



BEST PRACTICES

Virtual Student Engagement

April 2020

In the following report, Hanover Research reviews secondary literature and institutional websites to determine best practices and provide innovative examples of non-academic virtual student engagement.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on a review of secondary literature and institution exemplars, Hanover recommends:

OFFER ALL NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SERVICES VIRTUALLY TO MORE WHOLLY SUPPORT STUDENTS DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND AFTERWARD.

Although many institutions have effectively transitioned academic services to a remote environment, there are opportunities to shift non-academic services to virtual offerings. Opportunity areas range from telemental health to online career advising and resources. Specifically, institutions should adapt on-campus engagement in the areas of Health & Wellbeing, Admissions and Advising, Diversity & Inclusion, and Financial Aid to continue to support students in a sustainable way.

USE A SPAN OF TECHNOLOGICAL PLATFORMS, SUCH AS VIDEO CONFERENCING, BLOGS, VIDEO LIBRARIES, MOBILE APPLICATIONS, VIRTUAL EVENTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

An optimal approach to virtual student engagement includes various methods of interaction. Similar to face-to-face engagement, students' virtual engagement preferences and processing types differ greatly. Institutions should offer individualized and group options, as well as a combination of live and on-demand offerings, and ensure the utilization of formal and informal technological platforms.

INVOLVE STAFF IN THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF VIRTUAL STUDENT SERVICES.

Given their intimate knowledge of unique student needs, staff should be involved in conversations about moving services online, as well as the implementation of services. Additionally, institutions should avoid transitioning services to online platforms that eliminate the human element. Students attest that they feel most positive about their educational outlook when speaking with a “a real person”. Therefore, institutions should consider the technological platforms as tools to facilitate staff’s engagement with their students, as opposed to replacements, and collaborate to determine to most effective tools to support students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

Student affairs professionals support a holistic higher education experience that is vital to an institution's student community. According to the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), higher education institutions are facing unprecedented changes, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, that necessitate moving student support services online.

Virtual health and wellbeing services, particularly mental health support, assist students to cope with unfamiliar terrain. To that end, the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (HEMHA) provides practical considerations for offering telemental health services. Furthermore, students may feel a sense of loss due to lack of in-person interaction via campus activities and athletics. Institutions can encourage continued non-academic peer engagement through videoconferencing platforms, blogs, video libraries, mobile applications, virtual events, and social media.

Online services in the admissions and advising space are common among global institutions. The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) provides a rubric for career services and other admissions and advising-related services for online students which can guide institutions' admissions and advising offices in working virtually.

Institutions should have dedicated online support services for a variety of special interest groups. Institutions can largely follow tactics used in telemental health, virtual career advising, online academic and advising services, and others, such as using videoconferencing platforms, blogs, virtual events, and social media to support diversity and inclusion.

Financial aid and education costs are the biggest challenge that online students face. Providing early financial advising in a variety of virtual modes can support students' optimal online experience.



Pennsylvania State University (United States)

The [Student Services and Engagement](#) office is planning a variety of virtual activities, like Coffee and Chat sessions, virtual tours of museums, scavenger hunts, and photo challenges, as well as a social media photo challenge in support of LGBTQIA+ Week.



University of Toronto (Canada)

UTS is offering virtual [Mindful Moments](#) via Zoom, as well as one hour online activities and workshops led by students and staff to help with issues like 'Building Community in a Time of Social Distancing' and 'Self-Care When you are Sick.'



Western Governors University (United States)

WGU's [Career and Professional Development Center](#) provides 1) 24/7 Self Service Tools, like webinars, resume builders, and self-assessments, 2) Job Board of opportunities from WGU students and alumni, and 3) Individual and Email Support.



George Mason University (United States)

GMU has moved its [Mason Student Services Center](#) (MSSC) online as of March 2020. Students who need assistance with financial aid, enrolment, student accounts, and other areas may complete an online form or email the MSSC to set up a virtual conferencing session.

