



HEZEL
ASSOCIATES

Developing Distance Learning Student Services

Final Report

for
Continuing Education
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Baltimore, Maryland

by
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Syracuse, New York

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Developing Distance Learning Student Services

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I. Introduction

The Continuing Education Division of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) is in the process of developing a plan for delivering a graduate degree program in information systems via distance learning. As part of its planning efforts, UMBC intends to organize and upgrade its services to meet the needs of distance learners. UMBC contracted with Hezel Associates, a Syracuse-based distance learning consulting firm, to conduct an analysis of its current capabilities in student services and to provide recommendations for expanding those services for distance learners.

As part of its consulting activities, Hezel Associates has prepared a report on student services for the distance learning initiative. The Hezel team assessed UMBC's current capabilities and prepared recommendations for changes to enhance these services for distance learning students. Findings are derived from interviews conducted with the directors of various departments at UMBC. These include academic advising, the bookstore, the bursar, computer services, co-op and internship services, enrollment management, financial aid, graduate admissions, instructional technology, the library, and registration.

The study is expected to assist planners at UMBC in identifying gaps in student services, which need to be addressed in order to create an effective distance learning program. The following report consists of four distinct sections. The first section describes the concept of a learner-friendly and responsive student services model in distance learning. The following section describes the current status of student services at UMBC as indicated through department interviews. The third section presents recommendations to assist UMBC in moving forward toward a student services structure responsive to the needs of distance learners. The final section contains a strategy for implementing the student services model.

II. Development of Student Services for Distance Learning

Hezel Associates has developed a model for student services that is based on Hezel Associates research of student services available for distance learners at colleges and universities across the nation. The model is presented here. Student services for distance learners may be defined as methods of providing students with access to instructional and administrative support necessary to achieve learning objectives. Although distance learners work with existing university departments, these departments serve distance learning students differently from on-campus learners.

Rationale

The aim of student services is to maintain high personal touch by strengthening contact and connection with remote learners. A well-thought out student services plan will ensure learner access to a number of services and create a user-friendly virtual learning environment. Student services are critical to the expansion of distance learning at an institution for the following reasons:

- ① Students tend to evaluate a distance learning program based on the quality of the student services offered by the education provider;
- ② Student services help distance learners form a sense of connectedness with the educational institution; and
- ③ Student services are critical to creating a learner-centered environment.

Benefits

A well designed student services structure offers the following benefits to students and the campus:

- ① Reduced learner anxiety about expectations of the program;
- ② Increased student motivation in the program; and
- ③ Enhanced learning experience through increased access to resources and educational opportunities.

For the program, an effective student services structure will help to:

- ① Reduce the attrition rate by increasing student satisfaction; and
- ② Increase student enrollment as more students are attracted to the program through word-of-mouth advertising by satisfied students.

Description of Student Services

Excellent student services include the following components and criteria:

a. Administrative Support

- 1) ***Admissions:*** Admissions provides students with an online application and description of requirements necessary for enrollment into the distance learning program.
- 2) ***Registration:*** A registration system is implemented which allows students to register for their classes online or by phone. In addition, a course catalog is included on the web site. Instructions for completing the necessary forms are also included on the web site, which aid the student through the registration process. If students are in need of additional advising pertaining to registration, academic counselors are available online or by phone.
- 3) ***Tuition and Fees:*** To simplify the payment process, students are given payment options of over the phone, by fax, online, or by e-mail. The web site includes information on tuition payments, deadlines, fee structure and dues, as well as procurement of course materials.
- 4) ***Financial Aid:*** A "virtual" financial aid office is offered via the web which includes information, forms, and web resources concerning available financial aid in the form of scholarships, grants, and loans. The virtual financial aid office also includes financial aid estimator services and basic financial aid counseling for those students in need of it.
- 5) ***Student Records:*** All distance learners have secured access to their transcript information online. This enables students to get the feedback concerning their grades, class standing, program requirements, and transfer credit information.

b. Advising and Mentoring Support

- 1) ***Academic Advising:*** Academic advisors are assigned to students for regular communication via e-mail. Student questions about course registration, financial aid, and course transfers are answered directly by the academic advisors.
- 2) ***Career Services:*** A portion of the web site is committed to career placement activities which includes assisting the students in researching careers,

submitting resumes, scheduling job interviews, networking with alumni, and counseling on career directions. Finding a career is often the most difficult part of a college education. Thus, this service forms an important criterion in a student's selection of a program.

