

# The Paradox of 24/7/365 Access in Higher Education

The rapid explosion of technology has brought a fundamental sea change in the requirements to effectively support the higher education institution as a whole. A “perfect storm” has occurred where exploding end-user support volume has collided with increasing expectations for real-time Education Services Management (ESM)—yet internal resources remain constant or are shrinking.

To support this demand, transformative colleges and universities must recognize that ESM is mission critical to achieving the core mission of the institution. Leaders must be willing to ask the difficult questions

of how to structure, staff, and manage the service and support function. By taking the first steps to address the 24/7 paradox, these colleges and universities will have an advantage over their peers who have not yet started addressing the challenges of meeting end user demand in the age of “Google time.”

**In short:** Demand for real-time Education Services Management has increased exponentially. Service drives student success, satisfaction, and retention. Colleges and universities must rethink how they deliver support services to achieve the mission of the institution.

## The Challenge of Cost-Effectively Supporting Education 2.0

Over the past few years, many colleges and universities have realized two of the largest challenges of managing a Help Desk:

- Staffing cost-effectively for the lulls of July as well as the peaks of September and
- Meeting end-user demand for multiple support channels, including: self-help, face to face, phone etc.

**Staffing:** The biggest challenges of cost-effectively staffing a call-center and managing a seasonal often blended staff of full-time and student employees. Hiring, training, and retaining qualified employees to manage and run the help-desk function becomes a full-time operation for an IT department already running at full-capacity. Student workers can often provide excellent temporary support, however students frequently are not available during peak periods and often are not eligible to manage proprietary data such as information found in SIS and ERP systems.

**Multi-Channel Operations:** Delivering high quality support via phone, chat, email, and automated self-help is a challenging and costly proposition requiring significant investment in technical and management infrastructure. Given the costs associated with developing a knowledge-base, managing on-going quality assurance, maintaining world-class telephony, and conducting real-time workforce management, it's not surprising that colleges and universities are struggling with financing the help-desk function.

**Co-Sourcing Emerges as an Option:** Fortunately, the strategic option of "co-sourcing" or "shared-sourcing" has recently emerged, enabling institutions to cost-effectively outsource elements of the support operation while retaining oversight of performance and service.

Whether a college opts to co-source support for its course management system and portal or for 24/7 coverage of its entire Help Desk operation, the institution can find the right blend of in-sourcing and out-sourcing to address its unique goals and challenges.

## The Triple Whammy for Education Services Management:

### Exploding Volume, Increasing User Expectations, and Internal Resource Constraints

The professionals charged with managing the tide of incoming calls, emails, and walk-ins understand the inconvenient truth all too well: running a scalable, highly available support center is very difficult. Increasing volume, growing user expectations and internal resource constraints such as limitations in funding, [specialized] management expertise are frequently cited as barriers to improving support services<sup>ii</sup>. Additional challenges include developing comprehensive self-help materials and maintaining actionable data for decision-making.

As result, CIOs and Help Desk Directors around the country are asking themselves these tough questions:

#### 1 How Should We Structure Our Support Organization?

Frequently, the first question a CIO, Vice Chancellor, or Help Desk Director may pose is whether a centralized or decentralized model is most effective. According to the December 2007 Educause Study "Service on the Front Line: The IT Help Desk in Higher Education," the majority of institutions (nearly 75%) report that a centralized IT support model best meets their objective of furthering the institution's strategic goals.<sup>iii</sup> This data supports the notion that consolidating support services under one "roof" is an efficient model for supporting a wide array of departments, applications, and physical assets.

Cutting-edge colleges and universities are also starting to apply this model to centralized Student Services Support in an effort to provide better service for distant and local learners in a more cost-effective environment. "Supporting Online Students with Personal Interaction" from *Educause Quarterly* reported that 67% of students who dropped online courses cited insufficient support as the primary reason.<sup>iv</sup>

Fundamental service such as offering prompt, professional support for Financial Aid, Registration, Admissions and other key student service functions is a leading factor in student success and retention.

#### 2 Can We Deliver 24/7/365?

The next question CIOs often struggle with is "What hours can we make our support services to be available." Despite the 24/7 culture we live in, according to "Service on the Front Line", nearly 70% of institutions are not able to provide support outside "standard business hours."

Given that a 24/7 higher education contact center receives more than 50% of total requests at non-standard times, educators and administrators are keenly aware that "standard business hours" apply to banks and dentists—not to students and professors.<sup>v</sup> Yet internal barriers, such as staffing and funding, make expanding beyond 9-5, Monday through Friday a challenge they have yet to solve.

In addition to increased campus expectations, distance education programs also must consider evolving accreditation standards and best practices. In *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education recently cited providing technical assistance for student and faculty "during hours

when it is likely to be needed” as an important best practice in program success.<sup>vi</sup>

### 3 Should We Build or Partner?

For many institutions, the ‘Build or Partner’ question is a no-brainer, perhaps because outsourcing is absolutely not an option or the internal Help Desk is running perfectly as it is. But, for most colleges and universities the answer is not so cut and dry—it is both a strategic and a practical decision to be considered carefully.

