

Strategies for Meeting the Individual Needs and Learning Styles of Online Learners

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Abstract

The majority of online learners are working professionals with many domestic responsibilities. Their needs differ from traditional students of a brick-and-mortar classroom. They need to be effectively supported before the start of the program, during the course of their program, and also after its successful completion. Their needs may range from informational and administrative support, academic support, social networking, technical assistance, and career counseling.

In this qualitative research study with a phenomenological research design, nine online faculty members, 15 staff members, and 25 virtual students of five universities and colleges in the USA were interviewed on phone/Skype to seek their views about effective strategies for online learners. The findings include various strategies before the start of an online educational program, strategies during the course of the program, and after the program.

The main strategies before the start of an online program, it was found, included accurate assessment of readiness for online learning, pre-course survey, familiarization with program expectations, online orientation, matching educational program with career interests of the students, and loan assistance.

During the course of the program, various types of strategies include Skype/phone meetings with online students during week 1, effective time management and goal setting by learners, foundation courses, higher priority to learning than teaching, study skills support, avoiding plagiarism, detailed and demonstrative feedback, 24x7 technical assistance, adapting to preferred learning styles of virtual students.

After the end of the program, it emerged that virtual students should be encouraged to participate in convocation, become members of alumni association, seek their regular attendance at social mixer, and motivate them to share their experiences candidly in the end-of-the course survey.

Introduction

The online students have different needs than traditional learners of brick-and-mortar classrooms. The virtual classroom students, generally adult learners, are employed in various vocations. They have three main responsibilities: supporting a family, engaged in a full-time job, and pursuit of their academic goals. Thus, their daily schedule remains very tight. Hughes (2004) believes that online learners need to be supported in terms of choice of the right educational program per their background and career aspirations, familiarization with the students' portal in order to familiarize them with functionalities of various online tabs, and academic resources, admission requirements, students' federal loan assistance, 24 x 7 technical support by the help desk for continuous access to the virtual classroom and learning resources, academic support by the academic adviser, support for improvement of writing and quantitative skills, online library support, and support for learning APA rules.

Problem Statement

With the availability of technology (e.g. WebCT, eCollege, Black Board, Angel Learning, Learning Management System etc.) for online teaching, the new delivery mode facilitates learners from all over the world to seek quality education while pursuing their careers. However, an online learner needs to be a self-starter, technology savvy, an effective time manager, communicator, and a researcher. In order to meet educational aspirations of virtual students, an online teaching institution should ensure availability of 24x7 technical support for students, instructors, and staff. In addition, queries of virtual students need to be answered in real time; both instructors need to overcome monotony of online communication; instructors need to be knowledgeable, committed to students and course objectives, polite and motivating; student services and advising need to remain connected with students for materializing their loans, availability of online library resources, and guiding students to avoid pitfalls of plagiarism. These challenges of a virtual classroom can be overcome stakeholders by developing an intimate understanding of online learning environment.

Purpose Statement

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, the researcher examined various strategies for meeting individual needs and learning styles of online learners. The investigator interviewed nine virtual professors, 15 staff, and 25 students of five different U.S. universities. Participants were selected through a random process from LinkedIn professional network to learn their views. The questionnaire was designed after studying documents from peer-reviewed journals, and literature. Being a virtual faculty at Northcentral University with a work load of 60 Ph D students and chair/subject matter expert (SME) of 12 dissertation committees, the researcher dovetailed his professional experiences of a virtual classroom at Saint Leo University, University of Phoenix, and Assumption College.

Research Questions

The qualitative study pertains to the following three open –ended questions:-

Question No. 1. What are the virtual students' needs before the start of a program? How can they be effectively assisted by the institution's staff and faculty?

Question No. 2. What are the virtual students' needs during a program? How can they be effectively assisted by the institution's staff and faculty?

Question No. 3. What are the virtual students' needs after the successful completion of a program? How can they be effectively assisted by the institution's staff and faculty?

