

Outsourcing 24x7 Computer Support

David Schulte
Director – Technology Services
Marygrove College
8425 W. McNichols
Detroit, MI 48221
313-927-1330
dschulte@marygrove.edu

Abstract

As more and more colleges and continuing education providers are looking to delivery systems consisting of online courses and hybrid courses, the need to provide adequate student and faculty support for these systems increases. These models imply an “anytime, anywhere” delivery and an expectation that there will be someone to call or help when needed. Setting up a online or phone based support system can be expensive and beyond the technological reach of many small educational providers. But outsourcing that support with a pricing model that allows for passing the costs to the student can open the possibility for extending this service to smaller institutions. This paper examines why Marygrove College chose outsourcing this support and their experience with the process.

Introduction

“Why do we persist on running colleges and universities on an 8-5 schedule tailored to those staffing our offices and teaching our classes rather than to those using our services and taking our courses?” (Spanier 2003) It’s a good question and most educational institutions have used it as a basis for wholesale change over the last few years. Most of this change has been centered in the service providers at an institution. More and more institutions are moving registration, advising, payment and financial aid services online, to allow for 24 X 7 access for their students. Who do they notify when something doesn’t go as planned or a student needs help with these services at midnight on a Saturday? Telling them to wait until Monday may not meet their needs.

At the same time, how does a small institution afford to provide support or assistance to meet these changing student needs? Staffing phone lines and writing helpful software may be cost prohibitive to many institutions. The answer may be found in letting others with that expertise help out.

Why do we need 24 x 7 support?

The purpose of this paper is not to convince anyone of the need for this support, but we must understand some of the needs if we are to provide good service. You are probably involved in moving your institution forward by providing Course Management Systems, online registration or other services to your students. These systems come with an expectation of anytime/anywhere availability. This availability also implies support when they have a question or a problem.

The number of non-traditional students and non-traditional methods of delivery are increasing. Nearly half of all college students in the US today are over the age of 25 and this number will be increasing. (Aslanian 2001) Many of these adults will be working and using services provided by the commercial sector. Their expectations will be that the services will be available. The need for ongoing and continuous education and certification of skills will add to the need to provide these services in an anytime/anywhere fashion.

You cannot also just expect these students to know how to use your systems or services. Just because the traditional age students has grown up with technology does not mean they know your college's fee structure or payment options. The online service can also lead to a belief that ANYTHING can be added to the anytime/anywhere equation. You need to communicate and be firm on rules such as add/drop deadlines, payment deadlines and ramifications. Who do they see when they have questions or the litany of excuses?

Exactly who are you serving with the 24 x 7 support?

The obvious answer is that we are supporting students. This is the ultimate need, but we cannot forget that we need to support faculty as well. An EDUCAUSE 2003 survey indicated that the greatest growing need for support in e-learning is for support faculty. Instructors are increasing as likely to access their online courses during non-business hours. Who do they call when they cannot properly format or print an online discussion? On our campus, this was a big selling point for the outsourced support. We could answer some pedagogical questions as well as just handle basic support features. It also was a source of reassurance for faculty that if they needed help in the middle of the night they could get it.

You also may want to consider the type of student you are supporting. At Marygrove we have a large population of non-traditional age students. Many of our students have never used a computer or had very little experience and knowledge of basic computer functions. We also had a large population of our distance learners that were teachers. These students would often be connecting from computer in their schools. This exposed our need for support to a very a large disparity of computers and operating systems.

At Marygrove we have about 800 undergraduate students, mostly commuter students. (about 75 are in our dormitory). We have about 400 on-campus undergraduate students that are hear mainly during the evenings and on Saturday. We also had a distance-learning population of about 3,500 that worked in cohorts in schools using video tapes, workbooks and a mentor. The need for 24 x 7 support became apparent when we decided to have the distance learning group use Blackboard, email and online registration.

You could try and apply some estimating techniques to generate how many calls you would expect. You could then use some Erlang formulas or other queuing techniques to try and determine the number of staff you would need to meet the demands. The overwhelming factor for us was cost. Simply put, it was going to be very difficult to staff a position to answer these calls for all of the hours needed.

At Marygrove, we were about to embark on allowing a large population of distance learning students, access to information online. Prior to this, they did not have access to their records, everything was done via snail mail or telephone. We had a large population that had a very small

window of time to call. The thought of all of these calls and questions converging on us was a little overwhelming.

