

Commentary

Higher Education E-Learning Support Trends

Where and when the e-learning help desk is sourced is still being determined by e-learning decision makers, but few institutions currently offer around-the-clock help to students and instructional staff.

Providing sufficient and timely support to online learners and instructors has always been a challenge for higher-education institutions, and current trends suggest that it will become even more difficult. The key reason for this is the rapid growth of e-learning use. According to recent Gartner survey data (based on an international survey of 117 higher education e-learning decision makers, conducted in September 2003, and similar Gartner surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002), about half of all students are enrolled in classroom courses that are supplemented by e-learning technologies. By year-end 2005, this figure will exceed 70 percent (0.8 probability). Faculty use has experienced similar growth, more than tripling since 1999 (see "E-Learning in Higher Education: A Quiet Revolution").

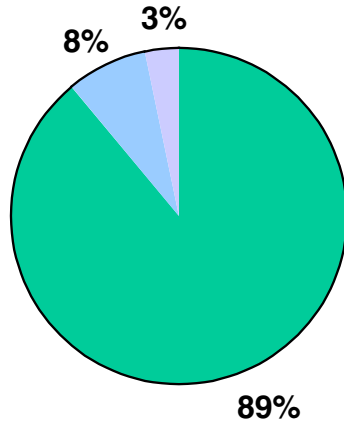
This degree of growth has placed heavy pressure on support organizations, which, in turn, has helped to shape e-learning environments. Among the 77 percent of institutions that have selected a single standard course management system (CMS), their top reasons for standardization are 1) eliminating the cost of supporting multiple products, and 2) the increased ease of providing technical support to users. Most of the benefits of product standardization, however, has already been realized (see "Higher-Education CMS Standardization Is Leveling Out"). As e-learning participation heads toward near-universal adoption among higher-education institutions, support organizations will face new demands — not only as a result of the sheer weight of user numbers, but because of the broadening range of needs and skill levels presented by a more-diverse user community.

However, survey results indicate that even as user communities become larger and more diverse, institutions continue to carry most of the burden with internal resources (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Eighty-nine percent of institutions reported handling student e-learning help desk support in-house; 8 percent used outside vendors; 3 percent offered no support to students at all. Of the institutions offering student support, 86 percent provided it on a limited basis. Fourteen percent offered around-the-clock (24x7) support. Among the institutions offering 24x7 support to students, 69 percent indicated the help desk support was in-house. The relatively higher rate of outsourcing among 24x7 institutions suggests that the difficulty of adapting traditional IT staffing and support practices to meet the needs of an expanding student user base is helping to overcome higher education's traditional reluctance to outsource.

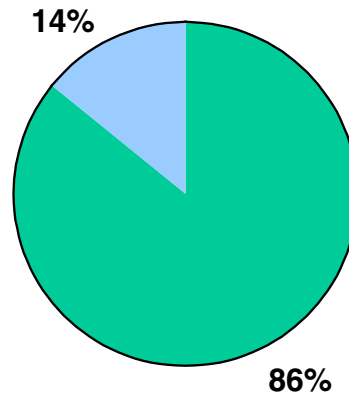
Gartner

Figure 1
Support for Students Using E-Learning Systems

Support Sourcing for Students



Hours of Support for Students



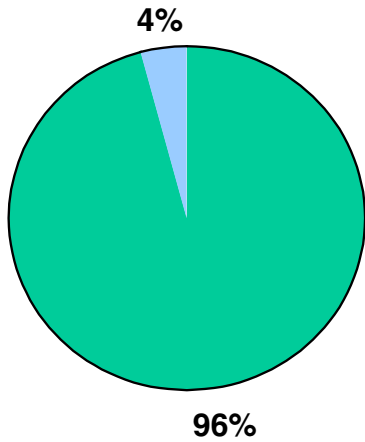
- In-house
- Outsourced
- No support/Not available

- Limited hours
- 24x7

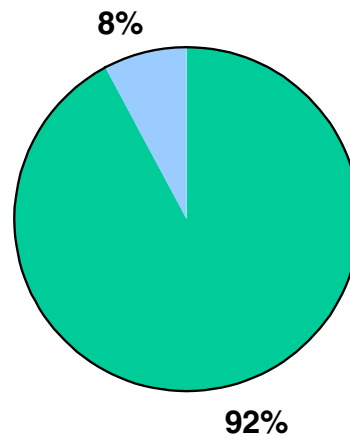
Source: Gartner Research (October 2003)

Figure 2
Support for Instructional Staff Using E-Learning Systems

Support Sourcing for Instructional Staff



Hours of Support for Instructional Staff



- In-house
- Outsourced

- Limited hours
- 24x7

Source: Gartner Research (June 2004)

The pattern of support for instructors was somewhat different. Although all institutions reported making help desk support available to e-learning instructional staff, it was less likely to be outsourced or available 24x7 than student support. Ninety-six percent of the respondents supported their instructional staff in-house and 4 percent outsourced. Overwhelmingly, support hours were provided on limited a limited basis (92 percent), with only 8 percent of the institutions offering 24x7 services. The sourcing profile of this smaller 24x7 group, was similar to that of the group of institutions offering 24x7 support for students, with approximately two-thirds of the support provided in-house. Thus, while institutions seem to perceive that

the needs and work habits of students justify 24x7 support more than those of instructors, they face similar challenges in providing staffing support for each group.

Clearly, institutions are providing the necessary levels of e-learning support. However, the model for where and when students and staff will be supported is evolving as college and university e-learning decision makers attempt to discern how much support is needed, when it is needed and how best to pay for these additional services. Formal-use studies, in combination with an institution's e-learning growth goals, can supply data to make support decisions. When a technology becomes a widely accepted part of the instructional mission of an institution, the cost of supporting that technology, which may have originated within academic departments, becomes invisible to those same academic departments. In the case of e-learning, service and support is an additional budget item needed to support an enterprisewide e-learning technology.

Gartner analyst interviews with clients suggest that support needs vary according to the calendar, with the greatest demand generally occurring during the first weeks of a semester. As a result, support hours may change accordingly. Furthermore, the options to offer increasing hours of support can come in the form of a combination of in-house and outsourced services. Companies such as Embanet offer full 24x7 service or limited support to institutions. Additionally where there are systems offices, such as state or consortiums groups, additional support hours to individual institutions are established at the central office.

As the number of students and staff using e-learning continues to grow, colleges and universities will continue to meet the e-learning needs for support as their budgets permit, but finding the best support with in limited budgets will continue to be a challenge. To meet this challenge:

- Plan on support needs to grow at the same rate as your institution's rate of e-learning supplemental use. Pure online delivered instruction will require 24x7 support by 2005 to remain competitive for pure online courses.
- Standardize when appropriate. The current trend to standardize on a single CMS platform will help contain support costs to students and staff.
- IT decision makers must determine the best and most cost-efficient way to support these increasing help desk services. Outsourcing all or part of e-learning support may become necessary if in-house staff and budget cannot be stretched to meet the demand.
- Institutions that are part of an educational system or consortium should investigate sharing academic support services.

Bottom Line: E-learning students and staff support demands will increase as more courses incorporate e-learning tools. Determining when and where this support is offered will include creative combinations of in-house and outsourced e-learning support through 2005.