

**Career Services and
Online Colleges**

Providing Critical Support to Online Students

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Introduction and Overview

The Internet provides an alternate way to deliver information and guidance to students who cannot come to a physical career center office because of their dispersed geographical locations or because of scheduling conflicts. For online colleges and universities without regional campus locations, the Internet provides the connection for not only academic courses, but also all student support services.

There is a need for awareness of student support services for prospective online students – about what they can expect and should look for when comparing programs – as well as higher education administrators and service providers – about current practices in the industry and new innovations on the horizon.

This report explores the availability of formal career services activities at online colleges and universities. A review of recent research and the career center websites at 10 online colleges and universities help to answer the following questions:

- Why are career services important for today’s online learner?
- What are typical higher education career services and which of these are most popular with students?
- What types of career services are currently offered online by predominantly online colleges?
- How do career services at traditional and online schools compare?
- What career services innovations are on the horizon?
- What should prospective students ask online colleges about career planning and job search support?
- How can career centers continue to leverage technology for delivery of services?

10 UNIVERSITIES REVIEWED

American InterContinental University	aiuniv.edu
Ashford University	ashford.edu
Capella University	capella.edu
Kaplan University	online.kaplanuniversity.edu
Liberty University	liberty.edu
University of Phoenix	phoenix.edu
South University	online.southuniversity.edu
Strayer University	icampus.strayer.edu
Walden University	careercenter.waldenu.edu

Online Support Services for Online Students

Education researchers Moore and Kearsley (2005) outlined the various components that should be included as part of a distance education program. These features, related to student success, include student support services. These researchers also provide specific suggestions in this area listing guidance and counseling as important services. Open access around the clock is recommended and often expected by students, and integration with on-campus services is important if the school has physical locations (Dare, Zapata & Thomas, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Leonard (2008) more recently outlined best practices in using technology to enhance support services. The suggested practices include the integration of websites, career guidance programs, webinars, instant messaging, and social networking, with other already commonly found modes of communication in online learning, such as email and learning management systems.

Characteristics of Online Students

In a 2010 survey of online learners, the majority of whom were undergraduates, the Noel-Levitz higher education consulting group found that “future employment opportunities” were one important factor in their enrollment and that college and university websites are their most important sources of information (**Noel-Levitz, 2010**). These students are interested in changing careers, advancing in their current careers, and embarking on their initial career paths via online programs that are focused on both academic and job-related goals. Online students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels seem to share some characteristics.

In a study of online graduate students at a midwestern university, **Colorado and Eberle (2010)** reported that more than half (52.4%) were over 30 years old and that 81.7% were employed at jobs more than 30 hours per week. This is in line with the Noel-Levitz 2010 survey of online learners from 97 schools, which found 50% of students to be over the age of 35, and the majority working full-time. “Convenience was the primary motivating factor for enrollment in the online program,” followed by flexible pacing and the ability to attend classes around their work schedules (Noel-Levitz, 2010, p. 9).

Importance of Career Services

Career-related services are just one area in which college students typically receive assistance. Other support areas include academic advising, personal counseling, disability services, tutoring, and multicultural programs. While there are many factors that determine a student’s success in an online program, the availability of these services has been associated with student satisfaction (Dahl, 2005). The availability of support services, including career services, may also play a role in student retention and community building. The online student’s need for support services, such as career counseling, advising, and tutoring, are similar to those of on-campus students (**Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2003**). Distance students also have a perceived need for these services (**Raphael, 2006**).

DEVELOPING DECISION-MAKING SKILLS

One of the purposes of the higher education career center is to assist students with the career decision-making process (Hammond, 2001). Making a career decision is not a one-time thing. As individuals make multiple career decisions and change jobs throughout their working lives, they rely on their career management skills to help clarify choices and make decisions.

PREPARING FOR CAREER CHANGE

Online programs are popular with those looking to make a switch from their current field of work to a new one and with those who want to advance in their current field. There are many reasons, both personal and professional, that may prompt an individual to think about changing careers. It may be a matter of the economy or new directions and trends in his or her current field. A recent press release from the **U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010)**, cited study findings that later Baby Boomers (born 1957 to 1964) held an average of 11 different jobs between the ages of 18 and 44. Defining and measuring career changes has been more difficult, but many people do experience multiple careers during their working years (**Bialik, 2010**).

ADDRESSING CURRENT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Effective career development and job search interactions are important as both students and universities face external pressures that include: "(1) tighter job markets, (2) more competition among schools for applicants, (3) higher tuition and 'return on investment expectations, (4) less on-campus recruiting [by employers], and (5) volatility in the economy." (**Garver, Spralls, & Divine, 2009**).