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to discover the perceptions of respondents about strategies for meeting the individual needs and learning styles of online learners. Participants, on line faculty, students, and staff were selected through a random process through LinkedIn professional network. A transcendental form of phenomenology was used to gather data (Cane, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted face to face, by means of Skype, or on the telephone. A 30 to 45 minute interview was conducted. Questions were asked about online learning strategies before the start of the program, during the course of the program, and on termination of the program. A five step process suggested by Moustakas (1994) was used for data analysis and interpretation. The five steps include: 1) organization and preparation for each interview, 2) generate a list of noteworthy statements based on participant's shared experiences, 3) a coding process including generating description of setting and categories, 5) interpret, find meaning, and summarize findings based on the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The coding process will be

facilitated by using NVivo 7 software (Nvivo qualitative data analysis software, 2006). This software program stores data, provides coding categories, and assists with data management.

Significance of the Study

Past studies have shown an increase in online classes and enrollment, however, bias exists in academic and public opinions that could potentially lead to a lack of gainful employment. Due to bulk of college students, being full time working professionals, online education is convenient for both students and faculty. The quality of online education is considered as good, if not superior, to traditional face-to-face teaching methods. It is due to rigorous accreditation standards of Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and other programmatic accreditation bodies like Accreditation Council of Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) for business programs etc. However, due to monotonous nature of online programs, instructors, staff, and students need to be self-starters in order to achieve course and program objectives. The participating students and online professors need to be technology savvy, manage their goals and time effectively, and collaborate in an effective manner to take advantage of cooperative learning.

With the increasing market share of online higher education, this study is immensely helpful for students, staff, and faculty. Recent financial aid and recruiting regulations should be a stimulus for more research. In conclusion further research is needed to see if improvements to online education in regards to social networks could be developed to increase perception and teaching methods that would enhance the learning process, perception and future employment opportunities.

In the United States, enrollments in online courses have far outpaced those in classroom courses. Allen & Seaman (2010) contended that between the years 2002 and 2009, the annual compound rate of growth for online courses was 19% compared to 2% for campus based courses. In the United States, the proportion of fully online programs in business was at 33% in 2008. A survey of AACSB accredited schools in 2005 reported that 53% offered distance or online courses and was up from 39% in 1999. Seaman (2011) indicated that in 2010, there was a second straight substantial increase: 70% for any online course or program. In conclusion, online programs offer convenience for the learner, and an opportunity for instructors to broaden their classroom and make learning more meaningful. Thus, knowing the strategies for meeting online learners' needs and learning style are essential.

Definitions

Higher education. For this study, higher education will be defined as postsecondary school education, including coursework taken through a college, university, or trade school, but not including high school classes (Wildavsky, 2012).

Online education. It refers to delivery of lessons to virtual students through learning management system (LMS) tools like WebCT, Black Board, Angel Learning, eCollege etc. Students respond to assignments and communicate with their instructors and staff in an asynchronous environment. It facilitates full time employed adult learners including Armed Forces personnel to seek higher education and training in a self-paced, self-directed, and convenient manner through their internet accessible computer from any part of the world and at any time.

Plagiarism. An intentional or unintentional act of claiming of a scholarly article falsely, which in fact, has been authored by some other writer. It amounts to academic dishonesty and is in contravention of intellectual property rights.

Online library. A web-based storehouse of electronic books, scholarly articles, and research databases like EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Gale AcademicOneFile, Science Direct etc. It is a very important resource center of

an online educational institution which is widely used by both students and faculty members for achievement of academic goals of an academic program.

Team assignments. Adult learners of an educational program collaborate with each other in group. The team members brain storm together to find solution to assigned problems in conformity with andragogical model of learning and social networking. Through mutual exchange of academic and professional views; students progress harmoniously towards achievement of course objectives.

Learning management system. It is a generic term used for online education tools e.g. WebCT, Black Board, Angel Learning, e-College. It helps both students and faculty members to communicate on various assignments. It houses various resources: online library, writing center, course room, research databases etc.

Service desk assistance. It refers to LMS related, round the clock help by IT personnel, on duty to resolve any accessibility issues that students, staff, and faculty members may confront during achievement of course or program objectives.

Online new students' orientation. It denotes the new students' web based familiarization tour of the program objectives, fee structure, courses sequence, various online resources. They get an opportunity to seek answers to their queries before enrolling into the program.

Social networking of virtual students. The process of socialization of virtual students on various networking websites like face book, tweet etc. It facilitates students, staff, and faculty members about whereabouts of alumni, their professional development and contributions to society, and scheduling of events like convocation and social mixer.

