

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

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In the following report, Hanover Research presents the results of a best practices analysis of student services for distance and online students.

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Executive Summary

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Recommendations

Based on an analysis of best practices in student services for distance and online students, Hanover recommends that institutions:

- 1 Offer online resume creation tools and self-assessments among career services.** The vast majority of students enroll in online degree programs for career-related reasons, and these services are among the most commonly-offered and most commonly-used in online formats.
- 2 Develop an online student orientation.** Peer-to-peer connections are highly valued by online learners, and orientations can develop these connections while transferring important information about other topics like time management, study skills, and online course structure.
- 3 Examine technological supports for subgroups of interest.** In discussing how to best serve online learners with disabilities or ESL students, many sources focus on issues beyond the remit of student services, such as instructional design, accessibility technology, or learning management systems

Fast Facts



74%

Percentage of **online learners motivated by career goals** to enter their degree program



17%

Percentage of **online learners at programs with purely on-campus resume creation or self-assessment services**



57%

Percentage of **online learners who think interacting with peers is “important” or “very important” to their success**

Key Findings

Online students value career services, and resume creation, self-assessments, and university-maintained job search websites are among the standard services offered online. Nearly three-quarters of online college students are motivated to enroll in their program for career reasons, such as moving to a new job or gaining a higher salary. More than half of online students say they have accessed or are interested in online resume creation tools, self-assessments, or university-maintained job search websites, and over 60 percent of programs offer these services fully-online.

Online orientations support student success and peer interaction. Orientations provide students with a low-pressure environment to acquaint themselves with the institutions’ learning management system, and provide a structured means of ensuring students absorb information resources. Depending on the design, students can also begin to interact with their peers, which about half identify as important to their success.

Disabled students will particularly benefit from early filing of accommodation requests, testing online courses before committing, and access to online library and tutoring resources. Online and adult learners often do not seek recognition of their disabilities until already behind in their coursework, and other students need to determine whether their existing technologies are sufficient to navigate a course’s online resources – both groups can benefit from being encouraged to file accommodation requests early. Students with physical disabilities may benefit from virtual resources of online libraries, and can make up for medically-induced absences by taking advantage of online tutoring support.

ESL, English, and math online learners sometimes have access to online tutoring, workshops, and third-party resources. In general, ESL programs with robust or innovative offerings appear to focus those offerings on campus-based students; despite this, some institutions provide ESL students with a curated list of useful third-party resources. Several institutions with a large online presence host online writing and math centers with similar third-party resources as well as subject-area tutoring, live online workshops, and third-party tutoring options.

Student Services Overview

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Characteristics of Effective Supports Services

Effective student services are a critical component of quality online education. In its *Five Pillars of Quality Online Education*, the [Online Learning Consortium](#) (OLC) identifies "Student Satisfaction" as "the most important key to continuing learning." According to the OLC, student support services is among the three components of this pillar – along with "course rigor and fairness" and "professor and peer interaction."

The organization goes on to note that:



"students are satisfied when provider services – learning resources, academic and administrative services, technology and infrastructure support – are responsive, timely, and personalized."

–Online Learning Consortium

Student support services are also a component of the OLC's "Access" pillar, which lists three areas of support:

- Academic Support** includes services such as tutoring, advising, and library resources.
- Administrative Support** includes services such as financial aid and disability support.
- Technical Support** includes factors such as such as hardware reliability and uptime and help desk support.

Examples of services within the "Access" pillar include "24/7 help, readiness assessment, [and] support social groups" and "library, tutoring, [and] digital learning objects." As institutions review or establish services for online students, they should be guided by these areas of support.

Five Pillars of Quality Online Education

Student support services are an important component of the "Access" and "Student Satisfaction" pillars of quality online higher education.