- 3) **Financial Aid Advising:** Through the office of financial aid, students are assigned a financial advisor who assists them in applying for financial aid for which they may qualify.

c. Instructional Support

- 1) **Help Desk:** A 24-hour operational toll-free help line is available for students to use if and when they run into technical problems during the course of their distance learning experience. The help desk assists learners on the use of the educational technology.
- 2) **Library:** The online library gives students access to a number of articles needed for completion of online courses. Additionally, the library connection grants students access to a number of national and international online libraries, thus increasing access to resources available for the learners. With the help of a mail distribution system, the learners are also able to borrow books from traditional libraries with online catalogs. Learners have access to librarians via a toll-free telephone line.
- 3) **Instructional Materials:** Learners can order their books online or by phone and in advance of the class.
- 4) **Testing and Grading:** Depending upon the instructor's preference, tests are administered online as "take-home" exams or during proctored exam sessions. Although the distance learning service center assists learners with the exam process, learners are responsible for identifying their own proctor. Policies regarding suitable exam proctors are outlined on the web site. Assignment, test, and course grades are available on the student records web sites.
- 5) **Online Tutoring:** A tutoring service is available on the web site where students can post questions or concerns for other students to respond to and either request or offer tutoring services.
- 6) **Services for Students with Disabilities:** The distance learning services center is prepared to handle general inquires regarding technical requirements, equipment, and resources for distance learners with disabilities. Any concerns not resolved by the distance learning office are forwarded to the Office for Students with Disabilities.

Table 1: Ideal student services system

Department	Functions	Features
Academic advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Interpret graduation requirements ➤ Orient new students ➤ Advise entering and transfer students ➤ Clear students for graduation ➤ Aid students in career placement ➤ Advise students concerning financial aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Online degree audit system ➤ E-mail advising ➤ Toll-free telephone line ➤ Personalized service ➤ Online faculty handbook containing a chapter on advising dl students ➤ FAQs online ➤ Faculty advisors communicate with students regularly via e-mail ➤ Online career placement resource ➤ Consistently updated web resource
Bookstore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Order and ship textbooks and related materials ➤ Provide copy services ➤ Distribute merchandise ➤ Assure that students are purchasing the correct books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Orders by phone, fax, e-mail ➤ Prepackaging of books ➤ Shipping of books ➤ Online catalog & ordering ➤ Consistently updated web resource ➤ Staff assistance to students in buying books
Computer services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manage all computer related issues ➤ Maintain university web pages ➤ Assist students with troubleshooting ➤ Distribute user accounts ➤ Assist instructional design with faculty training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 24 hour help line ➤ FAQs online ➤ System strong enough to handle a large influx of dl students
Enrollment management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manage registration ➤ Provide academic advising and support ➤ Admit and recruit students ➤ Distribute financial aid and scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Flexible and personalized service ➤ Well-connected to other service departments
Graduate admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Service graduate students ➤ Recruit and admit graduate students ➤ Provide graduation certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Computerized student database ➤ Online application ➤ E-mail counseling ➤ Online description of requirements necessary for DL program enrollment ➤ Videoconference/online system of interviewing

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Library services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Provide reference and circulation services➤ Maintain special collections➤ Maintain media materials➤ Offer online catalog➤ Host cultural events➤ Orientation of new students to use of library	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Robust electronic reserve system➤ Online catalog➤ Full text articles and other online resources➤ Access to a number of national and international online libraries➤ Mail distribution system➤ Toll-free help desk
Registration services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Admit students➤ Transfer credits➤ Maintain academic records➤ Process transcript requests➤ Post grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Online or telephone-in registration, grade retrieval, address change, and transcript request, financial data➤ Online catalog and time schedule➤ Online instructions for completing necessary registration forms➤ Available registration counselors online➤ Consistently updated website

III. Current Student Services Capacity at UMBC

To assess the needs and existing services available for distance learners, Hezel Associates, on behalf of the Continuing Education Department at UMBC, interviewed the directors of each of the following departments: academic advising, the bookstore, the bursar, computer services, co-op and internship services, the office of enrollment management, graduate admissions, instructional technology, the library, and registration. Summaries of the completed interviews are presented below.

A. Academic Advising

Academic advising at UMBC is managed through the Advisement Center. The Advisement Center is staffed with professionals who are available to respond to student requests for information and guidance regarding their programs. Issues most commonly directed to academic advising include waivers for courses, policy appeals, and transfer credit information. The academic departments are responsible for assigning faculty members to advise students.

1. Current services

Advisors at the Advisement Center and academic departments are responsible for the following functions:

- Guidance to incoming and transfer students;
- Orientation of new students;
- Assistance in dealing with and induction into the academic system for students;
- Information for faculty advisors;
- Review and interpretation of students' graduation requirements; and
- Clearance of students for graduation.

