

Career Services for the Distance Learner: Perceived Needs

Amy B. Raphael, University of Georgia

The purpose of this study was to explore what career planning and placement services are currently offered at four online, degree-granting institutions in the United States. This study examined what distance education administrators perceive as ideal career planning and placement services for their online degree-seeking students. Finally, this study examined the obstacles in moving from what is offered to what is ideal. The goal of this study was to collect data that would allow institutions of higher education with online degree programs to better serve their students in career planning and placement services.

The literature in the field of distance education primarily examines the in-course experience of students, but research has also been conducted on how to create a successful distance education program. In addition to studies regarding the growth of online learning and how its students' demographics differ from traditional students, the research mainly focuses on faculty attitudes towards teaching online and student issues within the course. Within these studies, however, there is little discussion of overall student support services, particularly those services related to career planning and placement.

Student services for this population are not considered to be an issue in the field of distance education (Berge & Mrozowski, 2001). The limited data collected on support services focuses on the perceived necessities, such as online availability of admissions, registration, and financial aid. Important services that a student might utilize on campus, such as career planning and placement services, are not considered.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived need for career planning and placement services by distance education program administrators and to explore what services are currently offered at four online degree-granting institutions in the United States. The researcher assumed that distance learners are perceived to be grounded in an occupation or career path, and that they are involved in distance education for professional development. While this may be true for some distance learners, it has been noted that many enroll in courses in an attempt to make a significant career change and/or advancement (Connick, 1999; Schwitzer, Ancis, & Brown, 2001). Some distance learners may know the directions they wish to pursue, while others may simply just desire a change. Distance learners may not consider career-related services to be a necessity in comparison to registration or financial aid, but students often do not realize that the benefits of services until they actually utilize them.

Distance Education Today

Distance learning and education are new terms for many student affairs administrators. The terms distance education and distance learning tend to be used interchangeably. In the most basic terms, distance learning is defined as the process by which any student-instructor relationship occurs over a physical distance. More specifically, the term distance education refers to “the provision of academic courses and entire degree programs when instructor and students are geographically separated” (Schwitzer et al., 2001, p. 12).

Distance education can occur through a variety of vehicles. In the beginning, distance education included correspondence courses, conference calls, and videoconferences. Today, distance education programs are primarily online programs conducted via email correspondences, chat rooms, and Internet use. The growth of distance education has spawned various types of programs, such as online universities and virtual campuses. “An online

university is likely to be an offshoot of a traditional university, offering all its courses and programs via the Internet and World Wide Web. A virtual campus has no campus and no faculty of its own. Instead, a virtual university makes available programs and courses offered by other colleges and universities using technology” (Connick, 1999, p. 4).

Before one can consider issues surrounding distance education services, it is necessary to understand the growing importance of distance education in higher education. The American Council on Education reported that the number of distance learning students doubled from 1995 to 1998, reaching 1.6 million (Valentine, 2000), and all indicators point to continued growth. Education as we know it is changing in response to a society that is becoming more accustomed to the increasingly reliable, flexible, and affordable technologies available today (Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999). Therefore, we must anticipate an even greater growth in distance education enrollment.

After acknowledging the increasing enrollment in distance education programs, one must take time to become familiar with how the distance learner differs from the traditional college student. The June 2002 report of the Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Student Services Subcommittee found that 33.1% of the distance learners surveyed were between the ages of 36 and 45. It is not uncommon for these students to be in mid-life, often married with children, and have everyday work lives (Schwitzer et al., 2001). Distance learners have exhibited higher maturity and commitment levels than their traditional counterparts. “They are people who want to exercise great control over what they learn, when they learn it, how they learn it and where they learn it” (Dirr, 1990, p. 400).

If distance learners are vastly different from the traditional campus-based student, what drives them into an educational setting? Various reports state that distance learners enroll in

their respective programs for an assortment of reasons, most of which relate in some manner to an occupational or career decision. Connick (1991) lists seven reasons, four of which are career-related: “to help in a current job, to move toward a new job or career change, to move toward a college degree and a career, and to retain an ability to do a particular job” (p. 91). In addition, Schwitzer et al. (2001) state that 60% of distance learners are motivated by career considerations. Specifically, they seek education for job advancement, professional certification, or career change.

Taking into account the demographics of the distance learner and the reasons stated above for students to enroll in distance education, one can see the importance of career planning and placement services for this population. There is a gap in the literature, however, regarding student services for distance learners and, more specifically, those relating to career planning and placement services. Bothel (2001) points out that, while distance education faculty are making progress towards better understanding their students, few changes are taking place in the overall university to accommodate for the special needs of this population.