Research Methods and Design

A phenomenological qualitative methodology will be used for this study. Phenomenology is the foundation of all qualitative research because the approach focuses on the experiences of the participants (Trae, 2012). Phenomenology uses analysis and interpretation of participants' experiences to capture the essence of the phenomenon, that is, the makeup of the construct of the study (Dahlberg, 2006; Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007). The phenomenological method was appropriate for this study because respondents i.e. students, educators, and staff with significant online experiences were given the opportunity to discuss and describe personal experiences related to the subject matter of strategies for meeting the individual needs and learning styles of online learners. This design facilitates the gathering of information from each participant's unique point of view (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The research questions require participants to reflect on their educational journey and analyze their beliefs and experiences of online education. Qualitative research is the best method to provide explanation of complex constructs, encourage participants to expand their responses, and provide depth and detail to support and explain data analysis (Arora & Stoner, 2009). Qualitative research also allows individuals to provide insight into how they think and feel about a topic or construct (Callan, 2008). Open-ended questions are an option in qualitative research and this provides participants the opportunity to add areas that might not have been considered by the researcher (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, Slate, Stark, & Sharma, 2012).

Qualitative analysis was used to identify patterns, discover commonality of thought among the participants, with the goal to find themes and categories of learning opportunities which help students develop transformational leadership behaviors. The phenomenological methodology uses the data gathered from the participants to understand the factors identified by the perception of multiple participants to fill the missing gap (Moustakas, 1994; Pallud & Monod, 2010). Because this study delves into the higher educational experiences of responses, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate way to understand how these leaders believe experiences in higher education. Each activity, assignment, or experience identified as influencing behaviors by a participant, who was interviewed, was documented. After the interview was

completed, each of the activities, assignments, and experiences was assigned to one or more keywords. A preexisting list of categories or classification was not used. Analysis of the responses created a list of keywords. These keywords were placed in a spreadsheet in detail and summary form to identify patterns and commonality in the perceptions of the participants.

Preview

In this paper, the researcher highlights the strategies for meeting learners' needs and learning styles in three parts as it is shown below:-

Part 1: Meeting the learners' needs before the start of the programs and/or course

Part 2: Assistance during the course of the program

Part 3: After successful completion of the program

Part 1: Meeting the Learners' Needs before the Start of the Program and/or Course

Before the start of course, a student's readiness for the program needs to be ascertained. The readiness refers to verification of academic qualification, financial need, language and quantitative skills assessment, and psychological preparation to withstand the rigors of the program.

Assess a Learner's Readiness for Online Learning

The self-assessment based counseling in the form of pre-course survey is a good tool to know a student's readiness from academic, financial, professional, and family perspectives. For objective assessment, it is essential that a prospective student is walked through an online orientation tutorial about the university's expectations from a student and also what a student can expect in terms of resources availability. The short sample of experiences of students may be helpful to a new student for knowing his/her readiness (Athabasca University, 2004).

Pre-course Survey

This helps to understand the students' knowledge and experience in the content area, professional and academic experience, their level of confidence in active self-learning skills, previous professional or academic experience related to the course they are taking, their accurate identification of self-learning objectives, comfort levels in using the online library resources with special reference to various research databases, word processing skills which are required for writing effective research papers, group discussion skills e.g. discussion forum, chat, and electronic conference etc., capability and confidence in using computer in order to become an effective online learner at the institution of higher learning (Northcentral University, 2013).

Program and Course Expectations

Learners need to know what to expect from the University and what the institution expects from them. They should acquaint themselves with the university catalog for browsing the details of the program and syllabus for each course.

Comprehensive Orientation Training

An online student should be encouraged to attend a web-based teleconference at a pre-determined and convenient time. Such an orientation greatly contributes towards success of students in the program (Northcentral University, 2013).

Matching Educational Programs with Career Interests of the Students

The career clusters should be examined in the light of various academic qualifications for various professions. The transcripts of a prospective student need to be evaluated to identify the best educational program which should match the career interests of the student. Also, a student's current profession, on many occasions, serves as the best guide for choosing a matching educational program. Example, a current

project manager, in a business enterprise, may choose a MBA program with concentration in project management, as program of his/her study in a university (Athabasca University, 2003).