2. Current practices

Through a pre-determined method, entering students are assigned advisors and are required to meet with advisors once each semester for schedule approval. On average, a student might meet an advisor about three to five times a year. Although most meetings between advisors and students are face-to-face, advising often takes place by phone or over e-mail. To clear students for course registration advisors often rely on e-mail and the Web.

3. *Current strengths*

The Advisement Center at UMBC is currently developing an electronic system to allow virtual delivery of all advising services. Issues such as course transfers, scheduling, and degree audits would be managed over the online system to save time and cost. Additionally, a calendar of important dates, a student handbook, and graduation information are available online. Administrators at UMBC believe that the planned online initiative will assist the Advisement Center and academic departments in serving distance learning students as well. The online degree audit system will also provide students with access to academic records, e-mail advising, and a toll-free telephone number for one-on-one discussion.

4. *Challenges in serving distance learners*

The director of the Advisement Center appears to have the infrastructure to extend the advising function to the non-traditional learners. Time zone differences, however, might make one-on-one synchronous advising difficult. Also, the current personnel and technological resources at the Advisement Center are insufficient to meet the demand for increased services for non-traditional learners. The current budget for the Advisement Center is sufficient to support only the existing on-campus needs for advising.

5. *Resources requirements*

The functions of the Advisement Center and the interaction with the academic department will need to be re-oriented to ensure that online advisees receive prompt feedback on their questions and queries. Dedicated personnel might be needed to address those needs. With an increase in enrollment, an increase in technological support will also be needed.

B. *Bookstore*

The university bookstore at UMBC is faced with an opportunity to expand into online sales of books and merchandise. With the introduction of distance learning, the bookstore stands to serve a larger customer base. Presented below are key points from a discussion with the Director of Bookstore Services.

1. *Current services*

Currently, the bookstore offers the following services:

- Ordering and shipping of textbooks and related materials;
- Copying, binding, and publishing services; and
- Distribution of merchandise.

2. Current practices

The bookstore serves customers through multiple delivery systems. Orders for textbooks and merchandise may be placed over the phone, by fax or via e-mail. Texts and other materials can be packaged and shipped to students upon request.

3. Current strengths

The bookstore is technologically inclined and has committed resources to online sales. The university bookstore is currently designing an online catalog and ordering system for the sale of textbooks and merchandise on the Web. The system is expected to be ready for use in the Spring 2000 semester.

4. Challenges in serving distance learners

According to the bookstore director, bookstore administrators and staff would like to move toward e-commerce and make more transactions possible over the Internet. However, current university policy requiring all course materials to be sold in the bookstore is standing in the way of online sales. The administration at the bookstore expressed interest in participating in the orientation process for new students.

5. Resource requirements

The director of the bookstore believes that the bookstore is well positioned to manage distance learning needs but admits that an increase in the number of students demanding services might require additional resources. Additional staff members will be needed to process the orders and handle shipping for distance learning students.

C. Office of the Bursar

1. Current Services

The Office of the Bursar acts as a cashier, performing services such as student billing, and interaction with loan officers. In addition, the Bursar pursues loan payments and manages all receivables.

2. Current Strengths

The Office of the Bursar offers the flexibility of accepting payments by phone, fax, and online. Customer service representatives in the office are ready to deal with distance learning questions. For added convenience to students the office also

offers online question and comment submission. The staff is very adept at dealing with a wide range of questions about credits and fees.

3. *Resources for learners*

The Office of the Bursar is active in addressing the need to expand and enhance its services on the World Wide Web.

Currently, information regarding fee structure and tuition is available online. Student questions can be addressed to customer service representatives via email, phone, and fax.

D. *Computer services*

1. *Current services*

The computer support staff in the computer services department is responsible for performing the following functions:

- Managing all computer-related issues;
- Maintaining university web servers;
- Assisting students with troubleshooting;
- Distributing user accounts to new students;
- Assisting the instructional design department with faculty training; and
- Providing software resources used by students in their instruction.

2. *Current practices*

The computer services department is familiar with the demands of distance learning. A program in Emergency Health Management is currently distributed via online learning at UMBC. Distance learners are required to locate their own Internet service provider since the department does not provide this service. The computer services department does, however, post minimal technical requirements for taking distance learning courses on the university web page.

In partnership with the university bookstore, the computer services department will also distribute Microsoft software to distance learners or other off-campus students beginning on January 1, 2000. A CD-ROM is also available with easily downloadable Internet software like Netscape, Netmeeting, Adobe Acrobat, QuickTime, and RealAudio so that students will have access to the applications necessary for non-traditional study.

Although the university does not offer desktop video to students, the computer services department will be experimenting with use of Netmeeting and expects to incorporate this method of course delivery within the next year.