METHODOLOGY

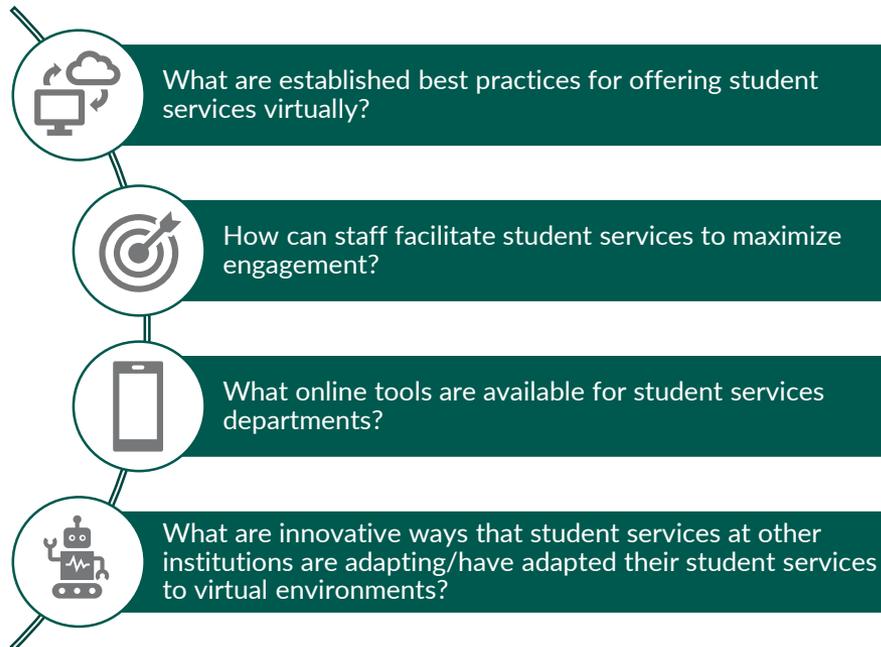
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

The institution seeks to understand best practices and innovative examples of non-academic virtual student engagement. In response to COVID-19, institutions have shifted academics to virtual platforms. Although campuses are adjusting to online course delivery through learning management systems, institutions want to be able to more wholly support their students. As such, they would like to know how best to offer non-academic support services, such as career and financial aid advising, co-curricular activities, counseling and overall interaction for students virtually. Specifically, this report addresses how staff can facilitate these supports to maximize engagement. A main goal is for staff to ensure that they are maintaining relationships with their students during this absence of face-to-face interaction.

In this report, Hanover reviews secondary literature and examines various online student services, with the specific goal of identifying more innovative ways that institutions are adapting/have adapted their student services to virtual environments. This report highlights best practices and unique approaches that other institutions employ, regardless of the timing of when these approaches were implemented. The results of this research will help institutions develop sustainable ways to modify the delivery of student services – not only during the time that campuses are closed but once students return to campuses, as well.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



“Higher education is a dynamic enterprise facing unprecedented change. Within [the current] context, there is a danger of exchanging holistic educational practices for narrowly crafted content outcomes in order to simplify metrics and minimally comply with regulations. Further, student affairs work, which is heavily dependent upon human resources, will remain a target for budget cuts aimed at reducing the cost of education.”

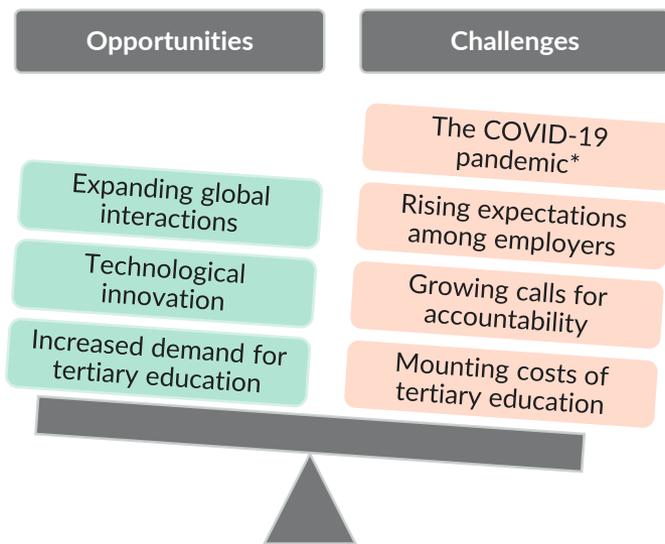
- *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators*, ACPA and NASPA

