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Moving Academic Support Services and Resources Online: Lessons Learned

Alyssa Darden
Franklin University, alyssa.darden@franklin.edu

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Educational Technology

As Franklin University shifted to all remote services in mid-March of 2020 due to COVID, our Learning Commons support services of library, academic support, and testing worked quickly to provide equitable services in an online environment. Services pivoted by offering only online tests proctored by ProctorU, moving all tutoring appointments to the online model, and a dedicated focus to of preferring library acquisitions in e-content only format.

Through these changes, we saw service utilization increases during March 2020 – March 2021 (all online) when comparing March 2019 – March 2020 (a mix of in-person and online services). The most substantial year over year increases were focused in core services of tutoring utilization with a 16% increase, research coaching appointments with a 64% increase, as well as ProctorU usage with approximately a 500% increase.

Challenges included acclimating students to online proctoring, keeping up with an increased tutoring demand, and matching budget to resource utilization. Some best practices have emerged from these areas from what we've learned in communication planning, implementing overflow models using third party vendors, and options of mediation and projections.

Lessons Learned

COMMUNICATION PLANS TO SET EXPECTATIONS

Recommended best practices: Consider change management practices, specifying expectations for required technology, and consistent messaging in a variety of avenues to familiarize students with new formats of support.

Change management and communication plans are critical even in the most normal of academic years, and even more so with new formats due to COVID-19. While all previous paper-based tests were replicated in an online environment and proctored online via ProctorU, that meant a sudden 500% increase in students interacting with ProctorU for the first time.

Many students had a preference for in-person tutoring sessions and in-person testing pre-COVID, and had reservations about utilizing online services in the early days of the pandemic. We updated information on the university's COVID informational site. We also tailored a marketing plan to explain and clarify online proctoring that was shared through a student facing blog, banners on the Learning Commons website, and direct emails to students and student facing staff with a video tutorial to help them get comfortable with online proctoring. We also needed to update technology requirements in the academic catalog specifying the type of camera students would need to able to work with online proctoring.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR OVERLOADS AND VENDORS

Recommended best practices: Identify any "high consequence" vendors and think through service alternatives ahead of time. Set up a downtime communications plan that details timing of communication and all parties that need to be alerted. Consider a third-party service integration that may be able to take on any overflow in demand during peaks.

Student service utilization increased exponentially in COVID environment, with a 16% increase of occupied tutoring hours, a 64% increase in research coaching appointments, and over 500% increase in ProctorU utilization when compared to the previous year of data. As students became more familiar with interacting with services online, demand ramped up quickly and outpaced the resources planned. Some of our vendors also experienced stress on their systems due to the demand during the pandemic, occasionally resulting in sporadic downtimes for services such as placement testing. Our team relied on a downtime communications plan we already had in place to effectively communicate with all impacted parties in a timely manner while putting workarounds in place through existing testing platforms**.** To ensure that students are able to get tutoring appointments, we have worked with a third-party vendor to serve waitlisted students or students who need a different time slot than our schedule allows. This has added flexibility to our services in a way that we would not have been able to do on campus.

PREFERENCE OF ELECTRONIC RESOURCES OVER PRINT

Recommended best practices: Prefer content that can be accessed online anywhere in acquisitions policies.

Franklin's students have been accessing library resources from many parts of the country even before COVID, helping to focus policy on serving the largest possible population of our students, regardless of location, through preferring the acquisition of electronic content over print**.** One area where this has been particularly beneficial to students has been through the library e-text program, where selected library eBooks serve as course textbooks at no cost to the student. Students continued easily accessing their course texts with no change in the COVID environment. In the three years we've run this program, we have surpassed over one million dollars in savings to the students through diverted costs of course materials. More information can be found on the Affordable Learning @ Franklin University guide. We also focused more budget and resources on enabling demand-driven acquisition of both eBooks and articles to open up access to online resources beyond our purchased collections. By acquiring more via demand driven acquisition, students are given more relevant resources at the point of the research need.