How can you go about support these needs?

Let's just look at the economics of manning a phone line 24 hours a day seven days a week. Let's leave the volume of calls out of this for the time being. Just assume you have one week off for each semester and an additional week off at Christmas, you would need 48 weeks of support.

48 weeks x 7 days x 24 hours = 8064 hours.

@\$10/hour that is \$80,640/year

@\$12 hour that is \$96,768/year

@\$15 hour that is \$120,960/year

Now this is just for one person taking one phone call at a time. If you add in peak hours and peak times of year, you really cannot handle it with one person. In our case, our 3500 distance learners were teachers. When do teachers call for help or support? At lunchtime and right after school ends! Our phones get swamped. So you need to consider manning for peak hours as well. Support is sporadic, but it is demanding of time and concentration.

Do not be duped by the idea that a person running the support line can also do some other tasks. The very nature of that assumption is that both the student support and the other task are not valued. Using students to help man the help desk lines is an idea. But how is faculty going to feel about being helped by a student? Also be careful of the information that these supporting students would have access. Do you really want students helping other students submit assignments or check grades? This would limit their usefulness.

In addition to manpower, you also need to consider the phone equipment or computer equipment you need to handle call or computer inquires. An ACD (Automated call distribution system) is a must to handle more than one call. A website updating procedures and FAQ's are another need. Finally, a tracking system to manage the calls and get information about the calls is needed.

All of this adds up quickly. Even a bare bones configuration can quickly get into a 6 figure annual investment. Are you really prepared to take on this task yourself? This is where outsourcing or partnering needs to be factored into the equation.

What is it that you are supporting?

The process of identifying our students also helped refine what applications and systems that we would need supported. The place to begin is to look at what you are offering via the website or online. Your course management system, (in our case Blackboard), your online administrative systems, your email system, and any other commonly used campus application should be considered. Remember, its frustrating for a student to call and receive help for an issue with Blackboard but then to get no help for a problem with searching for classes. (This is very much like a waiter saying, sorry, not my table.)

It is important to remember that the vast majority of calls to a support line deal with simply accessing the online service. Statistics range from 60% to 85% of all calls being a password or log-in id related issue. (Note: Do you really want students to help other students reset their

passwords?) Our experience has been about 75% of calls are system access related. For this reason it is important to consider your process and procedures for resetting the passwords. Besides system access issues, here is a list of other items that rose to the top of support needs at our campus.

- Blackboard (or any course management system)
- Email
- MS Word
- Powerpoint
- Registration
- Search for Classes
- Financial Aid awarding and status
- Payment processing
- Tape and Book orders for our distance learners.

Note that some of these categories are quite specific to the ways that our college conducts its business. Specifics in process and procedures such as these are often the reasons that people will not consider allowing outside services to run their support. This should be the beginning point. It is important to consider when trying to establish good 24 x 7 support for students, is that the implied availability is greater than the capacity of many schools to provide.

Economies of Scale

For Marygrove College, the realities of a 24 x 7 support line in assumptions made about what to support. We made the assumption that students would want assistance via phone and online at all times. We also knew that there were many policies and practices that were unique to our institutions method of doing business. Despite the complexities, the economics of trying to build a support center did not make sense.

Initially, while trying to find a vendor to assist us, the idea was just to contract out staff to answer the call. There were very few contractors, ready to staff a call center for technical assistance and they had the same cost limitations that you would have if you did the staffing yourself. A new pricing model was needed, one where “sharing” of staffing resources and overhead were used.

Call Center Model

What was needed was a model that would allow for the cost of the support to be spread over several customers. This model would have pricing based on the number of students or calls taken, rather than on a flat cost. We began to look beyond contract help to actual call center vendors. At the time we were investigating this, there were not a lot of vendors that specialized in higher education support. Course Management System support was only available through the vendor. We worked directly with our vendor, Blackboard, and a newly formed offshoot company called Presidium Learning.

Now days there are several call center vendors that provide course management support. The pricing model is readily adaptable to higher education. It consists of a flat “set-up” fee and then a dollar amount per user. So an example would be a \$5,000 setup fee and then \$20/user for 3500 users. The nice thing about this model is that most of the cost can be passed to the student in the

form of a course fee or technology fee. In the case of Marygrove, we had not charged a tech fee to our distant learning population in the past so it was appropriate that when we offered these new services, that we added a fee.

