Strengthening Our Institution Through Online Student Services

Arkansas State University Three Rivers, a public, two-year institution of higher education, was awarded more than $2.2 million through the Title III Strengthening Institutions Program in 2016 and a supplemental grant in 2018. ASU Three Rivers used the funding to strengthen its distance education courses and online student services. Through careful planning and implementation, we created new educational outreach opportunities for the college. The resources listed in this article can be beneficial to any institution seeking to transition their student services online.

Creating Access
LiveChat
Creating connections between online students and the campus is vital to the success of any online education program. ASU Three Rivers uses LiveChat to facilitate this connection. LiveChat is a tool that allows students and potential students to reach out online in real time to ask questions to a staff member. During our regular business hours, students may chat with representatives from our Office of Distance Education, the library, bookstore, Office of Student Affairs, Office of Financial Aid, and technical support. After hours, their chat requests will be sent as an email to be addressed the next business day.

Student Email
Realizing the need to connect with students to keep them informed about campus events, requirements, and special announcements, we created and encouraged the use of student email accounts. To streamline the amount of campus communications that students receive, the Title III Office of Distance Education partnered with the Office of Student Affairs to ensure that students were not receiving emails with redundant information. To further increase communication with students, the Office of Student Affairs also collected cell phone numbers and student permission to contact them by text message.

New Student Orientation
ASU Three Rivers requires all new and transfer students to attend a new student orientation. Realizing the requirement was not conducive to online students, the Title III Office of Distance Education developed an online orientation modeled after the on-site version. Students receive all information included in the live orientation via Blackboard. After working through the learning modules, students must pass the orientation quiz in Blackboard with a score of 80 percent or better. Students are not limited in the number of times they can take the test.

Blackboard Orientation
ASU Three Rivers also provides students with an orientation to the Learning Management System Blackboard. A large percentage of our student body is nontraditional, and many of these students have little computer training. We addressed this lack of training several ways, including on-campus workshops, online workshops, and by developing an asynchronous course that can be completed in Blackboard. The course, called Student Orientation to Blackboard and Resources, provides simple instructions for submitting assignments online. The course also houses a number of resources and tips for general student success and wellbeing.

Title III staff members also offer hands-on Blackboard training to online students, including a video and simple quick-start slide show that demonstrates how easy Blackboard is to use. We also provide personalized training via Blackboard Collaborate.

Films on Demand
Title III funding has also provided students access to a wide selection of video learning tools through the college's Library/Learning Resource Center. Films on Demand is one such tool. Films on Demand offers more than 31,000 full-length video titles and almost 300,000 segments of educational videos. Feature films are also included in the database.

Library staff members created how-to video tutorials that show students how to get the most out of the Films on Demand database. Faculty members were also provided with how-to tutorials, and introduction to the database, and examples of effective video use for classes. At the end of the 2016-2017 fiscal year, there were only 75 video views. By the end of the 2018-2019 fiscal year, we had reached 1,717 video views.

Retention
Read and Write Gold
Several student support applications are embedded in the Blackboard orientation course. Read and Write Gold is one such resource. Designed as an accessibility program, this program doubles as a powerful literacy tool that addresses many different learning styles with elements like picture dictionaries, word clouds, vocabulary lists, note-taking tools, color blocking, and audio notes.

Tutor.com

The Blackboard orientation course also provides access to free tutoring from Tutor.com. Students have access to the 24/7 tutoring and are automatically authenticated by Blackboard. Students also have the option of receiving online tutoring from campus-based tutors via Blackboard Collaborate.

Success

ASU Three Rivers wraps up its online student services with a combined graduation application and survey through SurveyMonkey. Students benefit from the conveniences of the online combo, and the college benefits from the higher survey response rate.

Conclusion

With less than a year remaining in our Title III grant, the focus of creating and improving access for online students has been met using several key products and creative implementation. Grant funding allowed us to make these services available simultaneously, but enacting one at a time is a feasible option for colleges who face budget restraints and still want to make improvements on their own campus.

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