Learning Effectiveness

"concerned with ensuring that online students are provided with a high quality education"



Scale

"principle that enables institutions to offer their best educational value to learners and to achieve capacity enrollment"



Access

"provides the means for all qualified, motivated students to complete ...programs in their disciplines of choice"



Faculty Satisfaction

"means that instructors find the online teaching experience personally rewarding and professionally beneficial"



Student Satisfaction

"reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience"

Source: [Online Learning Consortium](#)



OLC Student Services Scorecard



To help institutions track their performance in providing online student services, OLC developed a *Quality Scorecard for Online Student Support* from the experiences of the Florida State University System and Texas State University. Institutions can give themselves a score on each metric (2 = Exemplary Service; 1 = Service is Available; 0 = Limited or No Service), and the full scorecard gives examples of how each of these translate to the individual metrics (profiled on Slide 5).

Source: [Online Learning Consortium](#)

Student Services Overview – Performance Metrics

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Quality Scorecard for Online Student Support

Institution	Performance and Provision Metrics (modified)					Points
Admissions	Responds to prospective student inquiries during the admission process	Provides virtual campus tours during admissions	Has online applications	Has the capability for online submission of required documents	Provides onboarding service support for online students	10
Financial Aid	Provides access to a financial advisor/coordinator	Provides access to financial literacy assistance	--	--	--	4
Pre-enrollment Advising	Provides advising for students to set academic goals	Provides access to transcript evaluation/degree audits	Provides access to enrollment planning	Provides placement testing, if needed	Provides ability to contact the student disability office during the pre-enrollment process, and services are in place before the first classes	10
Veteran's Services	Provides access to support for personal/financial VA processes	Provides access to transition support services	--	--	--	4
Career Counseling	Allows students to explore career assessments during counseling	Provides access to job placement services	Provides access to internship resources and/or services	Provides access to resume writing workshops	Provides access to interview preparation workshops	10
Orientation	Provides first-year advising for FTIC students	Provides orientation for transfer students	Provides access to course catalog/information during the registration period	Allows students to make payments for courses/applications/ deposit fees	--	8
Post-Enrollment Services	Offers academic advising to students	Has early-alert notifications and follow-through contact with students	Provides access to counseling (mental and psychological issues)	Offers students access to academic proctoring	Allows students to participate in student/campus organizations	18*
Library	Provides access to library support personnel	Provides access to library materials and databases	Provides access to library workshops and tutorial library skills	Provides access to the library resources through a website using multiple devices	Provides library app to improve the accessibility of its resources	10
Students with Disabilities Services	Allows students to request academic accommodations	Offers new student intake appointments	Provides academic accommodations	Provides assistive technology access	--	8
Technology Support	Provides access to help desk support for technical support.	Provides access to information about the minimal software and computer requirements	Provides same access to required software as traditional students.	--	--	6
Graduate Student Support	Provides orientation for graduate students.	Provides advising for students to set academic goals for their program	Provides online guidance for students in the development of their thesis and dissertation projects	Makes training available for how to apply for grants.	Creates opportunities to network with other graduate students on research topics	14*

Source: [Online Learning Consortium](#)

*Additional metrics in this field have been removed and are located in report appendix.

Student Preferences

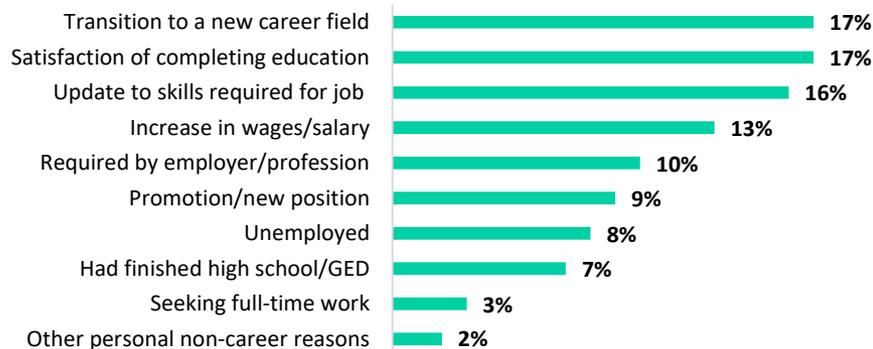
Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Overview

