

**INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
ON SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING
ONLINE LEARNERS**

INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING AND LEARNING

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**INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
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SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this series is to publish current research and scholarship on innovative teaching and learning practices in higher education. The series is developed around the premise that teaching and learning is more effective when instructors and students are actively and meaningfully engaged in the teaching–learning process.

The main objectives of this series are to:

- 1) present how innovative teaching and learning practices are being used in higher education institutions around the world across a wide variety of disciplines and countries;
- 2) present the latest models, theories, concepts, paradigms, and frameworks that educators should consider when adopting, implementing, assessing, and evaluating innovative teaching and learning practices; and
- 3) consider the implications of theory and practice on policy, strategy, and leadership.

This series will appeal to anyone in higher education who is involved in the teaching and learning process from any discipline, institutional type, or nationality. The volumes in this series will focus on a variety of authentic case studies and other empirical research that illustrates how educators from around the world are using innovative approaches to create more effective and meaningful learning environments.

Innovation teaching and learning is any approach, strategy, method, practice, or means that has been shown to improve, enhance, or transform the teaching–learning environment. Innovation involves doing things differently or in a novel way in order to improve outcomes. In short, innovation is positive change. With respect to teaching and learning, innovation is the implementation of new or improved educational practices that result in improved educational and learning outcomes. This innovation can be any positive change related to teaching, curriculum, assessment, technology, or other tools, programs, policies, or processes that leads to improved educational and learning outcomes. Innovation can occur in institutional development, program development, professional development, or learning development.

The volumes in this series will not only highlight the benefits and theoretical frameworks of such innovations through authentic case studies and other empirical research but also look at the challenges and contexts associated with implementing and assessing innovative teaching and learning practices. The volumes represent all disciplines from a wide range of national, cultural, and organizational contexts. The volumes in this series will explore a wide variety of teaching and learning topics such as active learning, integrative learning, transformative

learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, meaningful learning, blended learning, creative learning, experiential learning, lifelong and lifewide learning, global learning, learning assessment and analytics, student research, faculty and student learning communities, as well as other topics.

This series brings together distinguished scholars and educational practitioners from around the world to disseminate the latest knowledge on innovative teaching and learning scholarship and practices. The authors offer a range of disciplinary perspectives from different cultural contexts. This series provides a unique and valuable resource for instructors, administrators, and anyone interested in improving and transforming teaching and learning.

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PART I

IN PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION TO SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING ONLINE LEARNERS

Rachel Scott and Jaimie Hoffman

ABSTRACT

This chapter unpacks the unique characteristics of online students, research that exists pertaining to support of online students in American higher education, and reviews the subsequent chapters in this volume. The chapters in this book focus on research, theoretical foundations for supporting the success of online student. Authors present case studies in various context including a large state university system, a large and increasingly growing public master's degree, two private institutions, and a Scottish institution. Various theoretical constructs are provided to help inform practices for supporting online students including "communities of practice" (Wenger, 2000) or "communities of inquiry" (Garrison, 2007) and the Dynamic Student Development Metatheodel (DSDM). The final chapters of this book unpack the experiences of specific populations including post-baccalaureate, students, and doctoral students, understanding that each subset of students encounters different challenges throughout their online experiences. Finally, this book closes with a focus on a very important topic for all professionals: accessibility discussing the importance of inclusion, participation, and engagement for students with disabilities no matter the modality of learning. The last chapter compares two models of support (medical and social) and offers recommended changes for implementation of best practices to enhance literacy supports in online learning environments.

Keywords: Online education; higher education; student support; student engagement; retention; student support.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that online education is increasing as a learning modality in higher education. This growth is not limited to a single institution type within the United States, the expansion is prevalent in the private and public sectors of higher education and encompasses both for-profit and not-for-profit institutions, with the largest growth of online education enrollments at two years, private not-for-profit institutions (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Large institutions of higher education (enrolling over 15,000 students) have educated the largest portion of online students, totaling 46–66% of the enrolled students in online education (Seaman et al., 2018; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2014). Online students encompass 30% of all college students and 60% of all community college students (Wladis et al., 2014) in the United States. In the fall of 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2018), there were nearly 7 million students taking online courses; 5.7 million online students were undergraduates and about 4.9 million enrolled at a public institutions. Enrollment of online students at institutions of higher education is growing faster than on-campus student enrollment, with a compound annual growth rate from 2002 to 2012 of 16.1% and 2.5%, respectively (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

With such significant growth it makes sense to turn our attention to supporting and engaging this emerging population. We also cannot ignore that at the time (2020 during the coronavirus pandemic) this chapter was authored, we were in the midst of a global pandemic, causing universities around the world to move to exclusively distance learning for their entire student population. This drastic shift caused universities to make quick decisions with the safety of their students in mind but unveiled that many universities were not able to (and likely remain unable to) provide the same level and quality of student support in a distance format. This chapter unpacks the unique characteristics of online students, research that exists pertaining to support of online students in American higher education, and reviews the subsequent chapters in this volume.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE STUDENTS

Online college students share a variety of characteristics; they often do not take online courses exclusively – in fact, only 14.9% of the total student population enroll in a fully online program, while 16.7% of the total student population enroll in some form of an online course alongside their on-ground courses (Seaman et al., 2018). In addition, 56.1% of fully online students took courses from institutions located in their same state, and most online students enroll at institutions of higher education located within a 100-mile radius of their home (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Seaman et al., 2018).

