Literature Review

• An online course is defined as “one in which at least 80 percent of the course content is delivered online” (Allen, 2014, p. 6). According to the Babson Research Group, which surveyed over 2,800 collegiate institutions, the fall 2012 semester is estimated to have served slightly over 7.1 million online learners in the United States, which is 33.5 percent of the total student population of degree-granting postsecondary institutions (2014).

• Student support is defined as “the assistance and guidance that are offered to students beyond the learning materials” (LaPadula, 2003, p. 119). Student support services not only enhance a student’s experience in post-secondary education (2003), but also contribute to the retention of students in fully online programs (Heyman, 2010).

• The increase in the number of online students has forced higher education accrediting agencies to impose standards requiring institutions to provide the same student support services to online students as they do for on-campus students (Pullan, 2009).

• The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges released a policy in 2000, edited in 2012, and reformatted in 2014 stating that in terms of student services, students should have access to a range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance and correspondence education” (p. 3).

• The most important services for online students have been considered to be “registration and records, faculty advising, and libraries” (Dare, Zapata, & Thomas, 2005, p. 48).

• Gaytan (2013) concluded that the third most important factor in online student retention was institutional support services, which included services such as: admissions, registration, financial aid, and tutoring.

• Gould, Mason, and Dengharnath (2014) identified a few collegiate institutions with quality online student support services, including Oregon State University, St. Joseph’s College of Maine, University of Alabama, and Long Beach City College.

• Enrollment services, which, according to Noel-Levitz (2013), include “financial aid, course registration, and payment procedures” (p. 14), were rated the second most important factor for online students (2013).

• Academic services, which include “advising, online library resources, tutoring services, and technical assistance” (Noel-Levitz, 2013, p. 14), were rated the third most important (2013); student services, which include “online career services, the bookstore, and responses to student requests” (p. 14) were rated the least important factors by respondents of the study (2013).

Method

Qualitative, open-ended survey administered electronically via university-issued email.

Instrument

• Included informed consent agreement.

• Took respondents approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

• Included questions using the critical incident research approach, which “focuses on behaviors that have been directly observed—but not necessarily observed by the auditors themselves” (Downs & Adrian, 2004, p. 159); the observations are made by the people who actually experience the services (2004).

Data Analysis

Guided by the case-oriented understanding, which aims to understand the point of view of participants surrounding a particular phenomenon (Schutt, 2014), the responses of the participants were categorized into various themes related to their experiences. The categories assisted in identifying which student support services at FHSU needed to enhance the quality of provision to online students. In addition, the results of this qualitative study may guide the potential creation of a quantitative survey instrument for each service provided, which would address the overall satisfaction of student support services with a generalizable online student population.

Discussion

The most students reported positive experiences with the student support services with which they have interacted. The 24 students who participated in this study were like those in previous studies in regard to which services they deem most important. Students in this study agreed that the third most important factor in student support services include the Library and Computing and Telecommunications Center, which is consistent with the academic services in the Noel-Levitz Online Learning Priorities Report (2013); however, FHSU students felt these services were more important than enrollment services. The Admissions and Registrar offices were also noted as important to this sample of students, which is consistent with the Noel-Levitz Online Learners Priorities Report (2013).

The four offices in which experiences were most frequently reported either positively or negatively included the Financial Aid Office, Academic Advising and Career Exploration, the Bookstore, and the Computing and Telecommunications Center. It is apparent the Financial Aid Office provides both positive and negative experiences specific to the student, whether it is in regard to aid appeals or answering questions over the phone; this office was given the most scrutiny. The Bookstore was also given conflicting reviews as it has provided both exceptionally positive experiences and also very negative experiences to online students.

Given only two and a half months of thoughts to services to add to FHSU’s current model of student support services, it is assumed all other participants are pleased with the types of services currently provided to the online student population; however, it is clear not all students have received the same experiences from these services.