Informational and Administrative Support

Admission and academic staff should be available to respond to prospective students' queries relating to admission requirements, financial aid, course work, and any other query of miscellaneous nature. The availability of chat tool is very helpful in this regard.

Course Registration

Online experienced students of an institution should be encouraged to register themselves so that they feel more confident about the start date and their psychological readiness to start a course.

The new students may need assistance of an admission counselor for initial enrollment into the program.

Federal Students' Loans

A prospective student should be provided complete information about financial aid. Their application should be processed promptly so that they start early for their selected academic program.

Students' Portal and Service Desk Assistance

An academic adviser should assist new students to walk through the portal and familiarize with various tabs: course-room, writing center, dissertation center, library, university documents and so on. This helps in early acculturation of students with the program. Similarly, all important phone numbers and email addresses of university officials should be mentioned on the web page of a student so that they can easily seek the required assistance.

Well Designed Course Materials and Strong Academic and Tutorial Support

The high quality of the academic programs is essential for meeting both regional and program accreditation. Both audio and video tutorials need to be included for better comprehension of lessons by students with various learning styles. A carefully designed and rigorous curriculum helps a student to meet both program and course objectives. There should be 24x7 tutoring support available to students in the field of writing assistance, dissertation, research methods, mathematics, statistical analysis, finance, and accounting.

Proficiency in University Level Mathematics and Languages of Instruction

Mathematics may be a great stressor. Online tutoring support by SmartThinking may alleviate fears of students. Similarly, the Writing Center can help students in honing their writing skills.

Special Requirements of International Students

Overseas students should be encouraged to become member of online international students' societies e.g. Asian American Students Society, African Students Society, and Latin American Students society. It helps them to communicate comfortably, socialize, and learn about the program and the institution.

Aspects of Individual Culture Influencing Learning

Some learners require more support than others. The students from India and China enjoy greater proficiency in the field mathematics and IT due to greater emphasis in curriculum in those countries. Such proficient students could be identified and utilized for tutoring as graduate teaching assistants (TAs). Similarly, American students can help overseas students in rejuvenating their reading, writing, and research skills.

Reasonable Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990 requires that students with disabilities should be provided reasonable accommodation in terms of extended timelines for completion of assignments, tutoring assistance, accessibility support, and technological assistance.

Part 2: Strategies during the Program/Course**The Week 1 and Subsequent Meetings between the Mentor and Online Students**

During week 1 of each course, an online instructor should communicate with students either on phone or through Skype to review the course expectations and answer any queries that an online student may have. Such a personalized communication is essential to overcome the monotony of web-based learning. In addition, an online student should be encouraged to communicate on phone and Skype to seek clarification of various academic issues (Peterson & Palmer, 2011).

Effective Time Management and Goal Setting

Time management and goals accomplishment are two essential elements for achieving success in an online program. Students could be tasked to complete online workshops in these fields so that they are better prepared to complete the program successfully.

Foundation Courses

Sebastianelli and Tamini (2011) contend that in an online program, foundation courses help the new students to navigate through their course-room, online library, and explore various research data bases. The students learn to write effective annotated bibliographies, identify various logical fallacies in writing, write content and response post in a collegial manner for a discussion forum. Such a foundation course helps a learner to perform well in subsequent online courses.

Membership of Scholarly Societies

Some brilliant online students feel a sense of accomplishment of their self-actualization needs when they contribute their talents to several honor societies e.g. Phi Theta Kappa Society. Members of such societies should be encouraged to keep other online students engaged in a creative manner.

Learning Takes Higher Priority over Teaching

In online environment, it should be ensured that a learner understands the assignment thoroughly. A regular communication between the instructor and students is encouraged by organizing week 1 teleconference and frequent email and phone conversation thereafter (Jiyeon, 2012).

Study Skills Support

Online students should be familiarized with online learning tools e.g. dissertation center, writing center, SmartThinking, annotating online resources, e-books, APA citations and ways of avoiding plagiarism.

Assistance in Critical Analysis of Online Resources

The students should be familiarized with peer-reviewed journals from the research databases e.g. EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Gale AcademicOneFile. They should be acquainted with analysis and interpretation of statistical information. The paraphrasing skills and synthesis of key ideas of a research paper should form part of the online learner's education (Poole, 2011).