Benefits of Online Delivery

Students and career services professionals realize multiple advantages to online delivery. Students find any-time/any-place options not only for their courses, but also for access to support services and career guidance. The dynamic nature of digital information means that career center personnel can quickly update Web-based information and presentations, and post quick announcements and updates about upcoming events.

PERSONALIZATION.

Online formats allow students to access collections of links to other relevant service and support organizations and control the selection of services they want and need (Davidson, 2001). The integration of products and services is also possible, allowing students to participate in career development activities, such as ePortfolio building, throughout their academic programs, and work jointly with academic advisors, career counselors, instructors, and other learning professionals to support their achievement of education and career goals in a more personalized approach (**Schuler, 2010**).

NETWORKING WITH EMPLOYERS

From large employment sites like Monster.com to professional networking systems such as LinkedIn, companies are increasingly using technology to identify and communicate with students and other potential applicants. Moving career services online, and incorporating new and social media, can help students become familiar with professional use of the networks with which they may eventually interact with employers **(Weigley, 2011)**.

Challenges of Online Delivery

The challenges of online delivery include difficulty in tailoring services to individual needs. Individuals approach the career center with diverse needs, expectations, career planning skills, and levels of readiness to make career decisions. This group may include students at all academic levels as well as returning alumni, international students, and a wide range of career fields of interest. Finding the balance in offering flexible services to meet these needs, “with the right mix of technology and human contact,” can be a demanding process (Venable, 2010).

OUTCOMES

Measuring the outcomes of career service programs also presents difficulties, which is particularly true when the services are online (Davidson, 2001). Capturing placement rates of new graduates and tracking their employment over time can be labor intensive and difficult data to capture. Not all schools have provided this kind of tracking analysis in the past, although new regulations may encourage or require more detailed reports. Kaplan University, for example, has not tracked placement rates for online programs, but is required to track placement of ground campus students “according to a specific and time-limited period as prescribed by each respective state regulator or accreditor(s)” **(Kaplan Higher Education, 2011)**.

RESOURCES

There are also a host of issues related to creating online versions of typical on-ground services. The process of effectively planning and developing Web-based services requires careful assessment of the following areas: technical infrastructure, software needs, levels of interactivity (asynchronous and synchronous), training needs of career professionals and students, and budget resources **(Torres, 2006)**.

Traditional Career Services

What services does a typical career center offer?

The term career services can include a variety of programs and activities available to college and university students to assist with career-related issues. These issues range from career exploration and practical experience to job-search techniques and information about employers and current openings. A 2010 survey of traditional four-year colleges and universities, conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), revealed a list of 11 “typical” services offered by a majority of college career centers (**NACE, 2011**).

- Career counseling by appointment
- Career fairs
- Workshops
- Assistance with employer-offered internships
- Career assessment tools
- Drop-in career counseling
- Online counseling
- Assistance with academic internships
- Specialized career fairs
- On-campus interviewing
- Alumni outreach

Which career services are most popular?

In another survey of graduating college seniors, NACE found that there are five specific career services that were most popular among this group. These top five services were “used by more than half of the 13,000+ seniors taking part” in this student survey (**NACE, 2010**): Help in developing resume, job listings, job-search assistance, career counseling, and internship assistance.

MOST POPULAR CAREER SERVICE ACTIVITIES	% OF GRADUATING SENIORS IDENTIFIED
Help in developing resume	70.1%
Job listings	66.2%
Job-search assistance	62.3%
Career counseling	51.3%
Internship assistance	51.2%

From NACE, July 2010

Review of Online Career Centers

The NACE studies described above were used as a framework to review the services at 10 of the largest online colleges and universities. These schools range from those that are completely online to those with physical campus locations. Some of these schools have one main campus and others have regional locations across the United States, but all serve online students.

Which career services are offered online by online colleges?

Of the 10 career center websites reviewed, there was a range in the number of services provided. The level, amount, and availability of these services online can be difficult to judge from just the websites. In some cases, “assistance” may be in the form of samples, links, and articles, while in other cases it means one-on-one guidance with a career service professional.

MOST POPULAR CAREER SERVICE ACTIVITIES	% OF REVIEWED SCHOOLS OFFERING
Help in developing resume	100%
Job listings	60%
Job-search assistance	100%
Career counseling	80%
Internship assistance	30%

Referenced on career center websites of schools reviewed

RESUME ASSISTANCE

Some sort of resume assistance was available on each school’s career information website. This ranged from posted articles, links, and resume samples to one-on-one support and critiques of student resume documents.

