

# GAME CHANGERS

## EDUCATION and INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Edited by **DIANA G. OBLINGER**

EDUCAUSE

Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies

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ISBN 978-1-933046-00-6

#### FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to thank the many people who made this book possible, particularly Gregory Dobbin for managing the project and Karen Mateer for her research.

—Diana G. Oblinger

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*Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies* is published by EDUCAUSE, with generous support from Ellucian.

Cover and interior design by Michael Brady Design ([michaelbradydesign.com](http://michaelbradydesign.com)).

# Penn State World Campus: Ensuring Success, Not Just Access

Wayne Smutz and Craig D. Weidemann

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY is Pennsylvania's land-grant university, a public research university whose mission is to educate students from Pennsylvania, the nation, and the world. The university provides undergraduate, graduate, professional, and continuing education through both resident instruction and online delivery from its administrative and research hub at the University Park campus and at twenty-three campuses across Pennsylvania, serving more than 94,000 students.

Penn State has a rich legacy in distance learning, dating back to 1892 when courses were delivered through Rural Free Delivery. In 1998, Penn State entered the online learning market with the launch of the [World Campus](#). Today, World Campus serves more than 10,300 students (primarily adult part-time learners), representing nearly 50,000 course enrollments, and delivers over [seventy online degree and certificate programs](#) to students in all fifty states and more than fifty countries worldwide.

Penn State prides itself on being a student-centered institution. Consistent with that goal, the World Campus takes a holistic approach to online learning characterized by a deep commitment to *student success* through rigor, quality, full integration with the academic community, outstanding student services, and a fundamental belief in innovation as a key to success. World Campus is closely integrated with the university's academic and student-support infrastructure and operates under the same policies and procedures as the rest of the university. World Campus is administered by Penn State Outreach, with oversight by a university-wide committee of academic deans and administrators that also oversees resident instruction and online learning. Integral to the World Campus's success are the academic colleges—the academic “home” of both faculty and the curricula. The collaboration between the World Campus

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and academic units is supported by a sophisticated revenue-sharing model that returns discretionary revenue to the colleges and that provides operational and investment funding for the World Campus infrastructure.

The World Campus provides quality administrative services that are flexible, scalable, and innovative. The services stem from an organizational culture focused on service to students, empowerment of staff, and accountability for everyone. Certain services are offered through unique partnerships and out-source agreements with external companies.

Important units in the World Campus, and their tools and services, support a game-changing experience for students.

- **Recruitment and Marketing:**

- The marketing unit, internal to the World Campus, is critical to its success. Data-driven decisions are made about program viability. Sophisticated marketing strategies are employed to assist World Campus in meeting its goals, including increasing brand and program awareness, generating quality leads/prospective students, and promoting conversion of those prospective students into applicants and then into students. One of the critical factors in the success of World Campus has been the expertise of the marketing unit, which has been able to operate with a business mind-set within the academic environment.
- Prospects are provided with an [overview](#) of what World Campus offers for those seeking a quality academic experience.
- An external firm, Inside Track, provides prospective undergraduates with personal coaching from point of contact to the end of the fourth week of their first semester. Inside Track is there to provide support anytime during the critical first few weeks of a student's experience. See how online learning works at <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/how-online-learning-works>.
- Smarter Measures, a purchased software assessment tool, helps incoming students assess their readiness for distance education. Advisors, who have access to assessment results, contact students to address the challenges identified.
- Students are empowered by being provided with the [information](#) they need to successfully begin courses in their new field of study.
- **Instruction and Learning**—World Campus is not simply putting face-to-face learning experiences online. Learning is designed for the online environment. The Learning Design unit uses cognitive-learning theories

and design theory and practice, blending the art and science of instruction to ensure student success. Integral to the mix is the recognition of what makes distance education unique—its focus on learner autonomy, learner control, and flexibility of pace, sequence, and timing. Among the products, services, and approaches available are the following:

- Archived lectures, videos, course tools, and presentations allow access whenever needed. Use of digital-learning objects facilitates learning through visualization, resulting in a more illustrative learning experience. Scalability is achieved by providing access to these digital-learning repositories for multiple students simultaneously.
- [Just-in-time access to expert professional perspectives](#) delivered through compelling video can meet the needs of various learning styles.
- Adaptive testing is a new technology that personalizes the learning process for each student. With Knewton, World Campus is pilot testing new software for helping students with remedial and developmental needs.
- World Campus students have access to Penn State's world-class research library, including digital resources, books, journals, e-journals, newspapers, microforms, databases, movies, music, and more. World Campus offers [online tutorials](#) for students who want to hone their research skills.
- World Campus faculty complete "Early Progress Reports" for all struggling students, which are then provided to the student and advisor. Advisor intervention has resulted in improved retention.
- The [World Campus Faculty Development](#) unit designs systems and services to support a competent and confident World Campus faculty. The world-class online-instruction framework focuses on excellence in online and blended pedagogy, faculty with associated administrative tasks, and competence with the range of related technology. The Faculty Development unit also directs the [Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Education](#) in partnership with the Sloan Consortium.
- **Advising and Student Engagement**—Outstanding advising and exceptional co-curricular [student engagement](#) are hallmarks of World Campus and are critical factors for students in establishing real and enduring connections with Penn State. Advising staff deliver strategic-support resources and strategies—including academic counseling, career

counseling, communications and social media, student organizations and events, technical support, and undergraduate academic advising—to help adult online distance learners achieve their academic goals and build a lifelong connection to Penn State. Specific examples include the following:

- Clubs: World Campus [Psychology Club](#) and the [Blue & White Society](#), the student contingent of the Penn State Alumni Association
- Pi Delta Chi Honors chapter for World Campus students
- Social media groups for World Campus students on [Facebook](#), YouTube, and LinkedIn
- Blogs: [microblog on Twitter](#) and the [Corner of College and Allen](#) blog
- Live web streams of “[Huddle with the Faculty](#),” free lectures featuring Penn State faculty on Saturdays of home football games

## Evidence of Effectiveness

In FY 2010–11, World Campus students' satisfaction with their undergraduate advisors, career counselors, and technical-support specialists averaged more than 95 percent. That same year, World Campus students joined the Penn State Alumni Association at a rate of 53 percent (almost twenty percentage points higher than other campuses), and the World Campus Blue & White Society chapter is already the second-largest chapter behind University Park. Future goals are to exceed current student-performance outcomes, maintain satisfaction and co-curricular engagement rates, increase retention to even higher levels, and enhance the quality of the total learning experience while scaling to increase course enrollments by 140 percent by FY 2020–21.

## Lessons Learned

With fourteen years of experience in delivering online education, World Campus has learned a number of lessons that enable a continued focus on student success and outcome-based learning experiences:

1. Use technology where and how students expect it, where it adds value, where it can offer students options, and where it can extend student services to be available almost 24/7. For example, [technology can be used to make students feel a part of the unique Penn State community](#), even at a distance.

2. Use thoughtful metrics and data to determine which technology is working—and which isn't. Don't assume that it will work as intended for students. Be prepared to stop using what doesn't work.
3. The personal touch is still very important—don't try to use technology for everything. Choose wisely. For example, advisors and the [Help Desk](#) are critical links for students who need a real person to answer a question or troubleshoot a technical issue. Engage students through technology AND the old fashioned way—through human contact.
4. Experiment regularly with new approaches and technologies. For example, World Campus contracted with Inside Track to provide one-on-one coaching to prospects to map out a plan for their education and identify any barriers that would hinder their success, even before they make any long-term commitment.
5. Colleges and universities can no longer do everything themselves. Consider working with businesses that specialize in certain kinds of services, e.g., software development. Be sure to do your homework before partnering with them.
6. Student success doesn't end with the degree—career services should be offered throughout the educational experience and beyond.
7. Online learners have varying familiarity with technology. Providing excellent and timely technological support and resources is critical.
8. Invest in learning design and faculty development. The quality of the engaged learning experience is dependent upon the commitment of faculty and learning designers to exploring innovative ways of teaching and learning.

Finally, be prepared to recognize that whatever decisions are made, they will need to be revisited—probably sooner than later!

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