TRENDS IN ONLINE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

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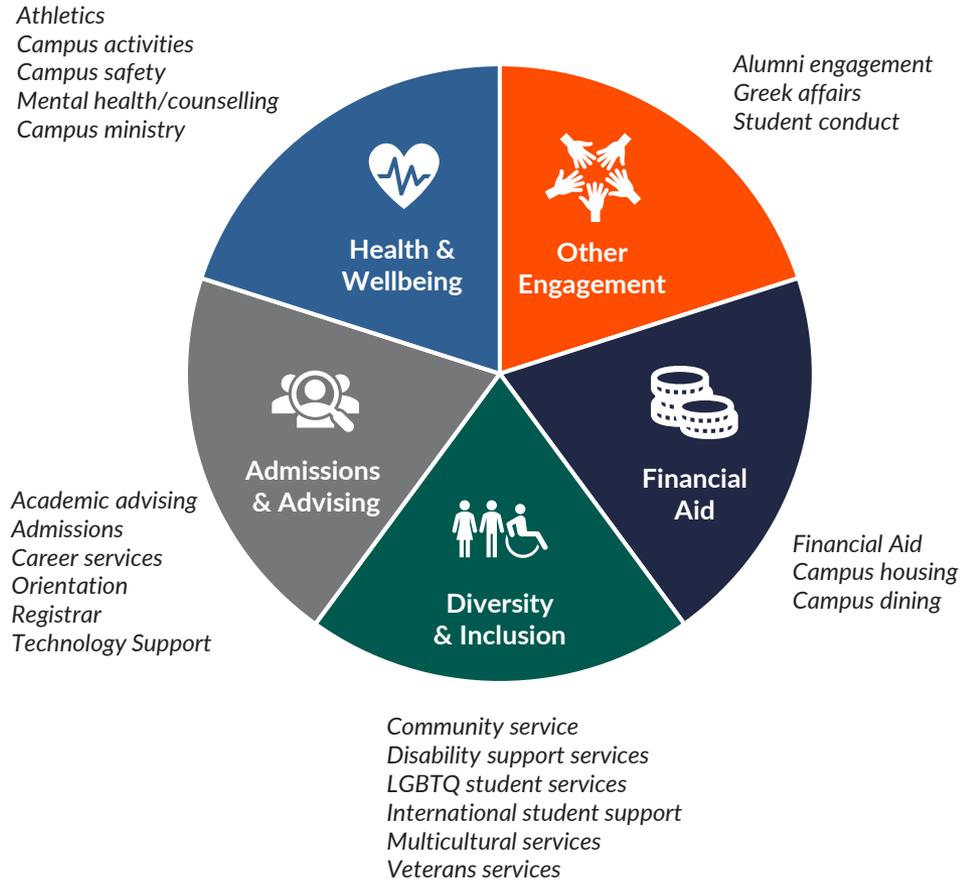
OVERVIEW OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

Student affairs professionals support a holistic higher education experience, from campus safety to student mental health. According to the [Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators](#) from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), higher education institutions are facing unprecedented changes, including but not limited to:



ACPA and NASPA communicate that “within this context, there is a danger of exchanging holistic educational practices for narrowly crafted content outcomes in order to simplify metrics and minimally comply with regulations.” The COVID-19 pandemic also enhances the risk of budget cuts, which may target student affairs professionals and services as programs move online.

FUNCTIONAL AREAS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS



Source: [NASPA](#) (left, right - adapted)

Note: Broad functional areas ascertained via a review of common foci. Italicized represents a sample of functional areas from NASPA’s annual census of Vice President’s of Student Affairs.