JOB LISTINGS

Job listings were mentioned or provided openly by most of the schools. Depending on the school, these postings may be links to national databases (e.g. **CareerBuilder.com**, **SimplyHired.com**, **America’s Job Bank**) or in-house systems managed by the school’s career center and based on relationships with specific employers. The types of listings available may include internships, part-time positions, and student employment opportunities, as well as full-time professional positions.

JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE

Another broad category, job search assistance appears to be available at all of the schools reviewed. Descriptors include: strategies, tips, tools, and best practices. Students at some schools receive this assistance online through links and posted articles, while others attend online seminars or workshops, and perhaps work directly with a counselor career advisor.

CAREER COUNSELING

Many of the websites list one-on-one or personalized assistance with a career counselor, career consultant, career advisor, or career assistant. **Walden University was one of the few schools to describe distance career counseling options** – students can set up an appointment via an online scheduler to have a one-on-one phone call with a career advisor.

INTERNSHIP ASSISTANCE

Only three of the schools clearly listed information about internships and how the career center might be of assistance in helping online students secure these experiences. Again, the level of service varies from a list of links to general internship information and sites to individual placement assistance.

Several career center leaders weighed in on popular services at their schools through the OnlineCollege.org questionnaire. At Capella University, online resume samples and a “virtual critique” are among the most popular services with student, along with YouTube videos, webinars, and online career courses. At Post University, resume review and cover letter writing are the most popular career services, and at Walden University it is their one-on-one advising by phone.

How are online colleges delivering career services?

A combination of technologies and formats are used to provide online students with guidance on career related topics. Beyond static websites, prospective students will also find blogs, recorded webinars, and the use of social media to provide information about career services resources and encourage student participation.

SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS

A wide range of workshops and seminars are advertised by seven of the career centers. Some offer live (synchronous) sessions online and others provide recorded (asynchronous) presentations that students can view at their convenience. In some cases, both live and recorded events are available to students. These sessions address typical job search topics, such as interviewing skills and working with recruiters. **Liberty University’s Virtual Career Center** Coordinator, Robert Johns, reported frequent use of audio and video recordings, including YouTube delivery, as well as the pursuit of “live webcasting, live chat” events in the future. Webinars are also delivered to students at Walden University.

PORTALS AND VENDORS

Some career centers make use of the school's learning management system or use their own Web portals to provide student access to deliver services online. Post University, for example, uses their **Career Post portal** to deliver services online. Other schools use a career services system that is outsourced. **CareerBeam** is one example of this kind of system, which provides a range of services such as assessments, resume writing tools, and industry profiles.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NETWORKING SITES

The NACE 2010 survey of 557 college career centers found that almost 60% reported having a Facebook fan page, and 26% are using Twitter. Numerous examples of the use of social media were found in this review. **The Walden University Career Center's Director writes a blog** and manages a **Twitter account**. Kaplan's Career Center manages a **Facebook page**. Liberty University's career center is using **LinkedIn**, Twitter, Facebook and **YouTube** to serve students and alumni.

Comparing Traditional and Online Schools

Compared to the NACE project's list of five most popular services, the online schools seem to offer all of these, if in varying degrees. Online career centers largely provide resume assistance, job listings, job search assistance, career counseling, and internship assistance. All 10 of the online schools reviewed provide resume and job search assistance, and a majority also provide career counseling and job listings. The availability of these services is similar in traditional and online schools although the online schools may be more reliant on technology for the delivery of the services to students.

There are several other services offered by the majority of the online colleges and universities that extend the offerings beyond the "top 5" to include more of the 11 typical services reported by NACE (2010). Online college career centers also provide workshops and seminars on career related topics, administration and interpretation of career assessment tools (e.g. skills, interests, personality, values), and career resource libraries, including both in-house collections of digital resources and links to external sites.

Several of the online institutions also work directly with alumni, which is a typical service at traditional schools. Mentoring programs like the one at Liberty University facilitate network building between graduates and current students. Alumni associations, like the one at the University of Phoenix, provide a host of services to graduates, including career guidance and resources.

Career centers at traditional colleges and universities also offer a variety of online services. According to NACE (2011), 68% of the 750 schools responding to the survey provide online counseling. The “most commonly used technologies among respondents” include websites and online job postings (NACE, 2011, p. 5). The use of social media by traditional centers is also increasing through Facebook pages and Twitter profiles (NACE, 2011). At DeVry University St. Louis services are offered both online and face-to-face. These services range from counseling and workshops to internship assistance and employer interviewing

What innovations are on the horizon?

In response to a brief questionnaire conducted recently by OnlineCollege.org, seven career center directors at online and traditional institutions reported on innovations they are currently pursuing. These innovations include the addition of services as well as new uses of technology to deliver services.

SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION

Several centers report moving forward with the addition of more “live” events. These include chat and webcasts for workshop/seminar activities for real-time interaction between career professionals and online students.

