

Episode 7: Student Services | How Students Can Succeed

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to Get Online from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. Get Online has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

We are in the middle of a three-episode series that explores how to best support online learners through strategic student services. In our previous episode, episode 6, guest host Rachel Ohmes was joined by Tristin Campbell and Casey Smith. They explained how their roles as distance education coordinators intersects with faculty, staff, and students.

All three provided pretty extensive introductions of themselves and their work within Great Plains IDEA, so for this episode I'll give you the CliffsNotes.

Rachel Ohmes is my colleague at Great Plains IDEA where she serves as the campus coordinator for Kansas State University, as well as the leader of all campus coordinators within our alliance.

Tristin Campbell works at Texas Tech University supporting programs in both Great Plains IDEA and Ag IDEA.

Casey Smith works with online students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Iowa State University.

Like Rachel, both Tristin and Casey work as campus coordinators for Great Plains IDEA, which means they support online students with enrolling for and accessing classes, as well as serving as *the* go-to person when students have questions and don't know where to find answers.

In this episode Rachel, Tristin, and Casey are going to talk more specifically about how they support students and provide some tips for students who are taking classes online.

Rachel Ohmes:

So, Tristin, tell me what are a few ways that you help students?

Tristin Campbell:

As you mentioned, I run our Texas Tech University GPIDEA programs so I'm primarily the first point of contact for these students if they're interested in the program, and to kind of navigate them is to understand how exactly you might be a Texas Tech student--"but wait, I'm also taking classes from Oklahoma State or Iowa State, how does that work?"--giving them the knowledge to be successful.

So the first need it to help the students get acclimated to how GPIDEA operates and because it can be challenging for first-time students to really understand the process of having a home university and then separate teaching universities, as well as different learning management systems that they'll be using throughout the semester.

I do like to think of myself as a resource for these students and helping them through this process and also helping them feel connected and a part of something even though they are distance learners.

Even if they're at Texas Tech University you can sometimes get lost in the shuffle taking classes from multiple universities, so having that home base and that connectedness, it has a big impact on having students succeed in this program.

Rachel Ohmes:

I really like how you described yourself as a "home base" because I think, regardless of the institution, really one of the values of having that distance education coordinator is to have almost a one-stop-shop for students because, as you were mentioning, there's a lot of processes that it can be hard to be acclimated with a university or college. Serving as that home base, I think really points to a fantastic way that distance education coordinators are of value to students.

So I think that's a really good thing to talk about now because we hear a lot in online education that we want to emulate the same services that we offer our face-to-face students for our online students and I think that absolutely we should be focusing on making that online student experience as real as possible; but I also think that being an online student, they are a different population than our face-to-face students.

A lot of them are non-traditional and that can mean a lot of things, but when I think of non-traditional, I'm thinking of students who are already working, whether it's their forever career or not they often work full-time jobs, they've got families, they have a lot of things and people who are constantly demanding their attention. So being flexible and customizing the online student experience is really important.

So while we want to give both populations top-notch support there are a few ways that you have to work with online students just a little differently than face-to-face.

So, Casey, how can you speak to that because I know that you mentioned that you have, you call them course surfers where they are perhaps face-to-face students but then they maybe take a few online classes with AG IDEA/Great Plains IDEA, so maybe what are a few ways that you work with online students that are just a little different than what you would do if you were working with the face-to-face population?

Casey Smith:

Yeah, definitely. I think those are some truly merited questions when it comes to how we not necessarily how we treat, but how we equalize the support that we give to an on-campus and online students, and I would say one thing is generally when I am in my office pre-COVID students can stop by the office at any point, on campus students just to drop in, or set up an appointment, or something like that to say hi, online students don't quite have the ease of access there; and especially as we think about non-traditional. A lot of students that I work with, especially in graduate programs, are working full-time so they might not be able to call in or have an extensive email conversation during the working hours so they might be outside hours.

So I try to make myself a little bit available afterward either by having specific phone hours or appointments set up maybe after five or early morning, something like that just arranging the schedule in a way that works best for the students.