3. *Current strengths*

Although not a toll-free line, a 24-hour help desk is available to students via telephone. The help line is a provision of the computer services department designed to assist students with troubleshooting issues.

The computer services department offers a wide range of software available for the student use. This includes support of a wide range of Unix development tools, Oracle database management software, and specialized tools for web services.

4. *Challenges in serving distance learners*

Most of the services currently offered by the computer service department are not yet available in a virtual environment. The director of the department believes this will be a necessary shift in order for the computer services department to adequately serve distance learners. Since the university works with a traditional cohort model and expects to offer distance education courses of varying duration, there is some concern over the manner in which such courses will be delivered and tracked. Currently WebCT is being used for distance education for an Emergency Health Services program. WebCT is also being utilized as an enrichment tool in traditional courses. The computer services personnel are comfortable with supporting WebCT for distance learning.

5. *Resource requirements*

The functions of the computer services department may need to be restructured so that more support can be offered virtually. To serve distance learners, the director believes that more full-time computer staff will be needed to support distance learning students. For round-the-clock monitoring and support, the department would need to outsource the help-desk function. Additionally, the department may need to expand services to faculty in need of instructional design assistance.

6. *Other concerns regarding distance learning*

According to the director of computer services, UMBC should leverage the experience with distance learning across the campus. Developing services for distance learning students is also likely to improve the school's capacity to serve current on-campus learners.

E. Co-op and Internship Department

1. Current Services

The Co-op and Internship department at UMBC offers an opportunity for experimental learning. The department offers a range of services that includes:

- Credentialing;
- Building relationships with corporate organizations; and
- Placing students in appropriate positions.

2. Current Strengths

The department offers a service that helps to make the educational experience of students more meaningful by offering a career-oriented education. Such services would be highly desirable in a distance learning program. A service that offers career experience to distance learning students would help to differentiate UMBC's services from the existing competition.

3. Current Challenges

The current staff is already committed to the needs of students on campus. Also, most of the existing relationships with employers are limited to corporations in the Baltimore-D.C. area. To accommodate the demands of distance learning students, the department will need an additional coordinator dedicated to supporting the additional activities in remote geographic areas.

4. Resource requirements

The department is currently involved in migrating to online applications and support services for the students. The placement service is currently available to part-time and full-time students. With the distance learning initiative the services will need to cover employers located in states outside of Maryland/Virginia as well.

Currently, student applications are managed manually through a set of printed folders. An online database to store and match students and employers is needed.

F. Enrollment Management

It is believed that distance learning offers several benefits including an overall increase in enrollment, alignment with the university's goal of increased graduate enrollment and a cost-effective solution to serving an increased number of

students without increasing the number of classrooms. Another opportunity that distance learning may provide involves contract training. The university offers limited contract training programs and under the current method of delivery, the process is too labor intensive.

The Assistant Provost for Enrollment Management believes that the services developed for distance learners will benefit traditional enrollments as well. Although it is believed that learners will be hesitant to take distance learning courses initially, the director of enrollment management believes that with proper marketing, learners will respond to the new format. The director predicts that most of the distance learning enrollments will be initially local, and then will expand gradually within the region and eventually, across the nation.

1. *Current services*

The office of enrollment management is responsible for managing the following services:

- Registration of undergraduate and graduate students;
- Academic advising and support services;
- Recruitment and admissions for undergraduate students; and
- Distribution of financial aid and scholarships.

2. *Current strengths*

Although the department offers high touch, flexible and personalized service, they are not otherwise prepared to serve distance learning students.

3. *Challenges in serving distance learners*

Major challenges the department faces include the implementation of a system to support courses of varying duration and the development of new approaches to offering students service. In the short-term, staff members will need to be dedicated to intervene with distance learning students until a decision is made regarding where distance learning student services will reside. The office of enrollment management may also need to allocate resources for new technology systems in order to adapt to tracking and serving distance learners.

New programs will need to be developed specifically for distance learners such as an orientation program. Enrollment tracking for courses of varying length is another issue that will need to be resolved with regard to distance learning management.

G. *Financial Aid*

1. *Current Services*

The Financial Aid Department is happy to process new aid applications and is prompt about notifying students of changes in their status. Of course, they always follow all federal regulations. Financial Aid also tracks the progress of high performance students.

2. *Current Strengths*

Financial Aid is a well-organized department with the ability to reach the distance learners via phone, fax, online, or in person. The department is in the process of developing a password protected web site. At least one staff member is dedicated entirely to dealing with financial aid opportunities for distance learning.