While an important component of student success, students services may not significantly affect enrollment decisions. The 2018 [Online College Students](#) survey was conducted by Learning House and Aslanian Market Research. The survey collected data from 1,500 students who had recently enrolled in, were currently enrolled in, or who in the next 12 months planned to enroll in a fully-online undergraduate or graduate degree, certificate, or licensure program. The survey found that the most common “top three most important factors” in students’ choices of where to enroll were tuition and fees (34 percent), reputation of the program (13 percent), or reputation of the school (11 percent). While the survey did not explicitly ask for students’ opinion on “student services,” types of services (e.g., career services and pre-enrollment counseling), were answer options.

Career Services

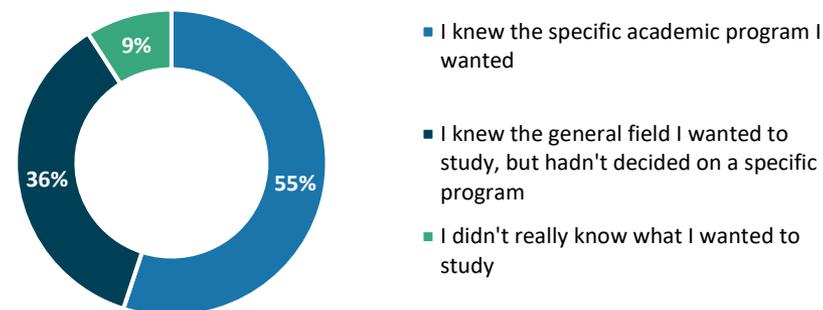
Most online learners are motivated by career goals. According to the 2018 [survey](#), nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of online college students are motivated to enroll in their program for career reasons of some sort. Given the importance of career goals among prospective students, institutions should ensure to offer, and advertise, career services. They should also ensure to offer career services for different types of students (e.g., graduate versus non-traditional undergraduate students).



Source: [Online College Students](#)

Pre-Enrollment Advising

Many students are unsure of their desired program of study. When [asked](#) to what extent they knew the specific program in which they wanted to enroll when selecting their most recent program, about 45 percent of online learners were at least somewhat unsure. This highlights the importance of enrollment counselors who can inform prospective students about available programs and provide guidance to undecided students based on their needs, goals, and interests.



Source: [Online College Students](#)

Online learners generally bring in credits from transfer coursework and other forms of prior learning. About 85 percent of [online undergraduates](#) bring in some transfer credit, and 23 percent have even completed 60 or more semester hours. In addition, 32 percent of online learners are awarded credit for prior learning assessments – though the same proportion indicated they were unsure if they received this type of award.

Given the importance of these services to program completion time and net program cost, enrollment counselors should be able to clearly articulate policies in these areas as well as encourage students along the PLA process to get maximum credit for previous experiences. Indeed, among the five most common [student regrets](#) were that they did not: talk more with an enrollment counselor (14 percent), learn more about transfer credit policies (11 percent), and learn more about the program requirements (8 percent). When examining services for online students, institutions should also consider how to communicate these resources and services to students.

