



# EDUVENTURES

## Learning Collaborative for Higher Education

Online Higher Education

Custom Research Report

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## Online Student Support Services: A Competitive Scan

### Key Questions

In connection with online higher education, which activities/services are positioned by leading for-profit and non-profit universities as “student support”?

How do leading for-profit and non-profit universities compare in terms of specific student support arrangements?

How does the inquiring member’s support services compare with other online universities?

Data Type	Key Sources
Secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sample consortia Web sites</li> <li>• Related Web sites and documentation</li> </ul>

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### Inquiry Overview

The inquiring member sought to better understand the support services that are currently offered to students of high-profile for-profit and non-profit online institutions. The inquiring member was interested in the range of services that are positioned as “student support,” and how leading online institutions compare in terms of specific student support arrangements (e.g., orientation, academic advising, tutoring, financial aid, career services). The inquiring member will use this information to better inform its own online student services offerings.

### Methodology

OHE staff conducted a competitive scan of 14 sample online institution Web sites to collect information about each school’s student support services. The sample contains seven leading for-profit providers of online education and seven leading non-profit providers of online education.

**Custom Research Reports** - *In-depth analysis of issues of concern to individual members.* The OHE program maintains dedicated staff to support members' needs for detailed, quick-turnaround research. Requests may be prompted by issues raised in the OHE program's Collaborative Research investigations, may seek to leverage the collective experience of the OHE membership, or may take the form of small-scale primary research investigations or reviews of secondary literature. Requests are fulfilled on a first-come basis and generally take 10 weeks to complete subsequent to the receipt of an approved proposal. OHE staff work to deliver accurate, reliable data and information in all cases; however, we cannot guarantee the accuracy of data and information from all sources used.

Key steps in this investigation included:

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Define scope and objectives of inquiry, and formulate hypothesis	Identify secondary and/or primary sources to be investigated	Collect data and test research hypothesis	Summarize key findings with reference to supporting evidence	Recommend specific actions and areas for further research, if needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview OHE member regarding objectives</li> <li>• Formulate research hypothesis:</li> </ul> <p><b>Competitive scan of sample schools' support services will inform enhancement of inquiring member's student support</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sample consortia Web sites</li> <li>• Related Web sites and literature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scan available data</li> <li>• Adjust research hypothesis if necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>15 support services were identified</b></li> <li>• <b>Advising, financial aid, and library services were most commonly positioned as support services</b></li> <li>• <b>Within each support service, a wide range exists</b></li> <li>• <b>Limited differences between for-profit and non-profit offerings</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Increase differentiation of programs by clarifying and highlighting support services of member schools</b></li> <li>• <b>Increase suite of standard support services w/ innovative program(s)</b></li> <li>• <b>Further research suggested: exploration of student perceptions of online support services</b></li> </ul>

Schools selected for the sample included:

*For-Profit Institutions:*

- American Intercontinental University Online
- Capella University
- DeVry University Online
- Kaplan University Online

Strayer University Online  
University of Phoenix Online  
Walden University

*Non-Profit Institutions:*

Drexel eLearning<sup>1</sup>  
Indiana State University Online  
Penn State World Campus  
Southern New Hampshire University Online  
St. Leo University  
University of Maryland University College  
University of Massachusetts Online

OHE staff collected information about each school's student support services by evaluating the schools' Web sites and other online information, such as student catalogs. Whenever possible, OHE staff distinguished between marketing rhetoric and what services were actually being offered by schools. The information presented in this report is based on student support services that sample institutions report to offer via their Web sites, rather than what may actually be offered. OHE staff have analyzed this research using the assumption that the student support information that is reported by the sample institutions on their Web sites—their primary marketing tool—is what sample institutions believe to be important to highlight to potential students. Information that is not reported via schools' Web sites has not been included on this report.

## **Findings**

Several sample institutions positioned their student support services prominently as a differentiating factor from other online higher education institutions. For example, Penn State World Campus posted the following on its “Student Services” Web site:

When looking around for an online university that's right for you, look beyond the programs that are offered. Find out what the university can do to help you be a successful distance learner.<sup>2</sup>

Penn State followed this “advisory” with a list of support services that are provided by Penn State World Campus to meet students' learning needs. Penn State was not alone in this rhetoric; several other sample institutions qualified the importance of their student service offerings with similar language. Southern New Hampshire University posts, “Classes are just the beginning. There are also online advising, online library access, an

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<sup>1</sup> Although Drexel eLearning is a for-profit company, it is wholly owned subsidiary of Drexel University, a non-profit institution. For the purpose of this study, Drexel has been categorized as a non-profit.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved Online (8/18/06): <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/StudentServices.shtml>

online bookstore, and more...”<sup>3</sup> prominently under the link to its “Student Services” Web site. Such emphasis on the positioning of student support services warrants further investigation into the current offerings of online higher education institutions.

### *Key Findings*

- OHE staff identified 15 services that fall into the general “student support services” category. These services include:
  - Academic advising
  - Financial aid
  - Library services
  - Online bookstores
  - General support/Q&A service
  - Career services
  - Technical support
  - Disability services
  - Virtual writing labs
  - Online orientations
  - Student newsletters
  - Alumni services
  - Online tutoring
  - Online student organizations
  - Student welfare/health services
  
- The three services that were most commonly positioned as student support services are academic advising, financial aid, and library services.
  