Upcraft and Terenzini (2001) discuss the ever-increasing need for such services as they reflect upon possibilities for resistance towards them. Technology and distance education create a new arena for student affairs professionals, but some may not be comfortable in this uncharted territory. Regardless, Bothel (2001) asserts that distance learners, without face-to-face interactions with faculty and administrators, often need and deserve *more* services than the campus-based student. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) recently developed standards and guidelines to assist the development of educational services for distance learners. As previously stated, distance education, as a legitimate form of higher education, is only going to grow in number of enrollments and total programs offered.

Therefore, it is difficult to expect current classroom and technological support services to sufficiently cover the needs of these students.

In October 2001, the Distance Learning Policy Laboratory conducted a survey asking students to rank the importance of several student services. Out of eighteen services, distance education administration and students ranked career services as fifteenth in order of importance. The top five most desirable services were registration, admissions, tuition and fee payment, library services, and technical support, the bare bones services necessary for a distance education program to survive. Furthermore, services such as admissions, registration, and financial aid all lend themselves to electronic delivery in a manner that is more obvious than services such as career planning and placement. At first glance this would lead one to believe that the need for career services is not very strong. On the contrary, many distance learners enroll in education for reasons that would lend themselves to benefiting from career planning and placement services.

While administrators and students may rank career services as lower in importance, one must next ask, how many students would use career services if they were available? Given the nature of the distance learner, it is important for these students to see how the specifics of their degrees are related in both the short- and long-term to their occupational futures. Schwitzer et al. (2001) note that many of these students are employed full-time. They go on to say that some of these students have tendencies to make hasty career decisions and often this population is filled with perfectionists within the realm of career development. Distance learners commonly express a fear of failure, as well as a fear of negative consequences for their significant others as a result of altered career goals (Schwitzer et al, 2001). Hence, it is likely that if career planning and placement services were available to these students, they would be widely utilized.

About the Researcher

Since receiving a master's degree in Counselor Education, my professional experience has been in university career services. As Assistant Director for Technology and Career Resources at a small, religiously affiliated, liberal arts institution, I worked with traditional-aged college students as they moved through the career development and job search processes. I feel strongly that higher education should encourage individuals to take advantage of all opportunities, consider every option, and take time for personal growth. I have seen the positive effects that career planning and placement services have on students.

Currently, I serve as a counselor for a distance career counseling program where I work via telephone and email with a variety of clients. Several of my clients are mid-life career changers in need of assistance in matching their interests and skills to a career as well as proceeding through the job search process. This involvement has shown me the powerful impact that services at a distance can provide. Many of my clients are similar to the distance learner described above. Therefore, I believe that while the delivery format is different than many student services administrators have used in the past, it can and does work.

My exposure to distance education has been primarily through my father who teaches in various online degree programs. It is through discussions with him that my interest in distance education was sparked. As stated above, the career changers that I assist in my distance career counseling work share similar characteristics with distance learners. I believe that career planning and placement services for distance learners may not be currently offered in a manner that increases the likelihood career development. My assumption is that these students are perceived to be in stable careers, simply taking classes for personal growth. The lack of

literature on career services in distance education leads me to believe that it is not deemed to be an important issue.

Method

The majority of research on distance education focuses on instruction and other faculty issues. Of the limited research conducted regarding student services in distance education programs, the focus is on admissions, registration, and academic advising. The purpose of this study was to explore what career planning and placement services are currently offered at four online degree-granting institutions in the United States. Furthermore, this study examined ideal career planning and placement services for online degree-seeking students, as perceived by distance education administrators. Finally, this study examined the obstacles preventing institutions from offering their ideal level of services.

The case study method was used in this study. Case study research explores a phenomenon by collecting detailed information in a qualitative manner. Researchers link data together to explain a phenomenon and analyze patterns of results while comparing various findings of the study (Creswell, 1994).

To best understand the administrators' perceptions of career planning and placement needs of online degree-seeking students, a set of three open-ended questions was developed to obtain information regarding current and ideal practices. A list of institutions offering known distance education programs was compiled in consultation with various professionals in the field. Eight distance learning program administrators were contacted via email; this initial contact was two-fold. First, for the researcher requested the name of the administrator most involved in student services so that a prospective participant could be identified. In one instance, an additional email was sent to the appropriate contact to request willingness to participate in this

study. Administrators at virtual universities as well as existing campus-based institutions were contacted. No virtual institutions participated in this study. As previously stated, a virtual university offers programs and courses from other colleges and universities using technology. Second, student services administrators at four institutions were interviewed via telephone at a time convenient for both parties. Geographic location was not a consideration in selecting participants.

