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Improving Online Student Experience

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Improving Online Student Experience

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Background

Whether it is through fully online courses, web enhanced courses, or hybrid courses, nearly all students will participate in online learning during their time with Western Michigan University. Following national trends, online enrollment has grown continuously over the past five years at WMU (see Figure 1). This growth is expected to continue as the University looks to WMU-Online Education to be a driving force for generating new enrollments and retaining existing students.

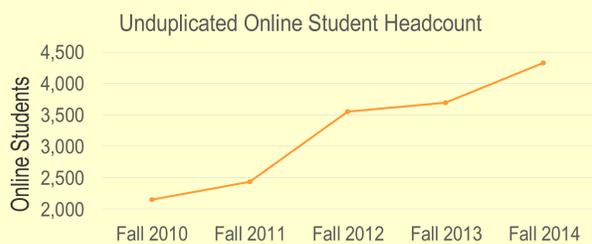**Unduplicated Online Student Headcount**

Figure 1: Chart tracking online student headcount, WMU Office of Institutional Research

Often, services that are available to main campus students are not extended to online student. Administrators and staff must find ways to reach these students with innovative and accessible student support services that are commensurate with the services available to main campus students. Staff must also consider how web presence influences student experience, both positively and negative, and adjust web content and aesthetics accordingly.

Proposal, Objectives, and Outcomes

Proposal – Enhancing the current WMU-Online Education web presence (see Images 1 and 2) by increasing student and instructor support features and revising website content and layout.

Objectives – Three main objectives:
• Update website
• Extend support services for online students
• Strengthen instructor support services

Expected Outcomes – Improving web presence and support services will improve the academic experience of online students while helping WMU attract and retain online learners and stay relevant in an evolving educational landscape.

Image 1: Student support site

Image 2: Faculty support site

Online Student Profile

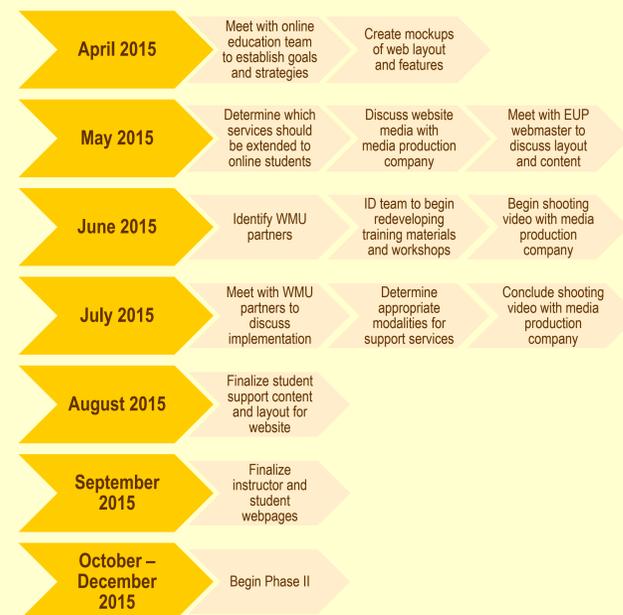Image 3: Economics student completing online coursework

Characteristics of Online Students
• Motivated by career advancement
• Working full-time
• Enrolled part-time
• Twenty six years of age or older
• May have dependents other than spouse
• Non-traditional enrollment patterns

Values of Online Students
• Affordability
• Ease of transfer
• Quick progression to completion
• Informative and attractive website
• Accessible student services

Timeline

April 2015	Meet with online education team to establish goals and strategies	Create mockups of web layout and features	
May 2015	Determine which services should be extended to online students	Discuss website media with media production company	Meet with EUP webmaster to discuss layout and content
June 2015	Identify WMU partners	ID team to begin redeveloping training materials and workshops	Begin shooting video with media production company
July 2015	Meet with WMU partners to discuss implementation	Determine appropriate modalities for support services	Conclude shooting video with media production company
August 2015	Finalize student support content and layout for website		
September 2015	Finalize instructor and student webpages		
October – December 2015	Begin Phase II		

Process

Phase I
- Extend basic support services to online students through partnerships with various WMU student services units
- Redevelop instructor support services (e.g., workshops, training materials, Eteaching Endorsement Program ,and training sessions).
- Update student support site and instructor support site

Phase II
- Create, distribute, and analyze student needs assessment
- Establish retention benchmarks and continuously track retention numbers
- Consider other services that could be delivered online (e.g., veteran and military services, graduate college, academic advising).

Student Services

Tutoring
• The Academic Resource Center uses peer tutors who work in small-group sessions to assist students with understanding assignments, interpreting lectures and text book readings, and studying for quizzes and exams.
• The Bronco Study Zone also offers academic coaching for students looking to improve their study habits.

College Success Seminar
• The Academic Resource Center provide sessions in which students work to develop skills that may contribute to their academic success. Topics include: coping with test anxiety, strengthening basic math skills, studying for success, etc.

Supplemental Instruction
• The Academic Resource Center uses peer leaders to provide support for academically rigorous courses. Students who have previously successfully completed the courses attend classes with students, hold review sessions, and provide guided study.

Writing Support
• The Writing Center provides support to students who are looking for strategies for effective written communication. Consultants work with students to assist with understanding the assignment, brainstorming ideas, and practicing pre-writing strategies.

Career Advising
• Career and Student Employment Services assists students with career exploration, developing professional skills, and job search skills and strategies.

Library
• University Libraries provides services to both main campus and online students. Services provided by the library include: online access to library resources, document delivery services, video streaming, and email, call, text, or live chat options for assistance.

Website Revisions

Student Support Site
• Update graphics and visual components
• Create and include videos of online student testimonials and biographies
• Include interactive sample course and online student orientation

Instructor Support Site
• Update graphics and visual components
• Create and include videos of online instructor testimonials and biographies (see Image 4)
• Include interactive FAQ-style support content

Image 4: Professor Lofton Durham recording testimonial with Rhino Media Productions crew

Recommendations

• Implement a formal student assessment survey to determine effectiveness and usefulness of services. Analyze any gaps that are indicated by surveys to determine which phase II services should be implemented.
• Semi-annual updates of website. Updating website content should be a continuous and collaborative process.

References

Aslanian Market Research & The Learning House (2015). *Online college students: Comprehensive data on demands and preferences.*

Zellner, K. S. & Moore, S. (2011). *Measuring and improving online student retention*. Washington, DC: Education Advisory Board.

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