*Addition to provide timely context

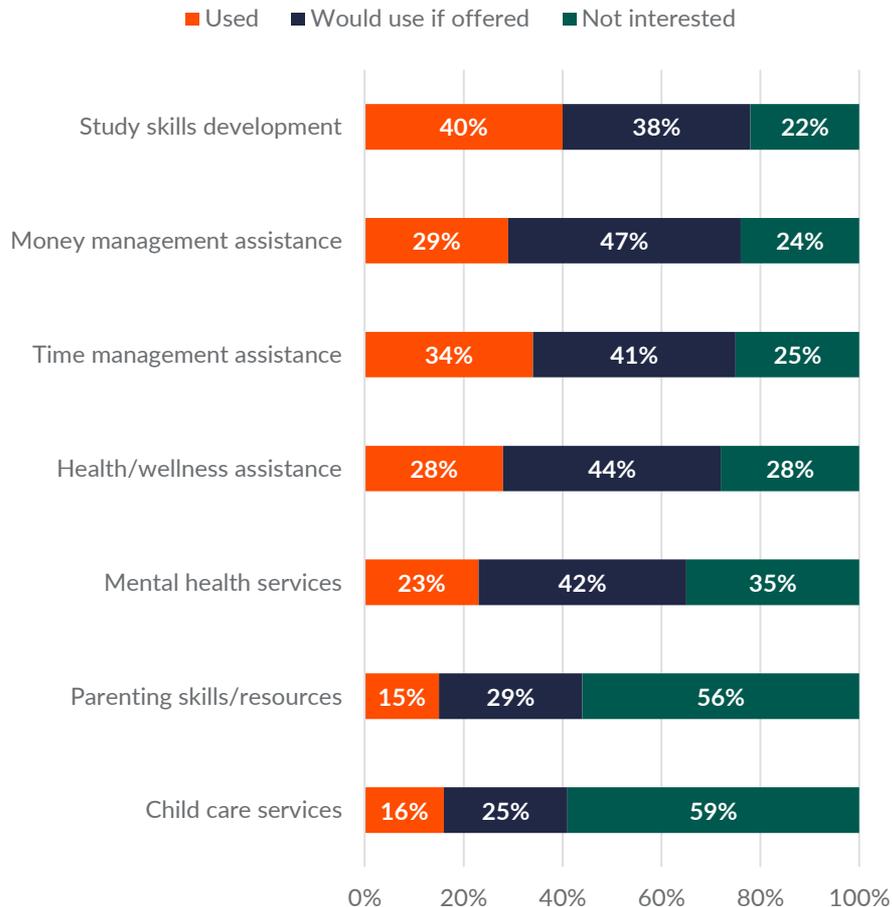
TRENDS IN ONLINE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

ONLINE STUDENT NEEDS AND INTERESTS

The pre-pandemic landscape of online student support services largely reflected a student demographic with potentially competing personal and professional priorities. A joint project of Learning House, Aslanian Market Research, and Wiley Education Services, the [Online College Students](#) report reviews the findings of a 2019 survey of 1,500 prospective, current, and recently graduated fully-online college students. Online learners most often reported using (or would use if available) the following services: study skills development (78 percent of respondents), money management assistance (76 percent), time management assistance (75 percent), and health and wellness assistance (72 percent). These trends generally reflect common online student demographics, with the average student 31.8 years old, employed (77 percent), married/partnered (44 percent), and with children (41 percent).

Current events will impact the formerly traditional online learner and necessitate a shift in the delivery student support services. As more institutions migrate [online](#) and areas in the [United States](#) and [globally](#) issue travel restrictions, the online student demographic will adjust to reflect the broader tertiary landscape. Enrollment projections from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES](#)), for example, assert that most (62.6 percent) of Fall 2020 students will be less than 25 years old. Similarly, data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD](#)) show that approximately half of first-time tertiary students in OECD member countries are younger than 25 years old, with the average age of bachelor's and master's degree programs 21 years.

TOP USED SUPPORT SERVICES AMONG ONLINE STUDENTS



Source: [2019 Online College Students Report](#)

Note: Reflects current and past student responses to “which support services did you use, if offered, by the provider of your online program?” See link for full methodology.



BEST PRACTICES

BEST PRACTICES: HEALTH AND WELLBEING

VIRTUAL STUDENT HEALTH AND WELLBEING SERVICES

Virtual health and wellbeing services, particularly mental health support, assist students to cope with unfamiliar terrain. Generally, students are less connected to the campus community when in a remote learning environment, necessitating psychological support according to [Inside Higher Ed](#). Within the current context, Inside Higher Ed's and Hanover's [survey](#) of 172 university presidents found that 92 percent are "very" or "somewhat" concerned about the mental health of their students during this epidemic. To that end, [the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance](#) (HEMHA), offers the following practical considerations for offering telemental health services (adapted):

Benefits

- Increased access
- Convenience
- Cost savings
- Barrier Removal
- Accommodate privacy concerns
- Increased clinical capacity

Risks

- Confidentiality
- Cybersecurity
- Crisis intervention
- Training and supervision
- Insurance
- HIPAA compliance

With these benefits and risks in mind, HEMHA offers these practical limitations and considerations for online mental health services:

Limitations

- Service disruptions
- Efficacy
- Gaze angles
- Difficulty of assessment
- Lack of infrastructure
- Social justice barriers

Practical Considerations

- Administrative logistics – e.g., insurance, fees, billing
- Location of provider – i.e., what additional security measures must be in place for teleworking clinicians?
- Services provided – e.g., will assessments or comprehensive treatments be offered?
- Hours of operation – e.g., will services be offered outside of the campus' operating hours?
- Staging the office environment – e.g., how should the provider/client sit to assess nonverbal cues?
- Third-party providers – i.e., what are the costs/benefits of various third-party providers and online platforms?

