the requisite skills to set up and manage the new technology. Action plans and timelines would have documented the critical need for each institution to acquire a centralized CRM system. In addition, implementation teams could have leveraged task dependencies and deadline dates to guide strategy and keep critical needs at the forefront of implementation activities.

Throughout the implementation process, Lindsey's, Allison's, and Robin's experiences included a solid internal support team of diverse internal stakeholders, including senior-level leadership. The support teams provided mentorship for front-line staff and served as forums to communicate questions, needs, and insights that emerged throughout the launch process. As Baily and Brown (2016) research identified, focused and long-term support from senior-level administrators appeared to positively impact the implementation experiences of Lindsey, Allison, and Robin. Conversely, Emily experienced an implementation process where the staff was "left trying to do the best that they can."

Participants relied on self-training and prior work experience to prepare for the implementation of their respective initiatives. Meyers, Durlak, et al., (2012) affirmed that individuals responsible for supporting front-line staff throughout implementation activities should have expertise related to the requisite innovation, process evaluation, and implementation science to support implementation efforts effectively. Training and skill acquisition should commence before the start of implementation activities. These recommendations align with many institutions' practices to offer semester or quarter-long training programs for faculty before they engage in online teaching. However, Allison was the only participant who engaged in formal training to acquire new skills and knowledge that prepared her to support an online education innovation.

All participants demonstrated professionalism, interpersonal communication skills, ingenuity, professional agency, and a commitment to facilitating student success. However, they revealed underdeveloped competencies that impacted their ability to implement and manage services for the fully online student population. For example, participants spoke to the importance of understanding how to track fully online students. They needed to acquire new technological skills for tracking prospective students before matriculation. As Meyers, Durlak, et al. (2012) proposed, WSU, SSU, and ESU essentially realigned roles when they contracted with OPMs to operationalize select components of their online education innovations. OPMs can provide valuable services to higher education institutions that desire to implement online education delivery systems; however, lack sufficient resources to do so adequately. Nevertheless, other institutions might be prepared to work independently of OPMs if internal employees receive training to implement and manage online education innovations.

Phase 3
Challenges materialized across several areas, including IT, student engagement, assessment and data management, student tracking, human resource acquisition, physical space, and financial aid. These challenges were not isolated to a single institution; however, how stakeholders resolved them indicated strong support and communication structures. Insufficient human resources challenged all participants due to the unexpected increase in lead volume that their institutions experienced. Data presented by Lindsey, Allison, and Robin illustrated the existence of support structures in which several senior-level leaders mobilized to hear their concerns, offer recommendations, and endorse their requests when evidence supported the need. In addition, informal and formal communication channels were established, giving practitioners forums to communicate updates and needs regularly.

Emily found it difficult to obtain adequate resources throughout her implementation experience. Although Emily referenced several forums where she could funnel needs and questions, it does not appear that there was a formal opportunity for the collective team responsible for implementing SSU's online education innovation to meet regularly. Infrequent senior-level meeting rhythms reduced the chances for a joint implementation team to work cohesively to understand the widespread impact of unresolved challenges; however, it also undoubtedly contributed to Emily's "disjointed" implementation experience.

Phase 4
The early involvement of stakeholders across multiple groups, a strong coalition of enthusiastic leaders capable of facilitating momentum and motivation, and early implementation of CRMs systems were offered as recommendations by all participants. Everyone offered specific suggestions related to operational processes that are critical to consider when implementing online education innovations, such as the classification, identification, and tracking of fully online students and how/if the tuition and fee schedule will be adjusted. Robin stressed the importance of working to understand the institution's mission and how the goals and objectives of the innovation align with that mission. Knowing the mission, goals, and objectives will help practitioners better understand what must be accomplished, how they should work towards achieving the "what," and what resource needs must be met first.

The participants did not engage in a systematic implementation process that methodologically applied the 14 steps represented in the QIF. Nevertheless, the process experienced by Lindsey, Allison, and Robin incorporated enough critical components to counterbalance the areas in which an essential step was omitted. The SSU and WSU implementations did not include pre-implementation assessments designed to evaluate fit, needs, and capacity. In addition, the SSU, WSU, and ESU implementations were not guided by a detailed timeline. Still, Lindsey, Robin, and Allison reflected on experiences that included strong senior-level support, strong communication channels, institution-wide commitment, and adequate resources. However, Emily's experience was adversely impacted by the compounding effect of several critical steps being omitted from SSU's online education implementation.

Conclusion

This study is significant because it utilized a systematic implementation framework to highlight the impact of operationalizing online education innovations at traditional universities on a subgroup of student affairs practitioners' preparedness to develop and sustain quality services for fully online students. Data provide a rational for higher education administrators to adopt a methodical approach when implementing online education innovations that also consider the needs and potential challenges of student affairs practitioners. In addition, data support the rationale for student affairs professional associations to develop comprehensive standards and competencies for implementing, managing, and sustaining quality services for fully online students.

Recommendations for Practice and Research
Systematic plans designed to promote the implementation of quality online education innovations should include early involvement of an implementation team representative of all critical stakeholder groups within the institution, an infrastructure assessment before the start of implementation, identification of multiple senior-level champions capable of shepherding the team through arduous periods, and communication efforts designed to promote widespread institutional buy-in. Furthermore, practitioners responsible for implementing services for fully online students should possess a level of agency that enables them to reconcile highly ambiguous situations from a systems approach. They should be able to work collaboratively across multiple student services functional areas and academic departments. Online faculty must acquire technological adeptness with learning management systems (LMSs); however, mid-level enrollment management practitioners should develop technical proficiency with CRMs and student data management.

There is an opportunity for student affairs professional associations such as NASPA, American College Personnel Association (ACPA), American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) to develop comprehensive standards for implementing programs and services to support fully online innovations. Frameworks promulgated by student affairs associations will help ensure that the profession's historical tenets undergird practices for implementing, managing, and evaluating services. In addition, student affairs graduate-level program faculty will have resources needed to guide curricula reform that prepares practitioners for employment in online education units.

Future studies should not be conducted more than one year after implementation, as experiences will be at the forefront of participants' memory. In addition, research evaluating the curricula of student affairs and higher education graduate programs will create a better understanding of how well graduate-level student affairs programs are preparing future practitioners to develop, manage, and sustain online education innovations.

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