The flat set-up fee provides many things. One is toll-free telephone number for your students to call. Another is a website. The final decision point for us came down to faculty support. As we mentioned, faculty will also be users of this system. We decided that since Faculty would want support on how to use Blackboard better, that we chose someone with an expertise in Blackboard and then train them on the other applications. With buy in from the faculty, it would be easier to get students to use the system.

Getting the specialized support for your institution.

As previously stated, it did not make sense to get support for Blackboard, but not get support for any of the other on-line services. So we needed to find a vendor willing to work to support our on-line email and other applications. We started our contract with the vendor in July with the intent to start on-line support when classes resumed. We began with FAQ type situations. (See Exhibit 1) But some of the most effective training was actually allowing the vendor's staff to test processes.

A byproduct of training the outside vendor is better consistency and communication of your own internal processes. When you try to teach someone else a process you have learned, you learn the process even better. For example, our case of a student's classes not showing up in Blackboard helped us communicate better. Early in the term it is because the instructor may not have activated their course, or it could have been an issue with registration. We documented ways to handle these instances and verify which was the correct situation. Later in the term we got a rush of calls on why they were not registered. Well, it was because we had un-enrolled students that had not made payment arrangements. We had to add this to our processes.

Communication, Communication, Communication

Any good relationship needs ongoing communication. It is no different with a outsourced support model. We constantly keep our vendor informed of changes to our campus online services. We keep them aware of maintenance schedules and campus events and holidays that may impact the need for support. They also contact us with issues and problems. Early in the term we had difficulty keeping up with the number of connections for the password reset service on the VPN. We had to expand that to allow the vendor to provide good service.

We have monthly meetings where we review the call statistics and look for any trends and handle the periodic "troublesome" call. These meetings allow for good exchanges and build rapport and confidence in each other. We hope to have annual or bi-annual campus visits where we can meet some of the actual support staff and show them our facilities.

Summary

Support of on-line services for an institution comes with an expectation of 24 x 7 availability. Users need on-line and live access to people who can help with their issues. The costs of this support can be prohibitive to small institutions. Outsourcing this support can provide a pricing

model that can be affordable and passed along to the students. When providing outsourcing, it is beneficial to have a well documented and understood set of internal processes. The communication necessary to achieve these well documented processes is very beneficial to all parties.

References

Arabasz, P. and Baker, M.B. "Evolving campus support models for e-learning courses" ECAR survey, March 2003

Aslanian, C.B., "Adult students today", The College Board: New York, 2001)

Spanier, G. B., "Bats, owls, vampires and other creatures of the night", EDUCAUSE Review, Fall 2003

Exhibit 1

ID	Title	Author	Create Date	Published	Folde r	Answer
688	How do I enroll into a Course?	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Students	ANSWER: Students can either enroll online using WebAdvisor (webadvisor.marygrove.edu) or visit the Enrollment Center located on campus in the Liberal Arts Building.
6886	How do I have prior courses removed from my new course list?	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Students	This option is not available to students
7466	My course is not showing up when I login.	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Students	ANSWER:If you are not able to see your course link once you login to Blackboard, this may be due to the course being unavailable. Please check the start date of your course, and keep in mind the course may not be available until that actual date. Your instructor may also choose not to make the course available, please contact your instructor for further information.
7818	Which one of my email addresses is listed in Blackboard?	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Students	ANSWER: Your maygrove email will be used with Blackboard.
8719	How do I delete a Student from my Course-site?	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Faculty	ANSWER: All accounts and courses will be loaded from scripts from the Datatel ERP systems to Blackboard, Active Directory, Web Registration etc. Bb Snapshot tool will be run each evening at ~ midnight. During peak registration times the snapshot application will run more frequently (twice a day). Specific times will be determined.
9209	How do I remove or "unenroll" a user (i.e. Student) from a course?	Lucrisha Banford	7/25/2004	Yes	Black board Faculty	ANSWER: All accounts and courses will be loaded from scripts from the Datatel ERP systems to Blackboard, Active Directory, Web Registration etc. Bb Snapshot tool will be run each evening at ~ midnight. During peak registration times the snapshot application will run more frequently (twice a day). Specific times will be determined.