- Within each support service field (as listed above), a wide range of services exist. Although institutions claim to offer a specific support services field such as academic advising or library services, some institutions actually appear to offer only limited services in that respective field, while others have extensive, developed services.
  
- Within this sample, there are very limited differences between for-profit institutions’ reported support service offerings and non-profit institutions’ reported support service offerings. In general, across all fields, there is almost no difference between the number and breadth of support services between the two types of schools. The only exceptions are in the field of library services and technical support services, where there is evidence that non-profit institutions have slightly more extensive offerings.

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved Online (8/18/06): <http://www.snhu.edu/online.asp>

**Figure 1. Frequency of Student Support Services Across Sample Institutions**

Service	Number of For-Profit Institutions Offering Service	Number of Non-Profit Institutions Offering Service	Total Number of Institutions Offering Service
Academic Advising	7	7	14
Financial Aid	7	7	14
Library Services	7	7	14
Online Bookstore	7	7	14
General Support/Q&A Service	7	7	14
Technical Support	6	7	13
Career Services	6	5	11
Disability Services	4	2	6
Online Orientation	3	3	6
Virtual Writing Lab	3	2	5
Student Newsletter	1	3	4
Alumni Services	3	1	4
Online Tutoring	2	1	3
Online Student Organizations	1	1	2
Student Welfare/Health Services	1	1	2

Figure 1 does not discriminate between schools that offer extensive services within each of the above support service areas and schools that have only limited offerings within each area. It is important to note that within each of the above support service areas, a wide range of offerings still exists. Discussion of this range will be included in following sections in this report.

Academic advising, financial aid, library services, online bookstores, and a general support hotline (whether via phone, e-mail, or live chat) were offered by all 14 sample institutions. Three of these services – academic advising, financial aid, and library services – also were the most commonly positioned on institutional Web sites as being “student support services.”: Career services and technical support also were offered frequently by sample institutions. For those sample institutions offering technical support, it was typically positioned as a major “student support service” essential to online programs, with many schools offering phone or live chat 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Disability services were mentioned by almost half of the sample institutions and were positioned as a “student support service” by all of the institutions that reported to offer them. Virtual writing labs and online orientations were offered in five of the 14 sample institutions. Although they were offered by more than one-third of the sample institutions, they were not positioned explicitly as “support services” by all of the

institutions that offered them. The same phenomenon also extends to student newsletters and alumni services, which were offered in four of the 14 sample institutions, but were not always positioned as “student support services.” Online tutoring, student organizations, and student welfare/health services had the lowest frequency, being offered by only a few of the sample institutions; however, these services were always positioned as “support services” by the institutions that offered them.

There were limited overall differences between the amount of support services offered by for-profit institutions and the amount offered by non-profit institutions. One hundred percent of both the non-profit sample institutions and the for-profit sample institutions offered the five most common support services, which included academic advising, financial aid, library services, online bookstores, and a general support hotline. Seventy-one percent of for-profit institutions and 71% of non-profit institutions within the sample offered career services. Within the sample, non-profit institutions were slightly more likely than for-profit institutions to offer technical support; however, for-profit institutions were twice as likely to report offering disability services as non-profit institutions. Three out of seven sample for-profit institutions made online writing labs available to their students (43%), as compared with two out of seven non-profit sample institutions (29%). There were slight differences in the numbers of schools that offer student newsletters and alumni services to their students; non-profit sample institutions were three times as likely to offer distance-learner newsletters to their students, and for-profit sample institutions were three times as likely to offer alumni services. Two for-profit institutions offered online tutoring to their students, as compared with only one non-profit institution. Only one for-profit and one non-profit sample institution offered their students membership in online student organizations. Likewise, only one for-profit and one non-profit sample institution included student welfare/health services in their student support services. Neither for-profit nor non-profit institutions included in this sample consistently outnumbered each other in terms of student support offerings.

**Figure 2. Breadth of Student Support Services Across Sample Institutions, by Support Area (Part 1)**

	Academic Advising	Financial Aid	Library Services	Online Bookstore	General Q&A
American Intercontinental University	●	◐	◑	●	◑
Capella University Online	●	●	◐	●	◑
DeVry University	◑	◐	◑	●	◑
Drexel University Online	●	◑	◑	●	◑
Kaplan University	◑	◐	◑	●	◑
Penn State World Campus	●	●	●	●	◑
Strayer University	◑	◐	◑	●	●
University of Maryland University College	●	●	●	●	◑
University of Phoenix Online	◐	◐	◑	●	◑
Walden University	●	●	◐	●	●
Indiana State University	◐	◐	●	●	◐
St. Leo University	●	◑	●	●	◐
UMass Online	●	◑	◐	●	◑
Southern New Hampshire University	●	◑	◐	●	◑

● Extensive Services

○ No Services Reported

### *Academic Advising*

Academic advising was the service most commonly positioned as “student support.” Although all 14 sample institutions offered some type of academic advising to their students, there were varying degrees of service. In the majority of the sample institutions, students can continuously work with an academic advisor to assist in the course selection and registration process. For schools offering more limited services, students participate in an initial academic advising meeting via telephone or live chat, followed by meetings on an as-needed basis throughout the remainder of the program. DeVry students, for example, may submit questions regarding academic advising through a general Q&A “Student Services” Web site, which addresses a broad variety of topics that fall into the “student support” category. Offering more personalized service, Walden University matches its students with faculty mentors, to “ensure that the coursework is relevant to your [the student’s] personal and professional interests,” in addition to discipline-specific academic advisors to ensure that students receive advice from knowledgeable professionals. Two sample institutions offered combined mediums of service. Students attending St. Leo University or Southern New Hampshire University can access online advising programs that provide registration assistance, in addition to their assigned academic advisor, with whom telephone appointments can be made.