SOCIAL MEDIA

While several schools’ career centers already actively use social media and networking tools, others plan to join them in these efforts as a way to extend their reach to more students. Career center accounts, separate from university accounts, are growing in popularity. This is the case at both online and traditional schools. Bennington College reported efforts to expand current social media use to increase student awareness of available services and their new physical location.

INTERACTIVITY AND INTEGRATION

Websites are useful for providing static information, but more dynamic solutions are on the way with the development of online elements that allow the student to interact with content and services. Interactive career planners are one example of the new tools that career centers are working on to integrate academic and career services. As in traditional career services, online centers are looking for ways to better collaborate with academic services and technology resources to help students with career decisions and planning throughout their academic programs.

ALUMNI ACTIVITY

Online career centers are looking to expand their services to alumni by using technology for communication and the exchange of information. Having separate sites for alumni and extended services through alumni associations are just two ways in which this expansion is taking place.

While most of the online schools are similar to traditional ones in terms of basic career services such as career counseling and resume writing assistance, there are additional services delivered via online technologies mentioned on only a couple of the websites reviewed for this report. These services, listed below, may become more widely used in the coming years as the availability of technology, and familiarity with its use, expands.

VIRTUAL CAREER FAIRS

Several of the online schools reviewed sponsor virtual career fair events to make connections between students and hiring employers. These events incorporate synchronous and asynchronous tools to allow for initial conversations and applicant screening at a distance.

ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS

Whether developed using a vendor system, such as OptimalResume, or through student websites, the use of portfolios is moving beyond student assessment and into the job search process as a way to provide evidence of student skills to potential employers.

ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

Walden University's career services group reports regular use of discussion forums. Asynchronous forums have long been a staple of online courses as a standard feature of learning management systems, but career service centers now leverage them to engage students in dialogues about career planning and the job search process.

Considerations for Prospective Students and Online Career Centers

This project reviewed a small sampling of schools, and the report is limited to what information that is posted on their public websites, but it is a start in comparing online and traditional services and helps us develop a list of questions prospective students should pursue as they research online schools and programs.

What should prospective students ask about career planning and job search support?

Students should consider their own priorities both in enrolling in an online higher education program and in their employment needs after graduation. They should consider which specific career activities would be helpful and how they would like to engage in these activities with or without the guidance of a career services advisor or counselor. Prospective students can explore each of the schools they are researching for evidence of these components and make it part of their decision when choosing a school and program.

ASK FOR MORE INFORMATION

The information available online may be limited depending on the school. Students should ask to speak with someone working in the school's career services center and to find out if more information may be available, but not currently posted online. Otherwise, students won't have a full picture of the services offered until they enroll.

ARE ON-CAMPUS SERVICES AVAILABLE?

If an online program is also part of a campus system are online students eligible for services at the physical career center locations on main or branch campuses? Having access to both online and in-person services extends the possibilities.

WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE CAREER SERVICES STAFF MEMBERS?

Find out how the career center's advisors are prepared to do their work. Just as faculty are expected to be qualified and current in their fields, career services professionals should also be skilled and up-to-date on relevant issues.

How can career centers continue to leverage technology for delivery of services?

Virtual career centers provide critical services to students, particularly in times of a weak economic outlook and depressed job market. These students value the convenience and flexibility offered by online delivery in their academic programs. How can career centers leverage technology to increase access to and availability of career exploration, decision-making, placement, and alumni activities?

EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES

Career center professionals should look at the variety of online services offered both by traditional institutions and other online colleges and universities. What is working and where can collaborative relationships be developed?

THINK BEYOND DELIVERY MODE

Even traditional schools with online programs and students may benefit from online career services options. Traditional students who attend classes on campus may also be interested in online services that allow for extended access beyond office hours.

TALK TO YOUR STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

Career center professionals should conduct a needs analysis with their online students to find out what kinds of services they want and how they prefer to have them delivered. What are their perceived needs for career guidance and resources? Survey alumni to find out what services were most helpful in their career development and job search process. What are alumni recommendations for changes?

Conclusion

Today's college and university students, at both online and traditional schools, rely on career services for assistance with a host of decisions and resources important to successfully securing employment after graduation. The services being offered by online and on-ground schools are similar and rely on some of the same technologies to meet student needs. In-house solutions, contracted services, and collaborative efforts are all possible as administrators work to meet these needs.

As the capabilities of technologies change, online colleges and universities will continue to explore the opportunities to offer additional services to students. Career services are an important part of the support online students need to transfer from school to work, and to continue to advance in their future careers.

Resources

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Walden University	careercenter.waldenu.edu

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