Students.edu

Shifting to a learner-centered model affects all of higher education, starting with online programs

By Maureen Lane-Maher and Hanna Ashar

n recent years institutions of higher education have adopted many organizational models and practices from business and industry. Critics attack the corporatization of the academy, while supporters acclaim the positive results of effective management. Both sides agree that the context of higher education is changing dramatically. The drivers of this change — technology, shifting demographics, the knowledge explosion, globalization, productivity, and savvy consumers — are moving institutions away from a campus-centric model toward a consumer-centric model of higher education.1 Nowhere is this shift toward the consumer or student more pronounced than in the area of online courses, programs, and degrees. In six years, the volume and variety of online education offered by private and public, large and small colleges and universities have soared.

Much online education literature focuses on instructional or technological dimensions and overlooks the fact that effective management is essential for success. For many institutions, traditional administrative services need to change considerably to accommodate a consumer-centered environment. Yet, few models or guidelines exist to assist administrators, accreditors, and public and private electronic commerce initiatives that we see customer-centered structures and processes. Seybold and Marshak’s Customers.com2 voted a bestseller by The Wall Street Journal and Business Week among others, proposed a customer-centric model that integrates business and information technology functions to attain the goal of “making it easy for the customer to do business” with the enterprise. In the following section, we elaborate on this model and suggest ways to adapt it to the changing environment of higher education.

The Framework: Eight Critical Success Factors

Jack Rokvart at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology popularized the concept of critical success factors: “the limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful competitive advantage; in other words, the areas where things must go right if the effectiveness of the organization is to flourish.” Although an organization may have a small number of critical success factors at any one time, these factors need constant care, attention, and adjustment. Seybold and Marshak studied the best practices of 40 successful private and public electronic commerce initiatives. Although hundreds of factors affect e-business relationships, Seybold and Marshak pulled from the best practices and identified eight critical success factors that, if followed, should ensure a “successful electronic commerce initiative”:1

- Target the right customers
- Own the customer’s total experience
- Offer products that fit customers’ needs
- Ensure face-to-face contact
- Treat the customer as a partner
- Ensure an online delivery system
- Use information to improve delivery
- Use technology to improve delivery

The Student-Centered Model

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The era of the campus-centric model is ending.2 The belief that “the student revolves around the institution” gives way to the idea that “the institution revolves around its students.” To attract and retain students, colleges and universities are incorporating a business approach in their administrative operations. Convenient, streamlined, and flexible online programs are emerging as the new approach. If managed effectively, these programs respond not only to the academic and professional needs of the students, but also to the educational and financial needs of institutions of higher education.

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Streamline business processes that impact the customer
Provide a 360-degree view of the customer
Devote customers help themselves
Help customers do their jobs
Deliver personalized service
Streamline business processes that are bottlenecks
Adapt the eight critical success factors to the higher education environment
The University of Maryland’s world-class online education programs may serve as a basis for program planning or program review. But first, we must isolate them by consider- ing the individual critical success factors in an academic context.

Target the Right Students
The starting point for any online initiative is to identify the end consumer — the student. No institution can meet the needs of all student populations, so it becomes necessary to target one or more groups. Successful e-business strategies start with a targeted set of customers. After “getting it right” with one group, then they expand to additional segments. The same principle applies to educational institutions. The institution needs to identify which groups or segments of students are served most efficiently and effectively served.

Numerous institutions follow a strategy of targeting the right students. For example,

The business education focus of the University of Phoenix led to a phenomenal growth of its online programs in a short time frame.
Prior to expanding to 30-plus online programs, Penn State’s World Campus initially offered courses only in engineering and information systems.
The University of Maryland’s worldwide network of face-to-face classes provided a sound foundation on which to build its Internet offerings. An institution needs to decide which groups make the most sense to target for online programs, then determine the specific products and services wanted by each segment and how they prefer to be served. Consider criteria such as these students: Do they have the technological skills and knowledge to participate in online learning? Can or should students access their online programs to the higher education. Together these critical success factors provide a set of guidelines and questions for administrators.

Critical Success Factors: Guidelines for Online Education Programs
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Streamlining Business Processes
Streamline Business Processes That Impact the Student
In a student-centered model, administrative processes that impact the student are designed from the outside in, or from the student’s perspective. A business process serves more than the institution’s internal needs; it should provide streamlined, easy interactions for the student. As mentioned earlier, Babson College spent several years redesigning their administrative functions that interfaced with students.

As a starting point, an institution should audit the current administrative processes. Which processes — between functions and within functions — can be improved to make it easier for the student to interact or do business with the institution? If necessary, redesign the front-end systems that interface with the students. Anticipate the kinds of queries students will make and ensure the information and services they need is available online.

Questions to Ask:
What functions — from initial inquiry, enrollment, admissions, and advising to financial aid, registration, book ordering, billing, and payment — are designed from the student’s perspective? Are interactions across functions seamless? Can all of these processes be conducted online?

Are there any of these administrative processes that students find to be the most complex, time-consuming, or from the student’s perspective? Is there anything that students find to be the most complex, time-consuming, or from the student’s perspective?

Are the level and quality of service delivered to students by these entities routinely evaluated and held to a standard?

Are information technology priorities based on what has the most impact on students?

Provide a 360-Degree View of the Student Relationship
Most e-businesses know that all customer contacts and transactions should be captured in a customer database and information made accessible to numerous business functions. Customer databases are a key organizational asset. In higher education, as well, appropriate employees need quick and easy access to complete, accurate, and up-to-date information to ensure responsive services and interactions. The most current interactions with students are documented in the students’ central database. This information can be used to build or improve relationships. Ownership of the student’s total experience is a critical decision that senior management needs to clarify.

Questions to Ask:
Can call center staff, enrollment counselors, student and financial aid advisors, financial staff, and academic administrators easily and quickly electronically access current, accurate information about students?

Can students access their records and change information where appropriate?

Are there any outstanding service issues? Are the most current interactions with students documented in the students’ central database?

Let Students Help Themselves
The interactive capabilities provided by technology increase the potential for self-service. Students should be able to obtain information and complete many transactions online. For example, the National Association of College Admissions Counseling reports that 77 percent of colleges offer online applications. These institutions found that the technology of online applications lies in improved communications and support to prospective students. Students encountering problems need assurance that “high touch” complements “high tech” and is available. An important corollary, then, is to provide students with an existing human contact 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Finally, you should ask students if the institutional Web-based services match their expectations.

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(spring 1998), (american
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tions to tailor communications and pro-
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interact with someone 24 hours a day
administrators and staff know
why students select specific online courses and programs?
administrators and staff know
understand the motivations and preferences of individual students so that they can
advise students accordingly?
administrators and staff build rela-
tionships with students? is the informa-
tion about preferences captured in stu-
dent information records and shared across the institution?

deliver personalized service
although it has become a cliche to
advocate “high touch with high tech,”
effectiveness of a personalized experience requires a personal touch. electronic
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questions to ask:
what does the institution do to
ensure a personalized or “high touch” experience for each student?
students queried for further top-
ics or areas of interest for online courses or programs?
students asked to provide feed-
back on each online experience?
while enrolled in an online course or
program, are students solicited for feedback about satisfaction with administrative processes?
are any or all of these contacts coor-
dinated, and do they present a con-
sistent message?
are former students asked if they
would like periodic electronic contact
with information about upcom-
ing offerings or events that might be
of interest to them?
which students can be identified as
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