Within this sample, there is a mild trend for non-profit institutions to offer a wider, more specialized variety of academic advising services to their students than their for-profit counterparts. While it was common for non-profit institutions to offer students online tutorials (for example, University of Maryland University College offers tutorials such as “Planning your First Semester”) and online advising programs (eLion at St. Leo, or PenPal at SNHU), it was slightly more common for for-profit institutions to take a more general advising approach. For example, students at Kaplan may chat online or via telephone with general advisors who assist students with a wide range of issues, and students at DeVry may submit a variety of questions to one central student support Web site.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Advising Services**

Service	%
Assigned academic advisor w/ continuous service	50%
General academic advisors	43%
Online advising software program	14%
Faculty mentors/advisors	14%
Online advising tutorials	7%
Initial advising session only, followed by as-needed advising services	7%

### *Financial Aid*

Financial aid was positioned as a “student support service” in the majority of sample institutions. A portion of schools have a defined Office of Financial Aid specifically for their online learning population. Those that do not are usually non-profit institutions whose distance-learners are able to access general financial aid services for both on-campus and online students.

Although all sample institutions were Title IV eligible, financial aid services varied from school to school. Not surprisingly, institutions that cater almost exclusively to online students seem to offer more developed financial aid support specifically geared toward distance learners. These institutions included American Intercontinental University, Capella University, Kaplan University, Penn State World Campus, Strayer University Online, University of Maryland University College, and Walden University. It was common for these schools to make financial aid counselors available to students for one-on-one telephone or live chat appointments (or call-in services), in addition to other services specifically tailored for distance learners. Penn State World Campus posts online tutorials that cover subjects such as how to fill out the FAFSA form and how to apply for financial aid. University of Maryland University College publishes the *UMUC Guide to Financial Aid*, which covers the financial aid process specifically with distance learners’ needs and concerns in mind. DeVry Online offers an interesting option to its distance learners, the “Delayed Deferral Plan,” where students whose employers offer tuition reimbursement do not need to submit payment until two months following course completion.

Several sample institutions do not differentiate services for on-campus and online students (DeVry, Drexel, St. Leo, UMass, SNHU). It is necessary for online students attending these institutions to navigate the financial aid system remotely. Although some information was posted online at the school’s financial aid Web site, it was often tailored toward on-campus students and rarely toward distance learners.

Notable was the prevalence of scholarships available exclusively for distance learners at some institutions. The scholarship structures varied between the non-profit and for-profit institutions in this sample. For-profit sample institutions, including American Intercontinental University, Capella University, and Kaplan University, offer merit-based scholarships to students using a per-course discount, usually \$200-\$300 per course, with a prescribed cap per semester (\$900-\$3,000 per semester). Non-profit sample institutions that offer scholarships have a more traditional structure, typically a set dollar amount renewable on a yearly basis or a one-time grant. At Indiana State University, the Colleges of Business, Nursing, and Technology offer programmatic scholarships for distance learners. The University of Maryland University College hosts the most evolved scholarship program, with more than two dozen scholarships specifically for distance learners, in addition to a number of presidential grants.

**Figure 4. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Financial Aid Services**

Service	%
Financial aid counselors	100%
Distance-learner scholarships	50%
Financial aid tutorials	7%
Deferred tuition program	7%

*Library Services*

Library services were commonly positioned as “student support services,” and many schools attempted to differentiate themselves based on what they reported to be their “extensive online libraries.” Although some of these claims seem to be rhetoric, many of the schools’ library and research services were, in fact, extensive. Unsurprisingly, the research institutions, including Penn State World Campus and Indiana State University, offer some of the most extensive library collections and services. Penn State World Campus has a library & research Web site devoted to distance learning, and includes a variety of library & research tutorials, live online (or telephone) chat with a librarian, several research databases where students can retrieve full-text articles (such as Academic Search Premier and Lexis Nexis), and an online form for students to request print materials via interlibrary loan or mail. University of Maryland University College offers students unlimited access to NetLibrary (an online subscription-based collection of e-books and other resources), which contains more than 7,500 e-books online. Indiana State University’s librarians will fax or e-mail copies of print articles to distance learners if the articles are not already posted in full online. Walden University also boasted an extensive library system; Walden students have full access to Indiana University’s library collection.

**Figure 5. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Library Services**

Service	For-Profit	Non-Profit
Online access to research databases	71%	86%
Reference librarians on staff	57%	86%
Remote check-out for print materials	43%	71%
Research tutorials online	14%	57%
Interlibrary loans available	14%	29%

Within this sample, there was a strong trend for non-profit institutions to offer more specialized and extensive library & research services for their online students, as illustrated in Figure 5. When compared to for-profit institutions, it was more common for non-profit institutions to offer online learners access to research databases; remote check-

out services for print materials; on-staff reference librarians available through live chat, e-mail, or telephone; research tutorials; and interlibrary loan services. When Walden University is not considered, because Walden outsources its library services to Indiana University—a large non-profit research institution, the gap between for-profit and non-profit offerings becomes even more considerable. This trend may be due to the fact that non-profit library systems were already in place and considerably more evolved prior to the implementation of online distance-learning programs.