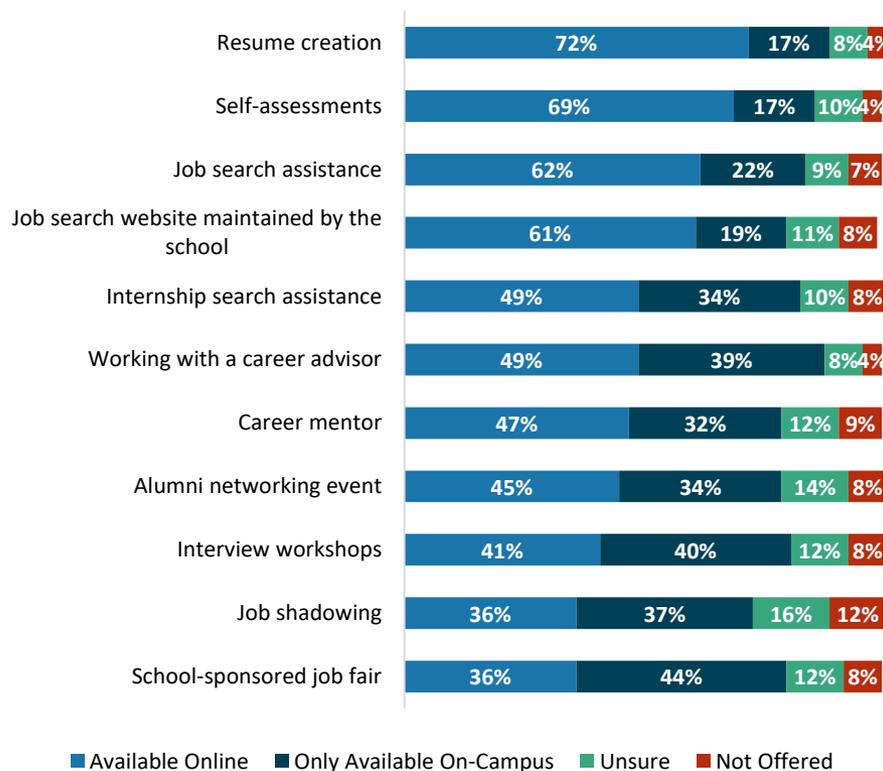
Student Preferences – Career Services

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Career Services

Resume creation tools, self-assessments, and university-maintained job search websites are standard career services for online learners. All three of these offerings are among the five most common services *available* in online formats according to the 2018 survey of [Online College Students](#), and all are among the five most commonly *accessed or desired* offerings. Notably, the survey's 2017 iteration found that 75 percent of online students reported that their school offered career services (about 77 percent of whom accessed those services). Among the quarter of online students who reported their school did not offer these services, two-thirds wished they did.

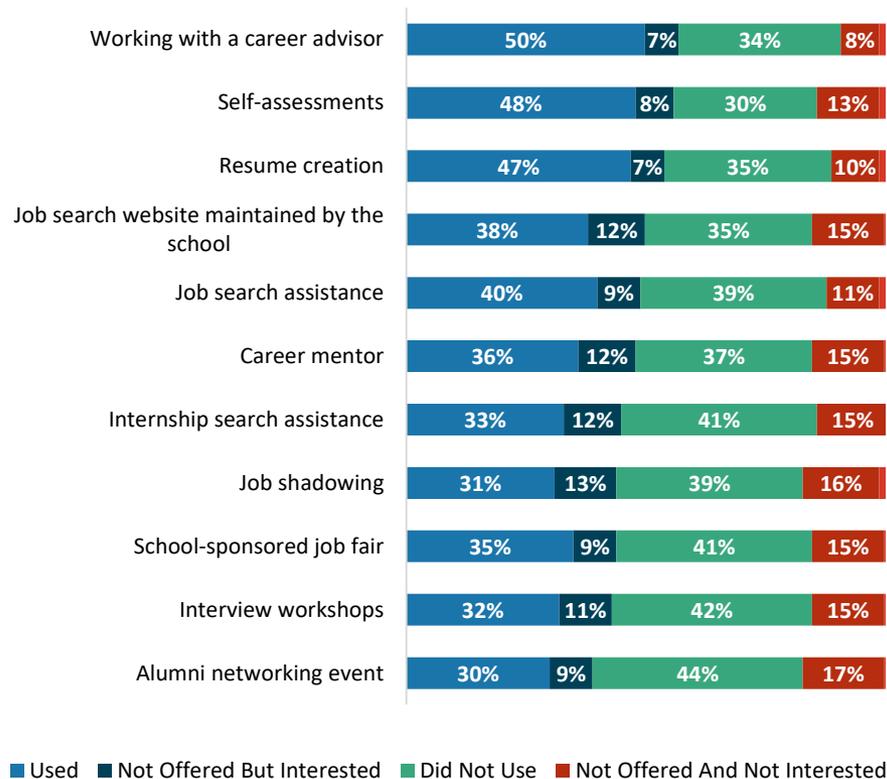
Most Common Online Career Services



Source: [Online College Students](#)

Question: How were each of [the following] services made available?