Avoiding Pitfalls of Plagiarism

Online tutorials on conventions of American Psychological Association (APA) with special reference to citations are important. Many online students may inadvertently plagiarize due to their ignorance of rules of citation. Some exercises need to be planned on crediting of sources of information during the foundation courses.

Team Assignments

Cooperative learning is an important tool in an online environment. When the students engage in the team assignments and exchange their views in an independent manner, their understanding is facilitated through exchange of their experiences, wisdom, and knowledge (Bednall, 2011).

Timeline Flexibility in Accepting Assignments within Course Duration

Daniel (2000) contends that an online student needs to be punctual in submitting quality assignments in a timely manner. However, sometimes, due to reasons beyond control, an online learner may default in timely

submission of assignments. The instructor may need to make humanitarian adjustments within the overall framework of the institution's policy to enable the student to complete pending assignments within the overall duration of the course.

Detailed and Demonstrative Feedback by an Online Instructor

The instructor needs to give a detailed feedback to an online learner so that there is real learning (Jacklin & Robinson, 2010). An instructor may show the online student about paraphrasing direct quotes or solving a statistical problem step-by-step. The cursory mention of APA rules or writing the answer of mathematical sum may be insufficient for comprehension of an online learner. Also, the instructor needs to grade the assignments objectively per the rubric. Sometimes, an instructor may be obsessed with APA rules and may downplay the overall quality of content of an essay due to a few errors in writing. Usually, 30 % weight-age is assigned to writing and 70 % weight-age is given to quality of content of a research paper.

Regular Motivational Support by the Academic Adviser and the Instructor

Mayes, Ku, Akarasriworm, Luebeck, & Korkmaz (2011) contend that an online instructor and academic adviser need to communicate with their students on phone, Skype, and through email regularly so that a learner feels encouraged and cared for. If a student is submitting inferior quality of assignments or facing challenges in comprehending assignments, s(he) should be contacted for tutoring. This will motivate the student to stay on track.

Online Educational Counseling

Academic adviser should communicate with assigned online students to know their academic challenges with regard to comprehension of lessons, degree of satisfaction with the instructional feedback, any challenges with online instructional material (Kuboni, 2013). A counselor works with web-designer to convey feedback of the students for better designing of lessons for subsequent courses. S(he) also works with the learner to decide if an intervention is required with instruction.

Ongoing Program Advising

An academic adviser keeps guiding students throughout the program with regard to sequencing of courses, identification of any instructional issues (Tina, Wilkinson, Hemby, McCannon, & Wiedmaier, 2008). S(he) advises students on measures to prevent plagiarism, arranges tutoring with SmartThinking, and serves as a point-of-contact for any issues of miscellaneous nature.

Online Library

At the time of time of enrollment, students should go through the tutorial on e-library and research data bases. Since databases containing peer-reviewed journals play an important role for writing research papers, master and doctoral students may need assistance for learning ways of navigation. Some exercises need to be planned in foundation courses for extraction of information for concerned research topics (Yi, 2013). The correct use of key words and phrases is important.

Access for Students with Disabilities under American with Disabilities Act, 1990

New assistive technologies, administrative assistance, assignment, examination, alternative formats for learning, and reasonable accommodation should be provided to students with disabilities.

Students' Rights and Access to Ombudsperson Services

Online students have the same right with regard to review of their grades and privacy of their personally identifiable information (PII) as students in a traditional brick-and-mortar school. They can complain about the infringement of their rights to ombudsperson of the university.

Grade Appeal

If the online students feel aggrieved about their final grades, they can appeal against by clicking the link which is marked "Grade Appeal". This allows online students to have a second review of their performance and seek resolution of their grievances.

Plagiarism Cases

The cases of inadvertent plagiarism can be minimized by acquainting online students with various rules of citation. An online tutorial on APA conventions can be embedded in the course room along with some exercises for practice.

Course and Programmatic Assessment

Regular course and programmatic assessment is essential for maintaining quality. Students in various programs and courses are asked to take various assessment tests. These tests are specifically designed to check the efficacy of curriculum and comprehension levels of students affected by them. Some modification in the program and courses may be necessitated as a result.