### *Online Bookstore*

Although the majority of sample institutions positioned online book ordering as a “student support service,” it was rarely positioned prominently. This may be due to the necessity for this service among remote learners or to its commonality within online institutions. All 14 sample institutions offer either some type of online bookstore for distance learners or the ability to order course texts and other materials over the Internet. There are very few differences in how this service is delivered across the sample institutions. American Intercontinental University (AIU) was the single outlier; AIU automatically mails required textbooks and other necessary course materials to registered students prior to the beginning of each semester. The cost of these materials is included in the tuition and fees, so there is no additional expense to students.

### *General Support/Q&A Service*

All sample institutions offered some type of general support hotline or general question and answer service for their online students. Only a few sample institutions positioned this service as a “student support service.” Other schools seemed to regard a general Q&A telephone number as a given, and did not highlight this specifically as student support. The three schools that chose to position general Q&A as student support were Strayer University Online, DeVry Online, and Walden University. Remaining institutions chose not to directly position their general assistance as student support.

**Figure 6. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Q&A Services**

Service	%
Call-in telephone support	100%
Student support Web site (students can submit questions/concerns online)	14%

All sample institutions have telephone numbers for students to contact staff to support their needs or answer general questions. Many sample schools, including the majority of the non-profits (Southern New Hampshire, UMass, St. Leo, Indiana State) have Offices of Online Learning, or the like. Students can contact these offices via phone or e-mail for assistance with any issues, questions, or concerns. Walden University offers a slightly

more specialized service. Each student is assigned a “concierge” who they can contact for assistance with any questions concerning academics, enrollment, or the online learning environment.

In addition to telephone hotlines, two sample institutions host Web sites where students can submit requests for assistance. Strayer University maintains an Online Help Center, where students can create a “ticket” for any needed assistance with technical, administrative, or academic issues. Strayer Student Support staff then address students’ tickets and work to resolve the issues. DeVry hosts a similar “Student Support” Web site where students can post questions referring to any issue.

**Figure 7. Breadth of Student Support Services Across Sample Institutions, by Support Area (Part II)**

	Technical Support	Career Services	Disability Services	Online Orientation	Virtual Writing Lab
American Intercontinental University					
Capella University Online					
DeVry University					
Drexel University Online					
Kaplan University					
Penn State World Campus					
Strayer University					
University of Maryland University College					
University of Phoenix Online					
Walden University					
Indiana State University					
St. Leo University					
UMass Online					
Southern New Hampshire University					

Extensive Services

No Services Reported

### *Technical Support*

All 13 sample institutions that offered technical support characterized this service as a “student support service.” Almost all of these institutions offered some type of telephone tech-support service. American Intercontinental University, Drexel University, Strayer University, University of Phoenix, UMass Online, University of Maryland University College, and Southern New Hampshire University offered call-in/live chat technical support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Other institutions offered tech support call-in/live chat services during limited hours, but frequently late into the evening and seven days a week. Students requiring technical support at DeVry Online can create a ticket on DeVry’s Student Services Web site to request support. DeVry also was the only sample institution to offer a “Computer Lab” online. After logging in, students have access to a variety of computer programs, such as the Microsoft Office Suite, on the remote server.

Several sample universities branched out from the basic call-in technical support service, including Drexel, Penn State World Campus, University of Phoenix, Indiana State University Online, and Southern New Hampshire University. Drexel University offers online how-to tutorials and an extensive Q&A database that students can search online. Drexel also continuously updates its “Download Library,” where students can download resources about how to navigate the online learning environment or troubleshoot software and hardware problems.

**Figure 8. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Technical Support Services**

Service	For-Profit	Non-Profit
Call in/live chat tech support 24/7	43%	57%
Call in/live chat tech support with limited hours	29%	43%
FAQ database	14%	29%
Online tutorials	-	43%

Within this sample, there was a trend for non-profits to offer slightly more extensive technical support services than for-profit institutions. As reported in Figure 8, non-profit institutions more frequently offered 24/7 technical support, technical support with restricted hours, and a searchable database of frequently asked questions. Three non-profit institutions offered online technical support tutorials, and no for-profit institutions offered this particular service. There is a possibility that this trend may be due to a case of marketing differences; this data may, in actuality, reflect a trend for non-profit institutions to more frequently highlight and report their various technical support services. For-profits may be offering comparable services, but they are not reported on their respective Web sites.

### *Career Services*

Eleven of the 14 sample institutions reported offering some type of career services to their online student population. In some schools, career services are closely linked with alumni services. American Intercontinental University, for example, offers alumni networking and workshops, resume reviewing, and a job search journal through its alumni Web site. Similarly, the University of Phoenix offers career-related information exclusively on its alumni Web site. It should be noted that some online institutions, such as the University of Phoenix, require or strongly prefer that admitted students currently hold jobs. Therefore, career services may not be a strong focus or necessity at these institutions because students may already be well-progressed professionally.