Most Common Accessed Career Services

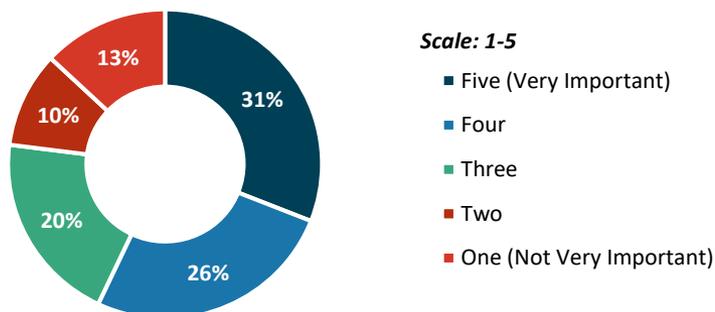


Source: [Online College Students](#)

Question: Which of the following career services did you use?

Student Engagement Initiatives

Students value opportunities to engage with program peers. The 2018 [Online College Students](#) survey found that 57 percent of online students (current and past) thought that interacting with peers was “important” or “very important” to their academic success (see below).



Online student engagement initiatives aim to increase peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor interaction. For example, an EAB forum on the topic [identified](#) initiatives such as:

- ❑ Online Student Clubs
- ❑ Online Student Government Organizations
- ❑ Online Leadership Development Programs
- ❑ Online Contests
- ❑ Online Speed-networking Events

A particularly ambitious example of an online institution encouraging student engagement is Southern New Hampshire University’s [SNHUconnect](#), where students in online programs can “discover [their] passions and attend virtual and live events” as well as “share interests, join clubs and learning communities, receive academic support, gain career guidance and connect with 18,000 peers who are active every month.”

Online Student Orientations

Online student orientations are an important component of student engagement and support. According to a [forum](#) of seven medium-sized institutions, online student orientations allow new online learners to familiarize themselves with the resources and tools of the program. The forum identified six key ideas for these offerings:

	Low-Pressure Environment: online learners can experience the institution’s Learning Management System (LMS) before their first classes.
	Online-Specific Focus: online learners are most receptive to information about their common challenges (e.g., “technical problems...time management challenges”).
	Orientation Quiz: online learners can complete a quiz at the end to ensure they fully absorbed the information.
	Nonselective Purpose: administrators do not use mandatory orientation requirements as a means of weeding out potentially unsuccessful learners.
	Student Feedback: online learners can complete brief surveys at the end of orientation to provide feedback which administrators can incorporate in regular revisions.
	Institution-wide Access: students and faculty in traditional programs that use the institution’s LMS also benefit from online orientation materials.

Online resources without institutional guidance may not be sufficient support for online students. According to an [article](#) in *Frontiers in Education*, a successful online orientation should include “comprehensive overviews of the course structure, recommended time commitments and expectation of students, familiarization with required instructional media and software, and guidance on the communication tools needed for student–staff interactions.”

Student Services for Disabled Students

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Overview

Many online and adult students with disabilities do not seek out the accommodations they need to be successful. [Adult students](#) are less likely to apply for an accommodation through a parent advocate, are sometimes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, and often have outdated paperwork – making them less likely to seek and obtain relevant accommodations for their disabilities. Indeed, according to one [report](#): “94 percent of high school students with learning disabilities get some kind of help, [while] just 17 percent of learning-disabled college students do.” Because of this disparity, adult students with disabilities [are](#) paradoxically both more likely to take online courses and more likely to find these courses difficult.