Managing an internal help desk of full-time and student employees can certainly work for those institutions with deep expertise in managing a small-scale call center with extreme peaks and valleys. However, many institutions realize that this is not an innate skill-set, nor do they want to invest the required resources to develop it.

In “Service on the Front Line,” only 40% of the survey participants agreed with the statement “campus expectations are aligned with help desk resources,” indicating that we have reached a tipping point in providing help desk services and something will need to change.

As a result, institutions are making the strategic decision to allocate resources to enhance their innate operational strengths and partner to gain access to the specialized skill-set required.

This desire to focus on the organization’s strengths, coupled with the evolution of “co-sourcing” alternatives<sup>vii</sup> has created new options for institutions seeking to enhance their end-user support without relinquishing oversight of the operations. [For more information on co-sourcing, see the sidebar The Challenge of Cost-Effectively Supporting Education 2.0.]

While each college or university’s process for evaluating how to best apply limited resources will differ, “Operational Lessons from a Strategic Sourcing Project” from *Educause Quarterly* (February 2008) describes first-hand how Tulane University made the decision to partner.<sup>viii</sup>

As author Adam Krob explains, the decision was both practical and strategic: practical because the University simply could not single-handedly address the shortage of qualified labor in hurricane-battered New Orleans; strategic because the University was required to make a long-term decision to focus on its strengths and partner to address the remaining support requirements.

## Achieving Success in a “Need it Now” Culture

Every institution will experience different challenges, face different constraints, and reach the tipping point at different times during the journey. However, the Paradox of 24/7 access is alarmingly real and will have very real consequences for institutions of higher education.

Transformational colleges and universities have recognized that the image of the institution and the IT function are tightly aligned with its ability to support all stakeholders in a timely, professional, and resource efficient manner. They understand the imperative to cost-effectively scale student and faculty support services. These leaders see all barriers to learning as barriers to achieving the institution’s core mission and as such focus on strategic goals such as cost accountability, retention, and instructional excellence.

## Measuring and Defining Success at the Help Desk

According to “Service on the Front Line,” colleges and universities report several common goals for enhancing their Help-Desk or Support Functions, including:

- Increasing focus on core competencies
- Improving the education experience
- Improving service to students and faculty
- Improving IT’s reputation within the institution
- Improving data compliance/security.

By asking the tough questions and evaluating the institution’s strengths and weaknesses in delivering end-user support, CIOs and Help Desk Directors can accomplish these tasks cost-effectively.

Metric are the barometers of success. As such, the following is a list of the help desk metrics institutions track most frequently:

- Call/contact load
- Number of users supported
- Number of problems resolved at first contact
- Average time to resolve a problem that cannot be resolved at first contact
- The number of devices/applications supported

Fewer than half the “Service on the Front Line” survey respondents believe that their institutions use these metrics effectively to improve user services. Selecting a co-sourcing partner that delivers extensive reporting and actively integrates that data into its daily decision-making will effectively leverage the strengths of both organizations.



These institutions recognize the Paradox of 24/7 access and have started asking the difficult questions of how to structure, staff, and manage their support organization. By taking the first steps to address the paradox, these colleges and universities will have an advantage over their peers that do not yet recognize or have not started addressing the challenges of meeting end user demand in the age of “Google time,” going quality assurance, maintaining world-class telephony, and conducting real-time workforce management, it’s not surprising that colleges and universities are struggling with financing the help-desk function.

Co-Sourcing Emerges as an Option: Fortunately, the strategic option of “co-sourcing” or “shared-sourcing” has recently emerged, enabling institutions to cost-effectively outsource elements of the support operation while retaining oversight of performance and service.

Whether a college opts to co-source support for its course management system and portal or for 24/7 coverage of its entire Help Desk operation, the institution can find the right blend of in-sourcing and out-sourcing to address its unique goals and challenges.

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- i Just as the World Wide Web is undergoing a transformation to Web 2.0, education is transforming as well. With the proliferation of Web-based and Web-enhanced courses, we are entering the world of Education 2.0.
  - ii Judith Borreson Caruso and Mark C. Sheehan, “Service on the Front Line: The IT Help Desk in Higher Education,” Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR), December 2007.
  - iii Caruso and Sheehan.
  - iv Ronald C. Thomas, Jr., “Supporting Online Students with Personal Interaction,” EDUCAUSE Quarterly, January 2005.
  - v Presidium Learning has collected 4 years of higher education specific data on the daily operations of more than 400 higher education multi-channel contact centers. This data provides extensive insight into the distribution of calls across month, day, and hour.
  - vi “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs,” Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
  - vii Co-Sourcing was a term and an approach pioneered by Presidium Learning to describe the method of partnering with clients to deliver world-class support.
  - viii Adam Krob, “Operational Lessons from a Strategic Sourcing Project,” EDUCAUSE Quarterly, February 2008.

### About Presidium Learning

Presidium was founded in 2003 based on the notion that higher education support demands a unique set of processes, procedures, and skills that are not offered by traditional contact center providers. The core tenets of the Presidium offering are: providing cost-effective staffing to meet higher education peaks and valleys; delivering high touch service combined with high rates of first call resolution; mastering technical skills unique to higher education systems and applications; and excelling in a multi-channel approach to meet the needs of the institution as a whole.

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