University of Maryland University College offers the most evolved career services to online distance learners. Included in UMUC's career services package are online tutorials geared for specific populations such as individuals with disabilities, career changers, returning adults, and high school students. UMUC also publishes the *CareerConnections* newsletter, which includes up-to-date information on workplace trends and other job-search related topics. UMUC holds on-campus job fairs specifically for its online students and maintains the CareerQuest Web site, where distance learners can post their resumes, making them available to potential regional and national employers, and search job postings. Finally, career counselors are available to meet with students via telephone or on campus to work personally with students to discuss resumes, strategies for job searching, interviewing techniques, and other career-related issues. UMUC also was the only sample institution to offer a Cooperative Education program specifically for its online students. Students who apply for the co-op program can complete internships and gain up to 15 credits of coursework, in order to gain field experience prior to graduation.

At sample institutions where online students most likely comprise a small portion of the student population, such as Indiana State University, St. Leo University, and Southern New Hampshire University, career services for online students are rolled into career services for on-campus students. SNHU allows students to post resumes on the career services Web site and search job postings for SNHU graduates. In all three universities, online students are invited to participate in on-campus workshops and job fairs open to all students.

All sample institutions that offer career services to their students positioned career services as "student support services." All institutions reported in marketing rhetoric that career services are available to their students, although the extent of services varied greatly, from simple question and answer, to the wide range of services offered by the University of Maryland University College.

**Figure 9. Percentage of Sample Schools Offering Specific Career Services**

Service	%
Career counselors	50%
Resume writing assistance	29%
Online career tutorials	21%
Job search assistance	21%

*Disability Services*

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, higher education institutions, regardless of whether or not they receive federal or state funds, are required to provide appropriate academic accommodations to ensure that a student with a disability is not discriminated against. Therefore, although only six sample institutions reported to offer disability services on their Web sites, it should be noted that all sample institutions likely offer some type of accommodations for students with disabilities.

The six sample institutions that outlined student support services all positioned disability services as part of their student support services portfolio. Half of these institutions, American Intercontinental University, Capella University Online, and DeVry Online, mentioned that support services were available, and supplied students with contact information for staff who could provide accommodations to meet their needs. The remaining three institutions, Walden University, St. Leo University Online, and UMass Online, have Offices of Disability Services (or the like) with staff who work with students to provide necessary accommodations and support.

Institutions in this sample rarely provided specific examples of accommodations that were available for students with disabilities. This may be due to the mode of learning that online education embraces—in most cases, students move at their own pace, taking as little or as much time as needed to learn course material. Due to the type of flexibility already in place, it may be rare for students to request additional accommodations, and therefore rare for schools to elaborate on available measures or even report that they are offered.

*Online Orientation*

Six sample institutions, including three non-profit institutions and three for-profit institutions, offer online orientations to their students. Four of these institutions, American Intercontinental University, Drexel University, University of Maryland University College, and Strayer University, offer basic online orientation tutorials to introduce students to the online learning environment. Indiana State University offers a streaming video orientation that introduces distance learners to the online classroom, in addition to outlining the student support services that are available and how to access them. Capella University offers the most extensive orientation process, which includes a

series of three interactive tutorials. Students can engage in an introductory “Online Orientation” tutorial, “FirstCourse,” a month-long seminar that sets the stage for the remainder of online learning, and finally “Learner Success Lab,” where students are introduced to policies and support services they may need in order to be successful.

The orientation process was generally not positioned by the sample institutions to be a part of “student support services.” The single institution who did choose to position the online orientation as a student support service was Indiana State University, whose Office of Distance Support Services maintains and posts the streaming online video.

### *Virtual Writing Lab*

Five sample institutions had online writing services available to their students: three for-profit institutions and two non-profit institutions. The two institutions that offer the most extensive writing services are Walden University and University of Maryland University College. Walden University, which specializes in graduate programs for doctoral and master’s degrees, has review services available for students who are writing their dissertations or theses. Students who are writing papers can submit them via e-mail to tutors, then discuss them via telephone to address style, content, citations/references, or any other questions or concerns. In addition to other online resources, Walden offers several step-by-step, interactive writing tutorials, such as “Better Writing in Six Weeks,” or “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Writing a Course Paper but Were Afraid to Ask.” If students need additional writing guidance, they can opt to take a face-to-face writing course with the Director of Writing Services at one of Walden’s required on-campus residences. University of Maryland offers many of the same services, including self-study modules and paper review upon request.

**Figure 10. Breadth of Student Support Services Across Sample Institutions, by Support Area (Part III)**

	Student Newsletter	Alumni Services	Online Tutoring	Online Student Organizations	Student Welfare/Health Services
American Intercontinental University					
Capella University Online					
DeVry University					
Drexel University Online					
Kaplan University					
Penn State World Campus					
Strayer University					
University of Maryland University College					
University of Phoenix Online					
Walden University					
Indiana State University					
St. Leo University					
UMass Online					
Southern New Hampshire University					

Extensive Services      No Services Reported

### *Student Newsletter*

Student newsletters were offered by one for-profit sample institution and three non-profit sample institutions. Two of these institutions, Penn State World Campus and Indiana State University, directly positioned the student newsletters as “student support services.” These institutions’ newsletters, circulated on a monthly or quarterly basis, outlined student services and resources and included financial aid and other important deadlines for students. St. Leo University and Walden University, the two remaining institutions, did not position their newsletters as part of support services. These institutions’ correspondences focused primarily on student profiles and successes, alumni information, and general school news.