So I think it comes in the way that we adapt to the student situation in a way that makes sense for us and for them, creating that constant line of communication is also important because getting timelines out there, oftentimes a student on campus is bombarded by the various dates and deadlines that are occurring throughout a semester. They'll walk past it on a way to class, they'll see it on a bulletin board.

For an online student, they need to be directed to spaces that have a similar function where they can find that information and a lot of that comes in the form of our communications flow, through marketing but it still helps with updates on getting registered. These are dates that if you are planning to drop this the last one you want to do without receiving some sort of penalty, things like that, making sure that we maintain that communication so that it is always in front of them without trying to be obnoxious at the same time.

So not peppering them with updates, but definitely having enough so that they aren't feeling lost in the process at all.

Rachel Ohmes:

Absolutely, you are really talking a lot about not only how online students require just a little bit different communication, but a lot of the advantages to even having a distance education coordinator and you said that it's really important to adapt to the student situation and you touched on a few ways that you did that with perhaps having, I'll call them abnormal office hours, to accommodate students' schedules and even being strategic in the communication that you're giving them.

So definitely, I agree with all of those things that, with online students it's important, as you said, to not bombard them with communication because they'll tend to probably delete those messages or not find them important, but to also make sure that they are getting all of the information that they need so they don't miss any deadlines or miss out on an opportunity.

Can you talk a little bit more about some of those challenges that online learners face that you, as a distance education coordinator, can really assist with.

Tristin Campbell:

Going to online versus going to campus, your education is challenging and if there's a disconnect between your education there can be a large dropout rate for these students because there is no check-in with a distance-learner and those students they can feel like an island, feel like they're doing this alone, so maintaining communication and availability can lighten their stress, and being readily available or a mid-semester check-in can make a big difference for a student, especially those long fall and spring semesters.

So just checking in like, "hey how's your semester, what challenges are you facing?" can really help them feel more connected to a university community.

Being proactive with students is pivotal and since they can't come to campus, getting them excited about the end goal of commencement and getting their diploma and being part of graduation can really keep students on track to complete their goal of graduation.

Rachel Ohmes:

Yes, and I really like what you just said about getting students excited about their goals. I think that really helping students achieve those goals is probably one of my favorite parts about being a distance education coordinator because, as both of you have kind of alluded to throughout our conversation today, there are so many obstacles that students can face which makes it somewhat easy to say "listen, I can't handle any more stress, something's got to go," and we see far too often that students might drop out of their online programs.

So, Casey, what are some things that you really enjoy about your job as a distance education coordinator?

Casey Smith:

I think my main enjoyment comes from just the fact that we are helping destroy that gap for people in higher education, the difficulty that some people have with doing the traditional face-to-face on-campus program and creating opportunities for people who might not otherwise be able to pursue a degree, doing it with universities that are reputable and where they can definitely get a quality program. It sounds so cheesy, so commercialistic but at the same time I know so many students who are so glad to come to Iowa State via online because they wanted to come, but then they weren't able to based on xyz reasons, whether it be family, whether it be work, whether it be service, something, just different things like that.

So I think, especially historically, because I got all my degrees via an online university, it's nice now to give back in a way and to see the challenges that I faced, now I'm able to have some say in the way that those challenges are addressed for students.

I think that the second part for me would be, I really like the investigative style of trying to figure out some of these different problems that are unique to our students and unique to the systems that are in place whether it be the software systems or just policy systems that are in place at different universities and how these students, at ISU there isn't a - how do I say this that's the best way - there isn't a system in place that is purely designated for online students or online-only students. Navigating some of the processes without that system in place is difficult but sometimes there's an enjoyment to that challenge.

I would say those are the two biggest pieces for me, one being kind of intrinsic and one being more geared towards that benefit that we are able to provide to the students.

Rachel Ohmes:

Yes, and I also really appreciate how you said that you were once an online student so you have that understanding and that background about what it really means to be an online student, things that you perhaps struggled with as an online student to really inform your job now, to identify those gaps as a distance education coordinator; which is so important because we always want to do what's best for the student, but it's also good if we can put ourselves in the student's shoes to really understand that.