From a demographic standpoint, 40% of online students are under the age of 30 years old (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012) and women make up 70% of the distance learning population (CollegeAtlas.org, 2017). The online student population is juggling more than just schoolwork, with 79% of undergraduate online students reported being employed, either part-time or full time while pursuing

their degree (Radford, 2011). Research has also found that students with mobility disabilities enroll in a distance education course more often than students without a disability (Radford, 2011). Online students also vary in their pursuit of degree type and in the credit hour consumption. Of students enrolled in online courses, 60% (of both undergraduate and graduate students) study full time and 73% of exclusively online students pursue a degree, compared to 19% pursuing a certificate and 8% pursuing a license (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). The literature is not clear on the most popular courses and degree programs for online students. Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) reported that business degrees dominate the field of study, while Radford (2011) found computer and information sciences to hold the highest enrollment percentage of online students.

Online students choose distance education for a variety of reasons. The most commonly reported reasons for taking an online class included accommodation of work schedules, family obligations, a students' distance from their campus, financial reasons, the ability to take a course not offered on campus, the availability of fast-track courses, and the ability to study anytime, anywhere (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Dare, Zapta, & Thomas, 2005). Online courses have opened up a new world for the student looking to further their education while continuing to work full time, for the parent juggling family responsibilities on top of their studies, for the student who has dreamed of having a degree from a university across the country. Simply put, online education gives students new opportunities they may not have in a traditional classroom setting.

With the foundational understanding of who online students are, their enrollment preferences, and their motivation for pursuing online education, we can turn our attention to the unique support services online students need.

STUDENT SUPPORT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This leads us to a conversation on the types of support that our online student population needs. Online students expect a range of services, transactions, and communication to be performed online (McCracken, 2005) with administrative services (such as online registration and online bill payment) being their most significant support service need (Dare et al., 2005). While online students identify administrative services as their top need, this could be the result of a lack of exposure to other support services; Jackson-Boothby (2017) found a significantly lower number of institutions of higher education providing non-academic student support services to online students. Currently, sparse literature exists that explores the potential effect that access to additional support services may have on online students.

Despite the sparse literature exploring the effects of additional support services for online students, higher education experts note the need for online students to receive support services. Brindley, Walti, and Zawacki-Richter (2008) found that due to online students having more responsibility to manage their own learning and that online learning requires more competency and skills to build, student support services for online learners should take added importance in the

student affairs profession. Further, [Crawley and Fetzner \(2013\)](#) found a general agreement that online students require the same support services as on-campus students. Yet, despite this apparent need for online students to have access to online support services, institutions of higher education have offered online support services at a slower rate and on a more limited basis ([Smith, 2005](#)). The slow pace of offering online student support services in higher education is met with an additional barrier of a variance in expectations for faculty and administrators pertaining to online student support ([Baillie, 2014](#)). Together, the literature showcases a disconnect between an identified need for online student support services, and the current state of institutions of higher education meeting that need. Even when online students are invited to participate in opportunities, they are not necessarily created for this population specifically; 76% of student affairs professionals in a study ([Jackson-Boothby, 2017](#)) identified student engagement opportunities (e.g., events, workshops, and trainings) for online students offered at their college or university, but many of those opportunities were for on-campus students that online students were invited to attend. As student affairs professionals, we see this often; universities will host speakers, or events and invite online students via a livestream, but forget to engage with them or acknowledge them in the event. We also find that events sponsored by the university specifically for online students are also sparse and, in our experience, are left to the individual programs to design, market, and fund.

BARRIERS FOR PROVIDING SERVICES TO ONLINE STUDENTS

Reviewing the research unpacked in the previous pages may leave you wondering: if distance education enrollment is increasing, and students have a clear need for support services, why are universities not delivering on this need? One of the top barriers to institutions providing effective student support services to online students is that campuses do not cater to online students ([Hoffman, 2018](#)). Specifically, institutions of higher education offer office hours and schedules that do not consider different time zones in which students may reside, host events exclusively on campus, do not adopt additional services, such as counseling or health services in an online environment, and levy fees to online students that do not apply to their off-campus status ([Hoffman, 2018](#)). Institutions of higher education are also not in a practice of displaying readily available resources for online students ([Jones & Meyer, 2012](#)).