### *Alumni Services*

Four sample institutions offered alumni services to their graduated students. This included three for-profit institutions and one non-profit institution. Although only 29% of all sample institutions offer alumni services, these services are strongly positioned as “student support services” within the participating institutions. Several of these institutions attempt to differentiate themselves from their competitors by highlighting the alumni services that are available, however limited or extensive they may be.

University of Maryland University College, the single non-profit institution to offer alumni services, offers the most extensive services and support. UMUC is the only sample institution to boast an organized, cohesive alumni association that holds regular events and workshops. UMUC’s outstanding alumni are recognized with achievement and service awards at dinners or banquets. UMUC posts an electronic yearbook on its alumni Web site, and offers volunteer opportunities to interested graduates. Both discipline-specific and geographic-specific networks have been established by the alumni association to give graduates career development and networking support. Alumni also have full access to career services, both on-campus and online.

The remaining three online institutions that offer alumni services include American Intercontinental University, Capella University, and the University of Phoenix Online. Although these institutions do not offer services as developed as those of University of Maryland University College, they all have Web sites specifically for their alumni. These Web sites typically offer some networking opportunities, in addition to limited or full access to career services and other informational resources.

### *Online Tutoring*

Four sample institutions offer online academic tutoring for their students, usually in the form of live chat conversations. Two of these institutions, Southern New Hampshire University and Strayer University, offer tutoring for specific courses or subject areas, and at set times throughout the week. Interested students can join live chat sessions. Southern New Hampshire University offers online students access to SmartThinking, a supplemental online tutoring program that universities can work with to offer online

students academic support. Through SmartThinking, Southern New Hampshire University's distance students can receive online tutoring for specific courses where help is usually necessary, such as accounting, algebra, statistics, and other math courses. Basic writing and composition tutoring also is available through SmartThinking. American Intercontinental University will provide a tutor in any subject after a student consults with his or her academic advisor.

In these institutions, academic tutoring is positioned as a "student support service." Similarly to alumni services, these institutions often attempt differentiation from their competition by highlighting their available tutoring services for their students. For example, Southern New Hampshire University writes, "Yes, we really can tutor you online. It's just one more way we go the extra mile for you" prominently on its "Online Services" Web page.

#### *Online Student Organizations*

Only two online sample institutions offer membership to distance learners in online student organizations. These institutions include one for-profit institution, Walden University, and one non-profit organization, St. Leo University. Walden University hosts three organizations, Sigma Iota Epsilon, Psi Chi, and Phi Delta Kappa, all of which are professional, honorary, discipline-specific fraternities. Walden University's chapter of Phi Delta Kappa is the only online chapter of the education society in the nation. These three student organizations comprise Walden's online Student Union, which is positioned as a university "student support service."

St. Leo University hosts 21 student-driven online organizations and clubs, ranging from the Catholics of St. Leo group to the Journalism group. Students also can participate in the Board of Advisors for St. Leo's Center for Online Learning. All of St. Leo's student involvement opportunities are accessible through the online student union, iROAR. Students also are able to create new groups or clubs if they have 10 or more people interested in joining. Student organizations are not directly positioned as "student support services" within St. Leo University, but many of the organizations are support-focused and warrant inclusion in the general support category. Examples are the Military Spouse Support group, the Military Appreciation and Support group, the Physical Wellness Club, or the Stepparent Club. In addition, these organizations are included within iROAR, which is positioned as an online support service for distance learners.

#### *Student Welfare/Health Services*

Not surprisingly, health services offerings were extremely limited in the sample online institutions. The only for-profit institution to offer student welfare services was American Intercontinental University, whose Student Affairs Office provides counseling referrals for students. The single non-profit institution offering health services to students was UMass Online. As UMass Online students participate in programs hosted by one of the four UMass campuses, distance learners have access to health services at their respective

school campus. Both of these institutions categorize student health services as part of their “student support service” offerings.

*Comparison of the Inquiring Member’s Support Services With Sample Institutions*

The inquiring member’s online education programs are offered by a variety of schools that are interconnected by one online portal. Student support services are offered one of two ways: centralized on the online portal or offered by the schools themselves. If services are offered directly by the schools rather than the centralized portal, exact services may vary across a field, as schools may offer different variations of support services. In this case, OHE staff utilized generalizations to describe the inquiring member’s overall support services across all schools.

**Figure 11. Comparison of Inquiring Member’s Services with Sample Institutions**

Service	% Sample Institutions that Offer	Does Inquiring Member Offer?
Academic Advising	100%	Yes
Financial Aid	100%	Yes
Library Services	100%	Yes
Online Bookstore	100%	Yes
General Support/Q&A Service	100%	Yes
Technical Support	93%	Yes
Career Services	79%	Yes
Disability Services	43%	Yes
Online Orientation	43%	Varies
Virtual Writing Lab	36%	No
Student Newsletter	29%	No
Alumni Services	29%	Varies
Online Tutoring	21%	Varies
Online Student Organizations	14%	No

The inquiring member offers all five of the most common student support services, which include academic advising, financial aid, library services, an online bookstore, and a general Q&A support service. The inquiring member also offers technical support and career services, which are offered by the majority of the sample institutions. The inquiring member offers disability services, which was reported by less than half of the sample institutions. Some of the inquiring member’s schools offer online orientations, though not all, which is comparable to the 43% of sample institutions that offer them. The inquiring member did not report to offer an online writing lab for online students (though some writing resources may be available on individual school Web sites), nor did

the inquiring member report to offer a newsletter to its distance-learning population. Some of the inquiring member's schools offer alumni services. Tutoring and academic help was available through some of the inquiring member's schools. The inquiring member did not report any online student organizations.