These data are in line with [wider](#) trends of students not seeking accommodation for their disability, instead planning to “just start the course and figure out what they may need and then adjust accordingly.” Experts recommend that students act as “self-advocates” and “prepare to be direct and open about what they need to succeed.” An effective student support service would thus make sure students know how to seek accommodations, make the process easily completed for remote students, and would encourage students to request accommodations at the outset of their course of study before they could fall behind.

Students may benefit from testing their courses early with any assistive devices they plan to use. The University of Illinois [recommends](#) students take courses early to ensure that any “chat, homework upload, and exam locations are accessible and meet [their] accommodation need.” Students can also test their ability to change font size or background for greater readability.

Institutions should articulate how their learning management system can accommodate students with disabilities. Learning Management Systems like Blackboard and Desire2Learn are designed to be accessible to students with disabilities, but cannot guarantee that instructors do not post content that is inaccessible to some learners. Some experts [recommend](#) that students explore these potential systems when choosing an online program.

Services for Students with Physical Disabilities

The Best Schools [identifies](#) several features of value to students with physical disabilities, including:

- ❑ **Disability Resource Center:** where students can report their disability to school personnel and let the school know that they need accommodations.
- ❑ **Online Library Services:** which can help students who have difficulty handling books or turning pages by providing digital document delivery (with appropriate assistive technology).
- ❑ **Online Tutoring Services or Writing Centers:** which, offered through chat or live-video platforms, can help students fill in the gaps of lectures they may have missed due to physical limitations or disability-related scheduling demands.



Spotlight: *Purdue Global*



In its [listing](#) of Student Support Services for online students, Purdue Global notes that students with disabilities are provided additional support from the [Center for Disability Services](#) – a division of the Academic Success Center – which handles all accommodations for students with disabilities.

- To **request an accommodation**, potential or current students can be referred to the office through their University representative and/or contact the office directly by telephone, email, or fax.
- The university aims to consistently meet the “[Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG), as set forth by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).”
- The office does not outline specific accommodations or services provided to online students.

Source: [Purdue Global](#)

Overview

Most support services for English As A Second Language (ESL) students are offered on campus. Institutions with robust support services for ESL students (e.g., designated writing center support, financial aid application assistance, peer-to-peer talking sessions) rarely note that these services can be accessed online.

This finding is in line with a [report](#) from the American Institutes for Research, *Serving English Language Learners in Higher Education*, which largely focuses its recommendations on topics like testing requirements, course flexibility, and leveraging technology rather than student support services. Taken together, these trends suggest that student support services are not of primary importance in addressing ESL challenges, and that institutions may be best served by a low-intensity investment in this area – for example, compiling an online resource of external tools for ESL students, as is done by SUNY Empire State College (see right) or [Creighton University](#).

Clear and easy-to-navigate resources may be equally important to robust or innovative offerings. Given that very few institutions advertise online student support services for ESL students, institutions may be able to differentiate themselves from other programs simply by outlining how universally-available services can be particularly leveraged by ESL students. For example, SUNY Empire State College [lists](#) no online learning support for ESL students other than its third-party resources, despite offering extensive online tutoring and writing center services that could be particularly relevant to native speakers of other languages.

Spotlight: SUNY Empire State College

Like several universities, SUNY Empire State College has compiled a list of external online resources for ELL/ESL students.