As much as we try to make things easy, navigating university processes is not always easy or simple. So being able to mitigate that for the students is always extraordinarily helpful.

Now that brings me to our last question, Casey, what advice do you have for online students to succeed within their degree programs?

Casey Smith:

I think aside from a lot of the things that we've talked about already, especially involving that constant communication, being in contact with us and vice versa, I think one of the most important things a student can do is find ways to become involved with their peers.

I think, whether it be like the GPIDEA student council, I believe is an option, a way for them to connect and to have their voice be known, whether there might be an online community involved in the learning management system such as Canvas, D2L, Blackboard, having ways to reach out to other students. This can come down to curriculum, too, for each course, but generally there's ways to create posts, reply to posts in each course that allow a student to really learn a little about their classmates and oftentimes they'll be taking courses with the same people, more or less, throughout

their program and if they get to know them I think it helps online learning, maybe not be as strong as the on-campus experience, but I think there are ways of mitigating that deficiency - if you want to call it that - and that is by having a more proactive approach to engaging your peers.

It can be awkward, I get that, but it's awkward in person too. So I think for students to really get benefit out of some of that networking piece. That is one of the best ways to do, it by interacting with your peers.

Rachel Ohmes:

I absolutely love that you said that, students should also be proactive because we've talked a lot about how, as a distance education coordinator, a lot of our job is really being proactive and eliminating obstacles before they are a problem but also students need to take some of that responsibility as well and be proactive in a lot of ways, especially with what you talked about on that networking component because you're right, we often hear in the online space that it's just not the same because you can't communicate.

When we're thinking about that face-to-face experience, a lot of times those communication opportunities aren't always there either, depending on how an instructor has their course set up. Whereas, mostly in the online space, there's always some kind of discussion board that students can communicate with one another through.

I think that's awesome advice to encourage students to be proactive in everything they do.

Tristin, how about you? What advice do you have for our online learners?

Tristin Campbell:

Well, Rachel, the points that Casey touched on are incredibly great and insightful to have. Sometimes there's that communication - who contacts who for advising - that in the previous podcast hit on.

So being involved with your education is key, and being at the forefront instead of being someone waiting for someone to contact you, and also keep your goals in sight and your reasons for continuing your education in sight.

I'm a distance learner at the moment and staying focused can be hard with all that life offers. You're doing online because you have work, you have kids, you have other responsibilities and sometimes education can be the first thing to go if life gets too much. So being accountable can be hard if you're not having to show up for class every day.

So keep your reasons for wanting to attain your education and wanting to receive a diploma at the forefront when things start to get tough would be some of the advice I would give online learners.

Rachel Ohmes:

That's fantastic advice because you're right, if you don't have your specific goals in mind and why you're pursuing them then investing yourself within anything, whether that's education, or any goal, if you're not clear on those things it's really hard to follow through.

So, you're making a really good point to help students stay accountable, but also when we get a college education no matter the level that that's at, we want to make sure that there's a reason that we're doing it because when that's not clear, first, you can spend a lot of money on college but secondly, not having that end goal impacts a lot of things about your education. Maybe you aren't selecting courses that would align best with your interests and you aren't investing as much as you should be in terms of reading the materials and really giving it your all in your assignments.

So I love that advice to really keep those goals in mind, but to also remember why you're pursuing them. What's your endgame? Both of you gave some awesome advice for our online listeners.

Tristin and Casey, I just want to thank you again for joining us on today's episode of Get Online. We've talked about a lot today and we've really taken a closer look at how a distance education coordinator can be a huge asset for faculty, staff, and students and we've also really talked about how students can be successful within the online space.

So, once again, thank you both so much for joining us today.

Kathryn Harth:

That's it for this week's show. A special thanks to our guest host, Rachel Ohmes, and campus coordinators Tristin Campbell and Casey Smith.

Listen next week to hear about how a dynamic duo is creating an innovative approach to supporting online students.

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I'm your host Kathryn Harth, and until next time, Get Online!