Several of the inquiring member's support services offered by individual schools do not distinguish services for online students from services for on-campus students. These services include academic advising, financial aid, disability services, and career services—some of the most commonly offered support services. This makes it necessary for distance learners attending the inquiring member's institution(s) to navigate the system remotely. This model is more commonly found in non-profit institutions than for-profit institutions, though University of Maryland University College and Penn State World Campus both have a full range of support services tailored exclusively for online learners. Although St. Leo and Southern New Hampshire University roll some of their online advising services into the on-campus services, additional online software also is provided specifically for their distance learners (eLion for St. Leo students, PenPAL for SNHU students).

The inquiring member's library services are in line with sample institutions that have more extensive offerings (comparable to Indiana State, Southern New Hampshire, St. Leo, etc.). The inquiring member offers research database access (offered by 79% of sample institutions), interlibrary loans (offered by 21% of sample institutions), reference librarians (offered by 71% of sample institutions), downloadable handouts, and access to an online e-book collection. The inquiring member did not report to offer remote check-out for print materials (offered by 57% of sample institutions).

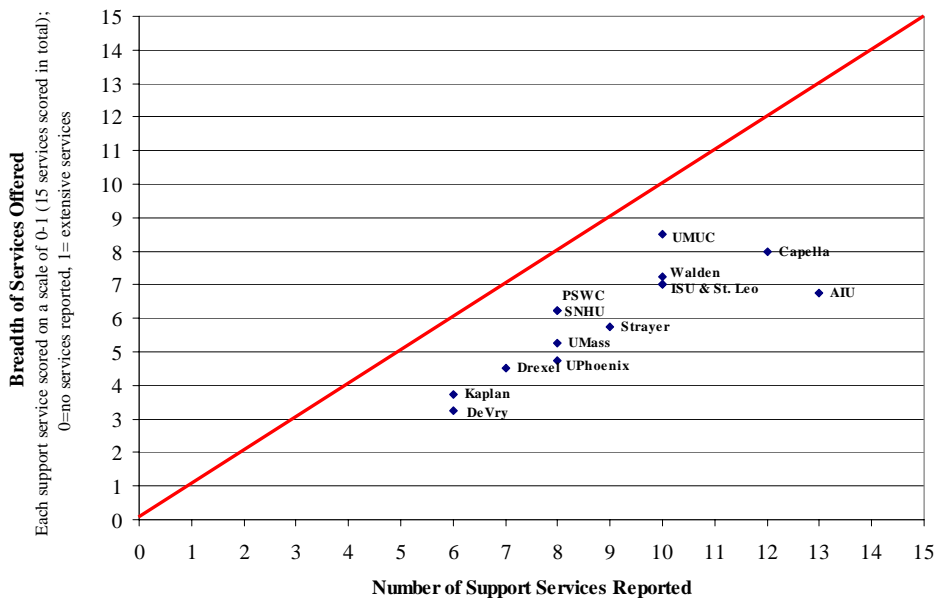
In addition to a general support hotline, the inquiring member also offers a common Online Support Web site, where distance learners can submit general questions covering a wide range of issues, search a database of frequently asked questions, or begin a live chat session with support staff. Only two sample institutions (14%) offered this service, Strayer University and DeVry Online.

Of the most commonly positioned support services (as listed in Figure 1), the inquiring member chose to position academic advising, career services, disability services, financial aid, and library services as “student support services” on its online portal. This is consistent with the positioning of the sample institutions. The inquiring member visibly differentiated itself by elaborating on the available disability services, which is rare for institutions included in this sample. The inquiring member provided additional resources for student with disabilities, a frequently asked questions page, and resources for parents of students with disabilities.

## Analysis & Recommendations

Within this sample, the leading overall provider of student support services (taking into account both number of services provided and breadth of each service) is University of Maryland University College. Although the University of Maryland University College does not offer the greatest number of support services to students, the services it does offer are extensive. Figure 12, below, charts sample schools' support offerings. The red line illustrates the ideal; schools whose data points lie on the red line offer the most extensive level of services in each of their offered student support fields (it is not possible for data points to lie above the red line). If we operate under the assumption that a greater number of student support services are more preferable, then the upper right of the red line represents the ideal target area. University of Maryland University College offers the greatest number of services at the highest extent (i.e., lies closest to the red line). American Intercontinental University (AIU) offers the greatest number of student services, but at the lowest extent (i.e., lies farthest from the red line). Walden University, Indiana State University, and St. Leo University also offer a high number of extensive services, and should also be considered among the leading providers of student support in this sample. Penn State World Campus reported fewer support services, but at a high level of extensiveness.

**Figure 12. Amount & Breadth of Student Support Services Reported by Sample Institutions**



Within this sample, the services most commonly positioned as “student support services” include academic advising, financial aid, library services, technical support, career services, alumni services, and disability services. Although career services, alumni

services, and disability services were not as commonly offered, when they were reported by sample institutions, they were always classified as “student support services.” Writing labs/services and online tutoring were not offered as frequently, but they were positioned as “student support services” in most instances. Student newsletters and online orientations were offered by a few sample institutions, and were rarely positioned as “student support services.” Online student organizations were positioned as “student support” in one of the two institutions that offered them.