3. *Current Challenges*

Members of the Financial Aid Department are somewhat concerned about the regulatory status of financial aid for distance learners, but they are eager to be involved in the process of ensuring that distance learners are always considered for financial aid.

4. *Resources for learners*

Financial Aid staff would also like to make its services available on the Internet. There are currently neither online applications, nor an online financial aid estimator, nor enough information regarding scholarships, grants or loans.

H. *Graduate Admissions*

1. *Current services*

The graduate admissions department is responsible for the servicing of graduate students through recruitment, admissions, and graduation certification.

2. *Current practices*

Under the current system, graduate applications are processed, stamped, copied and forwarded to the academic department to which a student is applying. The academic department then makes a decision to admit or deny a student based on GRE scores, interviews, letters of recommendation and undergraduate GPA. A decision sheet recommending admission or denial is then sent to the graduate

admissions department for final decision. If this process changes for distance learners, department representatives will need to be involved in the decision-making process.

3. *Current strengths*

A computerized student database and online application are the department's strengths in serving distance learners. The computerized database allows department staff members to track a student's academic progress. Although admissions counseling is increasingly available via e-mail, there are a low number of staff available to perform this function. There is not yet a toll free telephone line available for counseling.

4. *Challenges in serving distance learners*

The director of graduate admissions believes the department will face several challenges in serving distance learners. Among these challenges are the lack of computer support, an improved system for billing, and the need to identify distance learning students in the system. Online applications are currently accessible only from the University of Maryland's home page and are not located directly on UMBC's web page. If there is a large influx of distance learners additional staff will be needed.

I. *Office of Instructional Technology*

1. *Current Services*

The Office of Instructional Technology serves as an academic support unit for the departments. The unit offers guidance, assistance and expertise on authoring systems and instructional designers. The unit also trains faculty on technology systems, such as the Interactive Video Network[™] and provides guidance and support with teaching over interactive videos.

As part of its services, the unit provides evaluation and assessment services to measure the effectiveness of educational tools implemented by faculty at academic units.

2. *Current Strengths*

In terms of distance learning support, the Office of Instructional Technology offers a broad range of support through instructional designers, expert technology background and evaluation experts. The staff is available for faculty to prepare multimedia presentations, utilize technology tools and offer evaluation assistance.

3. Current Challenges

Its budget, personnel and resources limit the Office of Instructional Technology.

4. Resource requirements

The Office of Instructional Technology has applied all of its current resources to the existing needs of learners on campus. The office is stretched thin and would therefore not be able to start any additional projects for off campus learners without corresponding increases in the budget.

Investment in more resources might include additional staff or finances to outsource services. The office has access to freelance specialists in instructional design who could provide services on short notice.

J. Library Services

The UMBC library provides reference services to students and faculty including:

- Reference circulation;
- Maintenance of special collections, media materials, and an online catalog; and
- Occasional hosting of cultural events.

1. Current practices

The library makes a host of resources available online. These resources include full text databases, more than 200 journals, encyclopedias, and statistical data. Access to all University of Maryland System libraries and Baltimore area public libraries are also available. In addition, the library provides electronic reserve services, an online catalog, and an e-mail request service for reference questions and requests.

2. Current strengths

A robust system of electronic reserve materials as well as an online catalog and full text articles are already in place. The UMBC library is well positioned for the demand from potential online learners to access the library resources

3. Challenges in serving distance learners

The major challenge the library will face in serving distance learners is in the time consuming process of shipping materials.

4. Resource requirements

Although a toll-free telephone help desk is not currently in place, the library director expressed an interest in offering such a service if the necessary resources were made available.

Depending upon the volume of distance learners and their reference needs structural and staffing changes within the library may be needed. The major investment necessary to serve distance learners will be to make library materials available online. Since there is already an effort underway to make all reference materials available in an electronic format for students, the library director does not view the process specific to the distance learning initiative.

K. Registration Services

1. Current services

The office of the registrar is responsible for the following functions:

- Admittance of students;
- Transferring of credits;
- Maintenance of academic records;
- Transcript requests;
- Registration for courses; and
- Positing of grades.

2. Current practices

Students are required to have advisors approve courses and need to receive a waiver from the course instructor or advisor before they are allowed to register. Currently, traditional students are able to register after they meet with their academic advisor, are cleared for registration, receive an registration appointment. The registration process can be completed online, by phone, or in person. The appointments are scheduled on the basis of the number of credits earned. The most common problems or complaints students have with the registration process revolve around frustration with the slow computer system, difficulty in getting authorization for courses, and course waiting lists.

3. Current strengths

Online registration, grade retrieval, address change, and transcript request services are among the department's strengths which will assist in serving

distance learners. The online catalog provides descriptions and reference numbers for courses. A different page on the web site accepts the reference number and completes online registration.