In addition to the overall structural barriers to providing effective student support services to online students, [Baillie \(2014\)](#) found a variance of expectations for online students. The variance noted relates to communication with online students (whether faculty should be required to initiate email contact with each new student or host a welcome phone call), instructor presence and engagement in the online classroom (how frequently faculty should respond to discussion posts and maintain office hours), and online instructor's timeliness and response time (how quickly to respond to emails). The author argued this variance could possibly

signify that administrative expectations are less for faculty when working with their online students and courses (Baillie, 2014).

Crawley and Fetzner (2013) noted that the challenge for institutions of higher education is not just to provide the student support services but to do so in a way that fosters a meaningful connection back to the institution. Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, and Zhou (2015) took Crawley and Fetzner's recommendation one step further, noting that students with marginalized identities (such as first-generation students and students of color) are often overlooked in online student support and suggested that institutions of higher education should be focused on online student support at an individual basis. In the recent months of the publication of this book (2020), we have seen an increase in support of students from marginalized identities, including town hall events to provide students with a safe place to share experiences and hear from university leaders about how they are addressing key issues related to racism on their campuses. We have also seen universities expand their counseling center availability for students (where licensing allows) to provide students with more opportunities to connect with professionals in support of their academic pursuits and personal challenges. While these efforts benefit all students, it is particularly impactful for students from marginalized backgrounds who have experienced an uptick in violence and polarizing legislation in the recent months.

Identifying the barriers that prevent universities to provide effective support services for online students is one step in the direction toward making services available and accessible to online students. The more we can highlight to university leaders the priority of online students and the importance of providing these services in a manner that meets online students where they are at, the better chance we have at enacting real change in higher education; a change so desperately needed for higher education to continue to thrive in the future. This volume provides a series of best practices and research for successfully supporting online students, each chapter is briefly summarized below.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In "Transforming the Practice of Student Affairs Professionals: Creating an Ecosystem of Support That Is Inclusive of Online Learners," by Jaimie Hoffman and Autumn Willinger discuss the importance of supporting and engaging online students such that all students feel valued, welcomed, and supported. They provide recommendations on ways campuses can transform the existing ecosystem of support services and engagement opportunities to be inclusive of online learners. A systematic review of the current ecosystem of support is provided to analyze the ways in which access is provided remotely to online learners and to ensure that the language and engagement opportunities shared with students are inclusive of online learners. The authors suggest that campuses create and implement specific initiatives for their online population including online orientation, success coaching, library support services, and the use of predictive analytics for student success.

In “Reshaping the Online Student Experience,” by Molly A. Mott, Kristyn Muller, and Michele Forte discuss structure and strategies that institutions can use to transform the experience of students learning at a distance. They provide details on how one of the largest educational systems in the United States, the State University of New York (SUNY), reshaped the student online learning experience via the “Open SUNY” model. Specific strategies for infusing existing models of support with new ways of thinking are explained. Attention is paid to the infrastructure of the Open SUNY model of collaboration, the use of the Open SUNY Readiness Approach for preparing colleges to deliver quality online programming, and the unique Open SUNY + Signature Element program for assessing the quality of online programming and support structures. Finally, this chapter also highlights the efforts of one campus, the SUNY at Canton, to leverage Open SUNY and take its signature element on student engagement to the next level.

In “Beyond Instruction: Scaling Support for a Large Online Master’s Program,” by David Joyner examines the program- and institute-level infrastructure to support learners in Georgia Tech’s online Master of Science in Computer Science program (launched in 2014). The program is novel due to its cost and size: total tuition for the entire degree is around \$7,000, and to date, it has enrolled over 15,000 total students with 9,000 enrolled in fall 2019. This chapter examines administration at the program level, including its academic advisers, career counselors, and alumni relations, and at the institute level, where it integrates with on-campus infrastructure for academic integrity, student advocacy, and disability accommodations. The author concludes with three guidelines for implementing similar programs at other schools, taking into consideration the full range of experience in building Georgia Tech’s program.

In “Connecting with Online Learners: Case Studies from a Scottish University,” by Lorraine Syme-Smith, Louise Campbell and Lynn Boyle share some of the key ideas that impact the creation of online learning environments. This chapter explores some aspects of Connectivism and its relation to wider ideas of community-building, heutagogy, and motivation and articulates some of the factors that have influenced the authors’ practice in creating online learning. Examples of how theory influenced practices are brought to life in three case studies – each looking at a course the authors were part of creating. The case studies illustrate how these theoretical foundations fostered the development of learning communities, encouraged students to have autonomy over the direction of their learning, and engaged students to maintain their motivation for learning.

In “Facilitating Cocurricular Connections among Millennial and Generation Z Students in Digital Environments,” by Shelley Price-Williams and Pietro A. Sasso focus on the online learning experience for two specific populations: Millennials and Generation Z students. In order to build relationships and community, the authors encourage consideration beyond technology toward creating a higher value aspect of learning by developing models closely aligned with “communities of practice” (Wenger, 2000) or “communities of inquiry” (Garrison, 2007). This chapter examines how to engage Millennial and Generation Z traditional undergraduate students through distance learning approaches in ways that support student learning and development.