Within this sample, OHE staff found no evidence of performance indicators reported in relation to student support services. No services were positioned in terms of quality indicators, for example, response/resolution times for technical issues. However, 50% of sample institutions did commit to providing technical support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The absence of performance indicators leaves substantial room for differentiation for online higher education institutions. This issue also raises the question of rhetoric versus hard evidence; although all schools reported to offer student support services via their main marketing engines, no performance indicators were reported to substantiate claims. OHE staff attempted to bridge this gap by evaluating breadth of services; however, performance indicators may have provided a clearer picture, and certainly more definitive evidence.

OHE staff also noted frequent ambiguity between on-campus and online student services. Several sample schools rolled online student support services into on-campus student support services. Although online students are most likely able to navigate these services remotely, the top student support providers in this sample tended to offer more specialized services exclusively tailored for online students, and were able to differentiate their support services offerings from those that did not have separate services. It is possible that schools that do not have separate services may primarily have student populations located geographically close to the school, thereby reducing the need to create fully online, specialized support. Schools that support wholly online services may attract a student population that is more geographically diverse and remotely located from the school.

One major finding of this research is that, within this sample, there are very few differences between the student support services offered by non-profit institutions and the services offered by for-profit institutions. Overall, non-profit student support services were comparable to for-profit support services; out of the 15 types of student support services examined in this report, only two were found to differ between for-profit and non-profit institutions. There was a slight trend for non-profit institutions to offer more extensive library services and technical support services when compared to for-profit institutions. It is possible that library services differ because many of the for-profit institutions examined in this sample were research-oriented institutions, including UMass, Indiana State University, Drexel, and Penn State. Research institutions tend to have large library and research services available for their students and faculty, and these

services may have easily translated into online library services for remote students, creating a slight bias in this sample.

The findings in this report indicate that in terms of student support services, it may no longer be useful to stratify schools in terms of the for-profit/non-profit demographic. Non-profit online institutions seem to have increased their student support offerings considerably in the past few years, to the current point where there are limited differences between the two types of institutions. It may be more helpful to stratify schools by (1) target student population (primarily regional online students versus students across a large, national geographic area), and (2) focus of institution (research-intensive versus career college versus adult-focused). These two factors seem more likely to influence schools' choices of student support services and how they are structured.

### *Opportunities for Differentiation and Innovation*

Although the inquiring member provides the standard suite of student services (academic advising, financial aid, career services, etc.), there is still scope for further differentiation and/or innovation. The inquiring member has the additional stipulation that it must maintain the careful balance between the centralization of some services within the online portal and the individual schools' autonomy.

OHE staff identified the following areas in which differentiation and innovation are possible for the inquiring member:

- *Online writing resources or tutorials included on the inquiring member's central web portal* – Thirty-six percent of sample institutions positioned online writing support as part of “student support services.” This leaves ample scope for differentiation by the inquiring member. An alternative to creating an online writing center specifically for distance learners may be to post links to online writing centers or resources already in place at member schools.
- *Performance indicators and/or quality assurance measures highlighted* – No sample institution provided performance indicators or quality assurance measures relating to its student support services. There is a large opportunity for the inquiring member to differentiate by highlighting any quality assurance measures in place (i.e., average response time to support requests or technical problems, or number of full-time staff devoted to student support and assistance).
- *Online technical support included on the inquiring member's central web portal, or links to online technical support services at member schools* – Ninety-three percent of sample institutions provided technical support for their online students; however, only a handful of these institutions positioned technical support as “student support services”; in following, there continues to be scope for differentiation in this area. The inquiring institution did not position technical support services as part of “student support services” on its online portal. It may

be possible to include technical support on the centralized web portal, or to provide links to member schools' online technical support.

- *An online study skills Web site linked to or posted within the centralized web portal* – No sample institutions reported any online support relating to the development of study skills, though it is fairly common for on-campus higher education institutions to offer some student assistance in this area. The core population of online higher education tends to be returning adult students who may not have taken courses in years, and a study skills tutorial may be useful to help students refocus or “brush up” on their study and time-management skills prior to taking an online course. There is ample scope for innovation in this area.
- *An e-mail or online newsletter for distance learners outlining available student support systems and other news* – Twenty-nine percent of sample institutions distributed newsletters specifically tailored for their online students. Only one of those institutions, Indiana State University, focused its newsletter on available student support services. There is ample room for differentiation by the inquiring institution. OHE staff recommends that a regular newsletter be distributed to online students outlining student support services and how they can easily be accessed or navigated at particular schools, or via the online portal.
- *An online orientation/tutorial focusing on student support services for the centralized web portal* – Forty-three percent of sample institutions offer an online orientation for distance learners, but only 14% of sample institutions offer an orientation exclusively for student support services, leaving room for differentiation. This may be particularly useful for the inquiring member's student population, as it may be necessary for distance learners to navigate a large number of support systems remotely (academic advising, financial aid, career services, etc.).

## **Suggestions for Additional Research**

OHE staff recommends the following research action steps:

- Exploration of online student attitudes toward the importance of particular student support services and student support services in general to inform the inquiring member's program development.
- Exploration of the perception of students toward availability/unavailability of particular student support services and student support services in general to inform the inquiring member's program development.