As stated above, telephone interviews were arranged and conducted with administrators of the selected programs. Interviews lasted roughly 30 minutes in length. The interview questions were:

1. What career planning and placement services do you currently provide for your online degree-seeking students?
2. What do you see as ideal career planning and placement services for online degree-seeking students?
3. What challenges and/or obstacles do you believe stand in the way of moving from your current practices to the ideal services?

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Member checks were completed in order to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions. The transcriptions were then compared to one another to find common themes and best practices. For the purposes of this study, a theme was defined as a commonality between all four participants. Then, all four institutions were compared and contrasted to identify categories of findings. Each of the institutions in this study is described in Table 1.

Findings

While few themes arose among the four institutions that were interviewed, current practices and future possibilities as well as similarities and differences have been compared. In this section the programs currently offered will be presented, the perceived needs of the students will be voiced, the ideal needs will be discussed, and the obstacles will be identified.

Services Currently Offered. No themes emerged as all four institutions were compared. Each institution currently offers different career planning and placement services for their online degree-seeking students. While the information provided by institutions differed across all four participants, three of the four institutions currently refer their students to their campus' career services web site. The participant from Institution A explained that, "the university has a really great website for career services. And they have a ton of online resources. So, we've kind of been gearing our students towards that a little bit." Similarly, the administrator from Institution C stated, "in the area of career resources, students, as always, can get services from their home campuses." Two participants explained that they are currently not providing any career planning and placement services. Other services currently offered at single institutions include a half-time career counselor, SmartThinking.com resume and cover letter critiques, online workshops via an E Student Union portal, an online job fair, and promotional materials on what students can do with particular degrees.

Perceived Needs. Themes did not emerge through the discussions with the administrators regarding their perceived needs of distance learners' career planning and placement needs. The most frequent response dealt with students who are employed full-time. Participants from three of the four institutions expressed little need for career services. Institution A's participant explained: "Because of the degrees, students have such a specific idea of where they are going.

These students are either...already in their industry, and so they are just looking to get ahead in their own company, or they are looking for a slight career change. A lot of these people are already in the job, and they want to get the bachelor's so they can do a career progression in their own place of employment. We've been targeting people that are already in their field."

Furthermore, the participant from Institution C stated, "we may not be getting as much of an interest in career services because they are already working in a career. They are not like a new graduate without a job." Institution D's administrator reinforced this perception in stating, "Many of our students are already employed." Other areas of career planning and placement services perceived necessary by one of two of the institutions for online degree-seekers include job search preparation assistance, information regarding careers commonly pursued by graduates of particular degrees programs, career counseling, and more direct access and focus on services for distance learners.

Ideal Services. Themes also failed to emerge when talking with the administrators about their ideal career services program for their online degree seekers. However, three of the four institutions noted that a full-time career counselor designated for distance learners would be ideal. The participant from Institution A expressed that ideally the institution would employ "somebody here in house that can work with flexible hours and make the adjustments for these kinds of students. This person would deal with them directly so that students have this one person. They call up Sandy and say, 'Hey Sandy, this is the person I need to talk to.'" Likewise, Institution B's administrator "thinks it would be nice to have a fulltime person."

While no themes emerged among the career planning and placement services deemed ideal by the four participants, various ideas were identified by individual institutions. Two of the four participants stated their desire for online degree-seekers to have equal access to all of the

services that campus students do. Additionally, two participants believe that services such as resume and cover letter writing assistance or career development counseling are crucial. Flexible hours, a staff member with dual reporting roles with alumni affairs, online job fairs, and group discounts for students with headhunters were among other ideal services listed by individual institutions.

Obstacles. Money and funding themes immediately emerged as obstacles preventing institutions from offering their ideal level of services. An administrator at Institution D believes that, “they are not going to have the resources, probably ever to put into the kind of thing that we would need to.” When asked what challenges are prevent offering ideal services, the participant from Institution B simply replied, “Money.” Across the board, money emerged as a theme. “Obviously money and funding are the biggest obstacles,” stated an administrator from Institution A.

Another challenge noted by three participants is that all services are not available at a distance. An administrator at Institution D described the relationship between the distance education programs and the institution’s career services office: “They offered for us to link to any services that they have on their website. Well, you don’t get very far into their website and it says to come to room such-and-such and building such-and-such, for an appointment.” Institution C’s participant echoed the sentiment: “The problem is that not all of the home institutions have equivalent services. And, in addition to that, they may not offer them online. They may not be available at a distance.”

While less consistent across the four institutions, other challenges and obstacles to offering ideal services were mentioned. Two participants discussed staffing issues. Concerns regarding the lack of career services experience and knowledge surfaced. At Institution C, the

student support services office for distance learners consists of three individuals. Furthermore, “between the three of us, none of us has experience in career resources.” On the other hand, the participant from Institution B explained that the individual working with their students on career-related issues came into this position without prior experience in distance education. Last, faculty support, confidentiality with distance counseling, and keeping up with market trends and student needs were each noted by individual institutions as challenges in providing the ideal career planning and placement services.