4. Challenges in serving distance learners

Maintenance of academic records, the existing scheduling system, and course approval are the foreseeable challenges the department expects to face in serving distance learners.

5. Resource requirements

Registration services and the academic advising function are expected to work in collaboration. The Advisement Center has a staff member available in the evening hours who could assist with registration inquiries. If there is an influx of students due to distance learning enrollments, the registration office will need additional staff assistance. Depending on the workload, an assistant registrar may also be appointed to manage registration inquiries from distance learners.

Other services available

Evening Counselor. UMBC's Continuing Education Division has an evening counselor available to advise part-time students after hours. The counselor serves as a liaison between different departments at the university and the evening students.

Institutional Research. To assess the trends in student enrollment, UMBC's institutional research offers input to administrators for managerial decision-making. The research department is limited in its operation by the information system currently available for analysis and dissemination of data. As UMBC migrates to a more user-friendly information system, the institutional research department will have more time for specific market and learner satisfaction-related research projects on distance learning.

Table 2: Current student services

Department	Current services	Strengths	Challenges	Resource needs
Academic advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Interpret graduation requirements ➤ Orient new students ➤ Advise entering and transfer students ➤ Clear students for graduation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Online degree audit system ➤ E-mail advising ➤ Toll-free telephone line ➤ Personalized service ➤ Online faculty handbook ➤ FAQs online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Time zone differences ➤ Inadequate computer support ➤ Insufficient web advising ➤ Need for virtual orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advisors ➤ Computers ➤ Technical support
Bookstore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Order and ship textbooks and related materials ➤ Provide copy services ➤ Distribute merchandise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Orders by phone, fax, e-mail ➤ Prepackaging of books ➤ Shipping of books ➤ Online catalog & ordering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shift to e-commerce ➤ Omission from orientation process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shipping personnel
Bursar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Bill students ➤ Act as Cashiers ➤ Interact with student loan officers ➤ Pursue loan payments ➤ Manage receivables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Online payment option ➤ Customer service reps ➤ Online question/comments ➤ Staff comfortable with questions about credits and fees 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enhance web services
Computer services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manage all computer related issues ➤ Maintain university web pages ➤ Assist students with troubleshooting ➤ Distribute user accounts ➤ Assist instructional design with faculty training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 24 hour help line ➤ FAQs online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Lack of virtual services ➤ Work on traditional cohort model ➤ Inadequate support for asynchronous learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Full-time computer support personnel ➤ Services for faculty
Co-op and Internship Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Offer credentialing services ➤ Build relationships with local organizations ➤ Provide student placement services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Placement services for distance learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Number of staff ➤ Contacts are only in the area ➤ Online database desirable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Placement staff

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Department	Current services	Strengths	Challenges	Resource needs
Enrollment management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Manage registration ➤ Provide academic advising and support ➤ Admit and recruit students ➤ Distribute financial aid and scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Flexible and personalized service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Implementing a system to support courses of varying duration ➤ Developing new approaches to offer student services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advisors and counselors ➤ New information systems
Financial Aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Process applications ➤ Inform students of status ➤ Follow federal regulations ➤ Track high performance students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Well organized dept ➤ Online, phone, fax, in person ➤ Password protected site soon ➤ Staff for financial aid opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Regulatory status of financial aid ➤ Involvement in program development process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Would like to make more services available online
Graduate admissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Service graduate students ➤ Recruit and admit graduate students ➤ Provide graduation certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Computerized student database ➤ Online application ➤ E-mail counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Lack of computer support ➤ Billing problems ➤ Notification of DL status ➤ Location of applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Admissions staff
Instructional Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Distance Learning Development Assistance ➤ In-house experts ➤ IVN System training ➤ Train on teaching via TV ➤ Evaluation & Assessment Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Instruction designers ➤ System experts ➤ Technology background ➤ Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Limited budget, personnel, and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Money ➤ Staff ➤ Resources
Library services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide reference and circulation services ➤ Maintain special collections ➤ Maintain media materials ➤ Offer online catalog ➤ Host cultural events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Robust electronic reserve system ➤ Online catalog ➤ Full text articles and other online resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shipping of materials ➤ Involvement in student orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Toll-free help line

<i>Department</i>	<i>Current services</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Resource needs</i>
Registration services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Admit students ➤ Transfer credits ➤ Maintain academic records ➤ Process transcript requests ➤ Post grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Online registration, grade retrieval, address change, and transcript request, financial data ➤ Online catalog and time schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maintenance of academic records ➤ Existing scheduling system ➤ Course approval 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Assistant registrar for distance learners

IV. Recommendations for a Student Services Model

UMBC Continuing Education administrators intend to build a distance learning program that will offer distance learners a quality of service that is equivalent to the level of service received by on-campus students. A responsive student services model will not only provide existing learners with a satisfying distance learning experience, but also contribute to UMBC's academic reputation. Learner-friendly student services will reduce anxiety among new distance learning students and foster a sense of connectedness between the learners and the institution. Student services at UMBC should be organized around the themes of convenient online access with a high degree of personal touch.