Furthermore, students may feel a sense of loss due to lack of in-person interaction via campus activities and athletics. Also within the vein of student health and wellbeing, losing access to campus-based engagement opportunities can make students disconnected amidst "an avalanche of other losses," states Margaret Price, an English professor and director of disability studies at Ohio State University ([Insider Higher Ed](#)). Institutions can encourage continued non-academic peer engagement through videoconferencing platforms, blogs, video libraries, mobile applications, virtual events, and social media.

Pennsylvania State University (United States)



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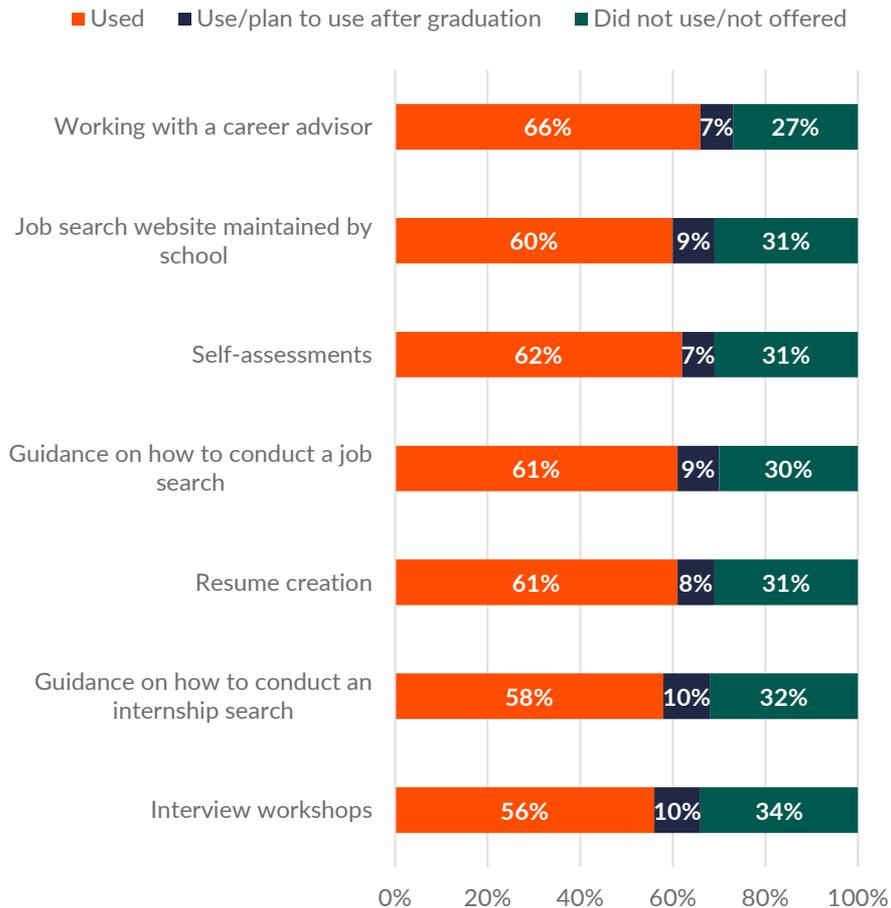
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BEST PRACTICES: ADMISSIONS AND ADVISING

TOP USED CAREER SERVICES AMONG ONLINE STUDENTS



Source: [2019 Online College Students Report](#)

Note: Reflects past student responses to “which career services did you use, if any, during your most recent online program?” Some categories combined.

VIRTUAL ADMISSIONS AND ADVISING SERVICES

Online services in the admissions and advising space are common among global institutions. Shown left, for example, most online students – minority and first-generation students, especially – utilize virtual career services. [The Online Learning Consortium](#) (OLC), “a collaborative community of higher education leaders and innovators, dedicated to advancing quality and leadership in digital education,” provides a rubric for career services and other admissions and advising-related services for online students (shown on the next page).