General ELL/ESL Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activities for ESL Students: “extensive, diverse collection of prescreened online activities for ESL students of all levels”• Dave’s ESL Cafe: “megasite for ESL students and teachers”• English as a Second Language: “hub of hundreds of free learning sites for ESL students and teachers”• Story Archives: “contains more than 50 news stories, each accompanied by RealVideo and/or RealAudio narration...Also included are many exercises to check reading comprehension”
College Writing for ESL/ELL Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advice on Academic Writing: “presents writing and grammar information on the college level in many categories”• Paradigm Online Writing Assistant: “online writer’s guide and handbook for writers at every level”• Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): “help is offered in handouts and materials; downloadable PowerPoint workshops and presentations; [and] an excellent search engine”• Writer’s Web “reflect(s) the stages in the writing process and links to topics such as getting started; writing first drafts; focusing and connecting ideas, analysis and argument”
TOEFL Preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• TOEFL Go Anywhere: “Educational Testing Service site for the TOEFL...offers online registration, a description of the exam, practice tests and links to other sites offering TOEFL preparation, English-language instruction and tips for studying abroad.”

Source: [SUNY Empire State College](#) (Online Writing Center)

Student Services for Math/English Support

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Overview

Subject-specific student support services are often provided through writing or math help centers or through designated third-party resources. Third-party online student services are more standardized; for example, [Post University](#) students have access to as many as 10 free hours of online, one-to-one tutoring via *Tutor.com*, which includes “most subject areas of Mathematics, Writing, Accounting, Economics, Finance, Science, History and Research projects.” The service is accessed via the institution’s *Blackboard* system and is available 24/7.

Arizona State University

	Student Services	
Services Summary	Synchronous online services include:	Asynchronous online services include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Subject Area Tutoring• Writing Tutoring• Graduate Writing Support• Review Sessions• Supplemental Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Writing Center Workshops

Services Highlights	
Tutoring/Support	Students schedule an appointment with a tutor or use the Drop-In Writing Waiting Room (Sun-Thurs 3pm-10pm).
Online Review Sessions	Tutors knowledgeable in specific subject areas use class content provided by the faculty to host reviews. Reviews are available for a variety of subject areas and designed to help students in a specific class “work together to review material and concepts in preparation for tests.”
Online Supplemental Instruction	Students meet with classmates “to discuss concepts, compare notes and share strategies” in structured study sessions led by “SI leaders” (students who have successfully completed the class and attend all class sessions).
Online Writing Center Workshops	Students can request workshops “on a variety of topics,” using an online form and are sent a workshop link to watch at their convenience.

Source: [Arizona State University](#)

Brandman University

	Online Writing and Math Center	
Services Summary	Synchronous online services include:	Asynchronous online services include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One-On-One Tutoring• Online Office Hours• Online Workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paper Submissions• Links to academic programs and online resources• List of pre-screened, independent editors and statisticians who offer services to university students.

Services Highlights	
Math Tutoring	The Center’s tutors have advanced degrees and expertise “in a variety of math topics including: Basic Math, Finance, Statistics, College Algebra, and many more. ”
Writing Tutoring	The Center’s tutors have advanced degrees and expertise “in a variety of writing topics including: Basic Writing, Rhetoric & Composition, ESL, Professional Studies, and many more. ”
Live Writing and Math Workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Workshops are generally 30-60 minutes, and take place about three to five times per week throughout the semester.• Workshops take place asynchronously through the Zoom platform.• Topics of workshops include: <i>Strategies for Reducing Math Anxiety</i>, <i>Excel: Basics</i>, <i>How to Write Effective Thesis Statements</i>, <i>StatCrunch: Learning the Basics</i>, <i>Grammar Review</i>, and <i>APA Formatting & Style Basics</i>.

Source: [Brandman University](#)

Note: Institution also offers [Multimedia Writing & Design Support](#).

Appendix: Performance Metrics

Student Services for Distance and Online Students

Unlisted Metrics from the Quality Scorecard for Online Student Support

Category	Additional Performance and Provision Metrics (verbatim)
Post-Enrollment Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students have access to success/academic coaching• Students have access to health services• Students have access to personal development opportunities (e.g. service clubs, leadership opportunities, mentoring programs, research projects, or other activities that are available to on campus students)• Students have access to tutoring services
Graduate Student Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes training available for how to apply for IRB review at the institution• Makes training available online for students in grant searching tools

Source: [Online Learning Consortium](#)

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