Service	Currently underway	Investment required	Priority level
Central help desk		✓	1
Learning resources			
• Online bookstore		✓	1
• Online library access	✓		1
Orientation programs			
• General orientation	✓		1
• Library orientation		✓	2
Personalized information	✓		3
Online advising resources			
• Academic advising	✓		1
• Faculty advising		✓	2
• Registration advising	✓		1
• Career advising		✓	3
• Financial aid advising		✓	1
Online materials and applications			
• Admissions		✓	1
• Financial aid	✓		1
• Bursar payments	✓		1
• Registration	✓		1
Interaction			
• Student to student		✓	3
• Faculty to student	✓		3
Technical support	✓		1
Instructional design		✓	1

The following recommendations outline a student services model for planners at UMBC to review:

1. Create a centralized help-desk. A call center should be set up to field questions from distance learners. This call center should be maintained by at least

two distance learning coordinators familiar with the potential problems distance learners might face. The coordinators will form the first line of communication with the learners. They will answer questions specific to distance learning at UMBC and will direct more detailed inquiries to the appropriate departments for further advice and input to the students. The centralized help-desk will give students a feeling of a "one-stop-shop" and will add a personal touch to the distance learning process.

2. Provide access to learning resources. Learners will need easy access to course texts and research materials. Online library and bookstore services will be of critical importance to distance learners. Whereas the library systems are currently being upgraded for electronic distribution, planners at UMBC should permit the bookstore to make textbooks, materials and merchandise available for students online.

3. Offer orientation programs for new students. Orientation programs should be created to familiarize distance learners with campus offerings, departments and academic policies at the university. The library should guide new students through the process of obtaining access to electronic reserve materials, online catalog searches, and policies regarding shipping of materials.

4. Allow access to personalized student information. Since distance learners may take courses asynchronously, it is likely that they will also conduct other university business outside of regular business hours. For this reason, UMBC administrators should allow learners password-protected online access to personalized information such as grades, transcripts, graduation audits, transfer credits, tuition balances, and financial aid awards.

5. Provide access to advisors. At various points in their academic career, distance learners, like on-campus learners, may seek future educational direction from faculty members, registration officers, career counselors, financial aid staff or academic advisors. Advising services need to be available via e-mail, online or by phone both during and outside of regular business hours. Faculty and staff should be trained in policies regarding distance learning students and distance education programs to prepare themselves to handle student requests.

6. Provide program and admissions information online. Distance learners appreciate the flexibility of accessing programmatic, admissions and administrative information over the Internet. Information pertaining to tuition rates, admissions requirements, general program descriptions, and contact information can easily be made available on the university web page. In addition, applications for admission and financial aid as well as registration forms should also be available online in order to expand virtual services for distance students.

7. Create learning environments, which allow student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction. Many students value a learning environment where they feel connected to a group. Distance learners should have the opportunity to interact with and meet their peers and instructors online. An online student center, student tutoring program, or online learning group projects are some methods of encouraging student to student interaction. E-mail access and virtual office hours for instructors will promote student-instructor interaction.

8. Access to technical support. The current help-desk for technical troubleshooting available at computer services should be upgraded to offer a toll-free phone line for distance learners to access. Although a 24 X 7 support desk may not be imperative in the initial stages of the program, technical support during evening hours should be offered to distance learners.

9. Offer instructional design support to faculty. Distance learning programs require faculty to adjust their teaching styles to meet the constraints of a new medium. The role of the Office of Instructional Technology will be critical in the process. A team of instructional designers will be needed, at least on a part-time basis, to assist the faculty in the development of courses.

10. Build on the evening counselor function. The liaison function, offered by the evening counselor for continuing education students, offers a useful model for replication. Specialists, similar in function to the evening counselor, will be needed for the distance learning project. The specialists will respond to student needs by acting as a liaison between various departments at UMBC to remove the various departments at UMBC to remove bottlenecks and facilitate completion of administrative tasks.

V. Next Steps

Hezel Associates recommends the following strategy for the implementation of student services for distance learning at UMBC.

Phase I (August-September 1999)

A planning committee should be formed from among representatives from each of the departments that currently offer student services on campus. The student services planning committee should consist of directors from the following departments:

- Instructional Design
- Continuing Education; and
- University Computer Services.