Online Students' Discussion Forum

The online forums on various courses, programs, and other facets of online students' activities are set up. They provide an effective platform for online students to exchange their views on topics of mutual interest (Amer, Al Barwani, & Ibrahim, 2010). Many queries by new students are answered by experienced students which benefit the former in making informed decisions on issues of academic, social, financial, and administrative nature.

Online Book Store

It is a very convenient place for students to purchase their text-books. It has the university catalog and list of courses along with prescribed text-books and syllabi. Besides, textbooks, students can also purchase other items like computer and its accessories at prescribed university's discount prices.

Interactive Online Tools

Various online interactive resources help online students in submitting high quality assignments. The annotated bibliography, rules of American Psychological Association (APA), various animated statistical and research tools, time management, and goal setting workshop help students greatly. Similarly, important links to YouTube may provide useful information on dissertation management and research methods.

Preferred Learning Style of the Students

The curriculum, study material, and various assignments for online students need to be designed to cater to the needs of all types of students with different learning styles: visual (spatial), aural (auditory-musical), verbal (linguistic), solitary (intrapersonal), social (interpersonal), logical (mathematical), and physical (kinesthetic). This helps them to make the most of the instructional and study material.

Balance Between Just-in-Case Support and Just-in-Time Support

The academic instructions could be divided into three categories: must know, should know, could know. The "must know" are fundamental and essential elements of a course or a program and therefore, should be given the highest weight-age in assessment. However, students should also be encouraged to learn about "should know and could know" types of lessons and concepts in order keep them updated about the new emerging trends in their content areas (Athabasca University, 2003).

Flexibility of Support, Continued Availability, and Easily Accessible Support System

All online students are provided 24 x 7 technical support about their virtual classrooms, online tutoring on language and mathematics. There is a flexibility of support between online and their academic and financial advisers in terms of emails, phone, and chat communication.

Familiarization with Tabs on the Learner' Portal and Course Room

The online students should get acquainted with various tabs in the course rooms, on line library, research data bases, writing center, dissertation center, and various other tools by communicating with either the help desk or academic adviser. Similarly, students should review the syllabus and online study material including audio video tutorials for various assignments in the course room.

Part 3: Support after the Successful Completion of the Program

After the completion of program, students are encouraged to join the alumni network in order to rejuvenate their sense of belongingness and affiliation with the school.

Convocation

The physical presence of online students, at a convocation ceremony, after the successful completion of a program, helps them in achieving a sense of accomplishment. They get an opportunity to meet their instructors and academic administrators to celebrate the occasion. Such an event serves as a life time, memorable event for online graduating students.

Employment and Career Development Assistance

Even after graduation, online students should be provided career development and employment assistance through effective networking amongst alumni. One of the primary aims of any program is to provide help to graduating students in seeking employment of their choice.

Alumni Association

The membership of alumni network, for the graduating students, helps the community in socializing and career development through networking. All students are encouraged to become member of the university through social networking sites like Face Book and Twitter. The achievements of alumni are highlighted through postings on Face Book. This develops a sense of solidarity amongst educational community members.

Social Mixer and Newsletters

Regular dissemination of information about students, faculty members, and their achievement through newsletters, helps the community to stay connected. Also, social mixers are organized by alumni and faculty members at a convenient place and time to exchange views and consolidate solidarity and brotherhood.

At the End-of-the-Course Survey

After the course is over, it is prudent to seek suggestions of the students for improving various processes of online learning. The questions in this survey pertain to the degree of promptness of the instructor's communication, his/her tone of writing, queries about his challenging assignments for achieving excellence, instructor's interest in the professional development of the student, assistance in comprehending course material, timeliness of feedback and its utility in achieving success in the course, and overall effectiveness of the instructor. Similarly, the learner is encouraged to comment on the learners' portal, its contents, and study material (Northcentral University, 2013). The student is requested to comment on application of learning in the course to his/her profession, relevance and quality of course materials (e.g. text books, articles, additional resources like videos etc.). The learners are encouraged to share their experiences with support services with reference to availability of academic adviser, his/her responsiveness to students' calls within 48 h, supportive nature, adviser's knowledge about program of study of the learner, policies and procedures of the university, use of support services, library, writing center, and dissertation center (Northcentral University, 2013).