Implications

In *The Distance Learner's Guide: Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications* (1999), four out of seven reasons given for wanting to become a student were career-related. Individuals want to become distance learners “to help in a current job, move toward a new job or career change, move toward a college degree and a career, or to retain an ability to do a particular job” (p. 91). Distance learners are often mid-life adults with families and everyday work lives. With a high maturity level and commitment to education, they return to the academic arena most often for job advancement, professional certification, or career change (Schwitzer et al, 2001). Consequently, institutions granting online degrees must begin to develop more consistent practices of career planning and placement services. The Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) states that institutions meeting best practices “recognize that appropriate services must be available for students of electronically offered programs, using the working assumption that these students will not be physically present on campus. With variations for specific situations and programs, these services, which are possibly coordinated, include career counseling and placement” (Student Support section, 4c). Furthermore, the SACS Policy Statement on Distance Education (2000)

explains that accredited institutions will “provide adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support the programs, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and placement and counseling” (p. 2).

Services currently offered. Neither distance education administrators nor career services professionals have come together to agree on best practices of career planning and placement services for online degree-seekers. Before progress can be made, basic service standards (such as those outline by CAS) should be consistently followed across all institutions. As distance education programs, and online degrees in particular, continue to grow, those not offering these services should become persuaded of the need for these services. Using the institutions currently offering services as models, institutions can begin to develop basic services. Once services are more consistently offered, best practices and ideals can be further implemented.

Perceived Needs. Understanding the needs of online degree seekers provides the first step in developing ideal career planning and placement. Much of the relevant literature states that the main reasons that students become distance learners are career-related (Connick, 1999; Schwitzer et al., 2001), yet distance education administrators often assume that their students do not need career planning and placement services because they are already in their chosen fields. The logical inconsistency between these two positions is obvious. While some individuals may indeed be enrolled in their coursework to simply meet job requirements, others may be dissatisfied with their profession and in need of assistance in considering alternative career options.

Many students may also need these services at the beginning of their studies. This differs slightly from the notion that on-campus students most utilize career services just prior to graduation. Distance learners, being career focused, need to know upfront what they can do with

the degree they plan to seek. For example, at Institution C, “Most students who call and are inquiring about one of our degree programs seem to know why they need the degree. You would not believe how many students will call saying, ‘I don’t know if the MBA or MPA is better for me.’ They will say right out, ‘I work in human resources for this county and I want to be assistant city manager.’ It would seem to me that supporting them in getting the career they already know they want is more important than helping them decide what career.”

Distance education support services must employ career services professionals to directly assist students and these issues. Additionally, these professionals can support students throughout their career development by providing job search preparation programs.

Ideal Services. There is not one correct way to deliver career planning and placement services to online degree-seekers. Nevertheless, there are a variety of practices that would offer a complete array of services for this population if combined. Consequently, distance education programs should work to incorporate aspects of the ideal services. Specifically, flexible hours are necessary, given the hectic schedules and lifestyle of many distance students. Further, distance learners are highly motivated, committed to their academics, and active within student services (Schwitzer et al, 2001). Therefore, institutions need a career services professional solely responsible for serving distance students. These students want to know who to contact when issues arise. Finally, resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills and networking, career development, and other services offered by campus based career centers should be available to online degree-seekers.

Obstacles. Overwhelmingly, money is an obstacle preventing distance educators from offering an ideal quality of career planning and placement services. Given the importance of providing these services for students, administrators should seek alternative funding

opportunities whenever possible. Grant writing, re-allocation of fees, and internally raised funds are options to be considered. Additionally, institutions must work to ensure that all services available to their campus-based students are available at a distance. As Bothel (2001) stated, “a student is a student is a student” (p. 2).

Conclusion

Many obstacles exist in the development of career planning and placement services for online learners. Clearly, distance education administrators’ perceptions of the needs of these students do not match what is currently provided. As distance learners continue to increase their presence amongst the college student population, it is necessary that student affairs professionals overcome many of these obstacles to provide at least the bare minimum of necessary career planning and placement services.

Table 1

INSTITUTION	NUMBER OF ONLINE DEGREES OFFERED	GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION
A	2 masters	Southwest
B	6 bachelors 3 masters	Northwest
C	1 bachelors 9 masters	Southwest
D	6 associates 2 bachelors 3 masters	Northeast

*Number of degree programs was obtained from the institution's web site as well as from information gathered during the interview.

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