An initial meeting of the task force, along with all the representatives from the departments, should be scheduled in order to share the recommendations described in this report for student services development.

Phase II (September-December 1999)

Following the initial meeting of the task force, the student services planning committee should meet to develop more specific costing and implementation schedules for each of the recommended student service improvements listed in the report.

The critical areas for review should include those listed as “Priority 1” under the recommendation section. The committee should report monthly to the task force on the progress regarding student services development. After receiving recommendations and input from the committee in its entirety, the task force should hire a director for student services.

Phase III (January 2000 onwards)

Once a suitable student services manager has been appointed, the student services planning committee may be dissolved. Student service specialists should support the student services manager. One or two specialists, similar to the evening counselor in function, would help to organize the student service department during the development phase of the project.

Phase IV (May-October 2000)

Implementation of all the student service elements and liaison with the departments on campus should be established during this phase. Registration, admissions, financial aid and other similar service departments should be offered on-line for distance learning students.

Appendix A

Appendix A

The Graduate Program in Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

The UMBC graduate program in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) was first offered two years ago as a collection of courses via distance learning. With the enrollment having nearly doubled since its inception, the program currently serves about 40 distance students.

Aimed at practicing medical professionals, the program has a strong market appeal for professional development and career advancement. Individuals employed in health and emergency related fields within and outside the United States form the major target audience for the program. The courses for the program have been developed using the WebCT authoring tool and are delivered over the Internet. The tuition for out-of-state residents is \$470 per credit.

Program development

The program was first conceived as an extension of the EMS summer programs, which had been running for years. Judging from the popularity of the summer programs, the administrators ventured into delivering courses over the Web. With the growing interest in the program and the general acceptability of the Web as a delivery medium, the program expanded to become UMBC's first distance learning initiative.

As with most innovations, the EMS distance learning program had to be sold before being accepted on campus as a credible initiative. The distance learning effort required methods and approaches with which the university was not entirely familiar. In order to meet the requirements of anytime-anyplace learners,

especially those located outside of the United States, services had to be organized in ways different from those currently offered to traditional learners.

Currently, adjunct faculty teaches many of the courses. The instructors are primarily practitioners who are situated all across the nation. The flexibility in being able to recruit faculty members from the field makes the distance learning program more relevant in terms of content. The faculty members are currently offered \$4,000 as compensation for course development and \$2,500 for conducting the course. Administrators believe that in order to encourage more of the faculty on campus to be involved in distance learning, appropriate reward structures will need to be put in place. Distance learning achievements will need to be linked to tenure and promotion decisions to make the efforts meaningful for the faculty.

Student services

The student services offered through the EMS distance learning program may be conceptualized into two categories:

1. University related student services; and
2. Course related student services.

1. *University related student services.* Services such as online admissions, registration, payments, and enrollments fall in this category. According to the program administrator, UMBC's existing policies on payments and documents were inadequate in meeting the needs of distance learning students. Only through intervention by distance learning administrators were operational bottlenecks resolved. The key factors leading to weak student services were:

- a. Lack of understanding on part of clerical staff about the needs of distance learning students; and

- b. Lack of awareness about the program among higher level administrators.

2. Course related student services. For course related student services, program administrators ensured that technological glitches were minimized through proactive planning and instructions. Students who enroll in the distance learning program are mailed detailed instructions on asynchronous learning and basic computing operations. For personal support, a 24 X 7 support staff is on call. The staff generally responds electronically, but in the event of an urgent request, students can reach the staff by phone as well. Because students are located in different time zones, some level of a round-the-clock support is needed.

Feedback and recommendations

To monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the program, administrators periodically gather feedback through surveys, debriefing and attrition rate. Students express satisfaction with the program and periodically suggest improvements in technology tools. The current attrition rate is approximately 30 percent.

According to the program administrator, top-level university management commitment to a distance learning program is critical. With top level support, distance learning services will receive adequate attention and support at the middle management and department levels as well. With the trends towards lifelong learning and anytime-anyplace learning, UMBC should, according to the administrator, recognize the strategic importance of distance learning.

With respect to new distance learning programs on campus, the program administrators believe that investments should be made at an institutional level, not just at the departmental level. Centralized investment in distance learning will

ensure that resources, once created, are accessible to other departments planning distance learning initiative as well. Coordination across departments will also ensure that efforts are not duplicated on campus.

When defining and developing courses and programs, the program administrator felt that special attention should be placed on the marketplace. Creating programs that face severe competition might yield low enrollments for the department. Programs aimed at niche markets are more likely to have market appeal for professional development among lifelong learners.