Conclusion

An online learner requires assistance before the start of a program, during the course of the program, and also upon its successful completion. The main areas, before the commencement of the program, pertain to ascertaining academic, financial, psychological readiness of the learner. During the course of the program, the learners should be familiarized with various resources of the portal, provided objective, timely, and supportive feedback on assignments, and encouraged to perform excellently by answering their queries in a prompt and effective manner. After the successful completion of the program, the alumni should be encouraged to join the institution on Face Book and kept in picture about the accomplishments of the

community. The employment and career development assistance should be provided to students both during the program and also after graduation through effective networking amongst alumni.

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Appendix A

Diagrammatic View of the Strategies for Online Learners

Before the Start of the Online Program	During the Program	After the Completion of the Online Program
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess a learners' readiness; • Pre-course survey; • Acquaint with program and course expectations; • Online orientation training; • Matching educational program with career interests; • Informational and administrative support; • Course registration; • Student's loan assistance; • Familiarization with various tabs on student's portal; • Round-the- clock service desk assistance; • Well-designed course materials, strong academic and tutorial support; • Proficiency in university level mathematics and English reading skills; • Special requirements of International students; • Aspects of individual culture influencing learning; • Accommodation for students with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Week 1 phone/Skype meeting between online mentor and the student; • Effective time management and goal setting; • Foundation courses; • Membership of scholastic societies; • Higher priority to learning than teaching; • Study skills support; • Assistance in critical analysis; • Educate learners ways to avoid plagiarism; • Timeline flexibility for late assignments; • Detailed and demonstrative feedback; • Teaching through feedback (TTF) model (Northcentral University, 2013); • Motivational support by the instructor and academic advisors; • Online counseling; • Program advising; • Access for students with disabilities; • Students' access to online ombudsperson's services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convocation; • Employment and career development assistance; • Alumni association; • Social mixer and newsletters on Face Book and Tweets; • At the end-of-the course survey.

Appendix B

Biography: Dharmendra Singh

Dr. Dharmendra Singh currently teaches business ethics, research and dissertation courses to online doctoral (Ph D/DBA) students of ACBSP accredited students of Northcentral University of USA. He serves on a number of dissertation committees in the field of management and human resource management and guides doctoral scholars in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method of research.

Earlier, he served with Indian Army as a commissioned officer (Lt Col) for 22 years and thereafter at Ansal Institute of Technology at Gurgaon in India as Professor in Management before settling in Boston in USA. He was also employed as a Campus College Chair for Graduate Business and Management programs at Columbus, OH campus of University of Phoenix, MBA faculty at Assumption College at Worcester, MA, and undergrad faculty Quincy College, MA. In addition, he taught online business and management courses at Potomac College, Washington DC.

A Professional of Human Resources (PHR), he earned his Master and Ph D degree in management. The title of his doctorate dissertation was '*Study of Motivational Factors of Indian Youth while opting for a Career with Special Reference to Delhi Region*'.

A distinction holder in English, Mathematics and Chemistry in All India Higher Secondary, he graduated in social sciences from National Defense Academy (NDA) in Pune.

Chief of Army Staff commended him for distinguished services in Kashmir valley in counter insurgency environment. He served both as a member and a presiding officer on a number of research committees with Indian Army and the Government of India on issues related to introducing objectivity in performance appraisal for the Officers Cadre, measures for improving the motivational levels of personnel below officers ranks, amelioration of recruitment process, improving the effectiveness of training and designing of compensation as part of the fourth Pay Commission of India. Earlier, he had presented a number of research papers at national/ international conferences/seminars. The prominent amongst these are, '*Cross Cultural Management in the Indian Armed Forces*', '*Driving Indian Army Personnel: HR Way*' and '*Rejuvenating Indian Army Education and Training*'. These were published in Delhi Business Review and 'Pranjana' management journals respectively. He presented an invited research paper titled, '*Changing Role of HRM in Banking and Insurance Sectors*' during a National Seminar at Rourkela on 15 Nov 03. The paper was published in the book titled 'Changing Face of Financial Services: An Indian Perspective', released on the occasion. A law graduate from Andhra University, he believes in analyzing management issues from multidisciplinary perspectives. **An Experienced Registered Yoga Teacher – 500 (ERYT/RYT-500)** with Yoga Alliance, MD, he is a regular practitioner of Yogasnas, Pranayama and meditation. He attempts to achieve a work-life balance in daily routine.