Western Governors University (United States)



WGU’s [Career and Professional Development Center](#) provides 1) 24/7 Self Service Tools, like webinars, resume builders, and self-assessments, 2) Job Board of opportunities from WGU students and alumni, and 3) Individual and Email Support.

Southern New Hampshire (United States)



SNHU’s [online education services](#) include an Online Writing Center, Tutoring Services, Career Services, Academic Advising, Technical Support, and an Online Accessibility Center.

BEST PRACTICES: ADMISSIONS AND ADVISING

QUALITY SCORECARD FOR ONLINE STUDENT SUPPORT

Services	Performance and Provision Metrics (modified)				
Admissions	Responds to prospective student inquiries during the admission process	Provides virtual campus tours during admissions	Has online applications	Has the capability for online submission of required documents	Provides onboarding service support for online students
Financial Aid	Provides access to a financial advisor/coordinator	Provides access to financial literacy assistance	--	--	--
Pre-enrollment Advising	Provides advising for students to set academic goals	Provides access to transcript evaluation/degree audits	Provides access to enrollment planning	Provides placement testing, if needed	Provides ability to contact the student disability office during the pre-enrollment process, and services are in place before the first classes
Career Counseling	Allows students to explore career assessments during counseling	Provides access to job placement services	Provides access to internship resources and/or services	Provides access to resume writing workshops	Provides access to interview preparation workshops
Orientation	Provides first-year advising for FTIC students	Provides orientation for transfer students	Provides access to course catalog/information during the registration period	Allows students to make payments for courses/applications/ deposit fees	--
Post-Enrollment Services	Offers academic advising to students	Has early-alert notifications and follow-through contact with students	Provides access to counseling (mental and psychological issues)	Offers students access to academic proctoring	Allows students to participate in student/campus organizations
Graduate Student Support	Provides orientation for graduate students.	Provides advising for students to set academic goals for their program	Provides online guidance for students in the development of their thesis and dissertation projects	Makes training available for how to apply for grants.	Creates opportunities to network with other graduate students on research topics
Technology Support	Provides access to help desk support for technical support.	Provides access to information about computer requirements	Provides same access to required software as traditional students.	--	--

Source: [OLC](#); Note: Not all categories shown. See link for additional context and scoring.



BEST PRACTICES: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

VIRTUAL DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION SERVICES

Diversity and inclusion creates a cohesive and successful learning environment. Among the many benefits of moving these services online, diversity and inclusion initiatives lead to better student outcomes and financial gains for institutions. Indeed, findings from the U.S. Department of Education show that student-body diversity has social, academic, and societal benefits across students of all backgrounds.

Institutions should involve a variety of staff and faculty in providing online support services. Controversially, diversity and inclusion work is often performed by underrepresented faculty members – a [study](#) in *Nature: Ecology and Evolution* found that, while most of the 469 faculty respondents engaged in such work, “those who did the most work were significantly more likely to self-identify as nonwhite, nonmale or first-generation college attendee.”, suggesting an additional burden on these individuals. To avoid this trend, institutions can largely follow tactics used in telemental health, virtual career advising, online academic and advising services, and others, such as using videoconferencing platforms, blogs, video libraries, mobile applications, virtual events, and social media to support diversity and inclusion. These approaches allow for a variety of staff and faculty to participate in supporting students. As students are navigating the absence of physical connection found on campus, it is especially important to embrace diversity and promote inclusivity.

Purdue University Global (United States)



A division of the Academic Success Center, the [Center for Disability Services](#) (CDS) provides a list of key resources, such as guidance for requesting accommodation, non-discrimination policies, and contact information for telephone, email, fax, and TTY.



SUPPORTING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT DURING THE CRISIS

In light of COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, many institutions have moved their diversity and inclusion services online. Samples include:

- [University of Alberta's First People's House](#) (Canada)– Staff are available during regular business hours via email, phone, and Google Hangout. Students may also fill out an online form to contact the Student Wellness Worker and dedicated Elders.
- [University of Virginia's Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) (United States) – is combatting discrimination and harassment, especially against the Asian community, by providing a variety of assistance programs, services, and resources via a 'Community Care in Response to COVID-19' webpage. The web page offers translations in Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and English.
- [Berklee College of Music's Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) (United States) – encourages community engagement and provides resources through its social media platforms. The center also continues to “offer consultations, meetings, and direct support for students, faculty, and staff online.”
- [Salisbury University's LGBTQ Virtual Center](#) (United States) – offers a virtual 'safe space' for LGBTQ students via online resources, telemental health services, sexual health and safety support, and complaint reporting. The University encourages continued student engagement overall through apps like Zoom.

BEST PRACTICES: FINANCIAL AID AND OTHER SERVICES



PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE VIRTUAL STUDENT SERVICES

Notable online providers offer sustainable and comprehensive models for virtual student support. Samples include:

- [University of Maryland Global Campus](#) (United States) – e.g., virtual advising and mentorship, student clubs, student council, and technology resources
- [Capella University](#) (United States) – e.g., FinAid counselors, online writing center, 24/7 tech support, and alumni association
- [Arizona State University](#) (United States) – e.g., virtual library, career services, mobile applications, and disability support

In response to the global pandemic, primarily in-person providers have also successfully moved the majority of their student support services online. Samples include:

- [University of Toronto](#) (Canada) – e.g., telehealth, virtual co-curricular events across campuses, and career chats
- [Northern Virginia Community College](#) (United States) – e.g., online connectivity solutions for students who lack it
- [University College Dublin](#) (Ireland) – e.g., Nearly all services, including student advising and chaplaincy services, are now offered via phone and Zoom.

VIRTUAL FINANCIAL AID AND OTHER STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Financial aid and education costs are the biggest challenge that online students face. 'Estimating actual costs (tuition, books, etc.)' and 'applying for financial aid and identifying sufficient funding sources' were the top two biggest challenges online students faced three years running according to [Best College's](#) 2019 Online Education Trends Report, reviewing survey responses from 1,500 online students. Alumni respondents push for earlier financial advising in a variety of modes to ensure that students have an optimal online experience.

Overall, survey respondents reported that finding information about programs and services, especially via speaking to 'a real person', was key to having an positive education outlook.



George Mason University (United States)

GMU has moved its [Mason Student Services Center](#) (MSSC) online as of March 2020. Students who need assistance with financial aid, enrolment, student accounts, and other areas may complete an online form or email the MSSC to set up a virtual conferencing session.



Athabasca University (Canada)

An online provider offers AU an individualized approach to [financial aid](#) advising through tools like fillable self-help and inquiry forms, province-specific student aid resources, access to virtual advising services, and online video resources.

5 STEPS TO BUILDING VIRTUAL SERVICES FOR ONLINE STUDENTS

5 STEPS TO BUILDING VIRTUAL SERVICES FOR ONLINE STUDENTS



1. ALIGN GOALS AND SERVICES

Develop a strategy to ensure alignment of resources, policy, and infrastructure. “Make sure that policies are enabling your strategy and are not a barrier to your strategy,” states Kim Scalzo, Executive Director of Open SUNY. For example, if the goal is to expand online course offerings, either overall or due to stay-at-home orders, the administration must invest in new professional staff or training existing staff to support growing online enrollment.



2. DEVELOP AND TEST SUPPORTS

Utilize for-fee services from online program management partners, like Blackboard, or free virtual applications, like Zoom. “To start... the support delivery platform must be strong enough to provide classes, counseling, academic support, video chat and other services in a user-friendly way.”



3. COMMUNICATE STRATEGICALLY

Ensure that staff are using a variety of modes to communicate what support services are available to students. While older students may prefer email, for example, younger students may be open to text and notifications via social media. Ultimately, it is wise to ask students what their preferences are for communicating.



4. DETERMINE STAFFING

Involve staff in conversations about moving services online. When deciding whether to provide a particular student support offering online, whether to staff that service, whether to utilize a third-party service, and other considerations, involve staff in the discussion as they are most familiar with the students they serve. Staff may be more or less comfortable working outside of regular business hours and with learning new technologies necessary to support students virtually.



5. PRIORITIZE AND ADDRESS STUDENT NEEDS

Meet immediate needs first and expand to other supports as resources allow. Arguably, mental health support and counseling services should be one of the first services institutions move online. Susan Aldridge, past president and advisor for Drexel University Online, actively worked with the University’s counseling center to “to create video-based training for faculty on how to identify someone in crisis and when to refer them for support. The counseling center compiled a list of mental health resources available by phone in every state, since clinicians can only provide counseling to someone physically located in the state where they’re licensed.”

Adapted from [University Business](#)’ “5 Steps to Building Virtual Services for Online Students” by Theresa Sullivan Barger, August 13, 2019.



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