The Student Commons

Thesis

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Abstract

Over the past decade, distance learning has grown (in popularity) and developed at such a fast rate that getting your degree online is now accepted as a popular alternative to traditional face-to-face education (Connolly, MacArthur, Stansfield, & McLellan, 2007). Students’ lives have become increasingly complicated and busy, which makes distance learning’s flexible nature not only attractive but often one of the primary considerations as a student searches for a college degree. As online education continues to grow, however, so too does the rate at which students drop out or fail to complete their degree. Student retention for distance learning programs is lower than campus based programs, and while institutions are excited about the opportunities distance learning provides, they struggle to reduce the high attrition rates.

To address the low retention rates, some educators suggest an abandonment of online education; others consider steps that would improve success for online students. Using Moreland & Carnwell’s three types of learning support for distance learners as a theoretical framework, I began to create an online Student Commons. The community was designed to provide students with each of the three types of support: academic, emotional and practical. After an initial survey of academic advisors, a concept of the Student Commons was born. Utilizing ANGEL (Bryant & Stratton’s Virtual Classroom program), the Student Commons was further developed. A focus group of academic advisors were then given permission to view and interact in the group for assessment and recommendations.

Presently the Student Commons group is complete and in the process of having additional information added to complete its functionality. The group is expected to “go live” for all Bryant & Stratton online students in September 2011.
The first integration of distance learning began in the 19th century, more than 150 years ago, featured a print-based delivery system, better known as correspondence study (Klesius, Homan, & Thompson, 1997). This model of distance learning remained consistent for many years and was only recently altered by the dramatic advances in technology. With the rapid increases in the availability of types of communication, distance learning began using resources like, audio/video conferencing and telecourse (where the instructor would broadcast to several locations). While these methods increased the popularity of distance learning, it was not until the 1990’s and the introduction of the World Wide Web, that distance learning was taken to a new level. Green, (1997), noted that the use of email, the Internet, and the WWW were becoming increasing common with the instructional process. In addition, Green (1999) showed that more than a quarter of college courses were using the WWW for course material and resources.

In 1996, Kerka discussed the following advantages and disadvantages of using the World Wide Web as a main tool for instruction and distance education:

**Advantages:**

1. Flexibility of class time and space
2. Capability to reach a global market
3. Cross-Platform compatibility
4. Quick development times
5. Easy updating of education content
6. Lower development costs
Disadvantages

1. Limited bandwidth and slow modems
2. Over reliance on learner initiative
3. Learner success depends on technical skills in computer operation, web navigation, and ability to cope with technical problems
4. Information overload requires information management skills
5. Access to Internet-based courses may still be a problem for geographically isolated and some disabilities
6. Social Isolation

With the rapid growth of the internet and personal computers, has come an increase in students interested in distance learning. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2006 and 2007 nearly two-thirds of the more than 4,000 two-year and four-year ‘Title IV’ degree-granting postsecondary institutions offered distance education. In addition, according to a study conducted by the Sloan Consortium the following year, approximately 4.6 million of the 18 million college students in the United States were enrolled in at least one online learning course in American colleges and universities (See Figure 1). That figure equates to about one-quarter of all U.S. college students in 2008, a 15 percent increase from in six years.

![Figure 1: Online Enrollment in Degree-granting Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 02-Fall 08](Allen & Seaman 2009, p. 9)
Another important finding from the National Center for Education Statistics is that online learning is not distributed “evenly” among all divisions of American colleges and universities (see Figure 2). More than 82 percent of all online students were enrolled in Bachelor degree classes, while only 14 percent of students were enrolled in graduate level coursework.

![Pie Chart: Level of Study of Online Students – Fall 2008](Allen & Seaman 2009, p. 9)

The growth in student interest and registration in distance learning programs has been linked to three major factors: 1) the interest to attract students that do not live on campus; 2) the growth of adult learners with time and distance limitations; and 3) the growth and development of technology that allows for distance learning as a possibility (Aoki & Pogrosezewski, 1998). The challenge for online programs therefore is not how to recruit students, but how to retain them once they begin.

The promotion and growth of online education would seem to suggest that online courses are equivalent or superior to traditional on campus courses in terms of improved student access, increased rate of degree completion, lowered costs, and appeal to non-traditional students” (Wagner, S. C., Garippo, S. J., & Lovaas, P. 2001). While online learning in higher education
has progressed for a number of reasons, a recently completed study by Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, (2009) funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that:

- among students in four-year schools, 45 percent work more than 20 hours per week;
- among those attending community colleges, 60 percent work more than 20 hours per week, and more than a quarter of these students work more than 35 hours a week;
- only 25 percent of students attend traditional residential colleges;
- 23 percent of college students have dependent children.

In 2002 Diaz conducted a study of 231 college students in a health education course. He found that online students in this course compared to those in a traditional classroom tended to be older and were more likely to have completed more credit hours. In addition, Diaz noted that “the profile of the online learner suggested a student with more life and academic experiences — attributes that made the student well suited to the independent, self-directed study associated with distance education” (Diaz, 2002, p. 1)

Two years later, Dutton, Dutton & Perry (2002) conducted a study of 283 students (of which 131 were online students) taking an Introduction to Computer Programming C++ class. Figure 3 shows similar data as the study mentioned above. However, in addition this study found that most students enrolled in the online class were part-time students; only 38 percent of online students were taking a full-time course load compared to 82 percent of campus based students who were full-time. The researchers also showed that online students tended to be over the age of 22. Figure 3 below shows that the average age of online students was at least 5 years
older than that of the campus based student. Dutton, Dutton & Perry concluded that in their study non-traditional, older students preferred online courses to the traditional lecture course.

Today’s technologies allow for a distance learning model that uses electronic communication and sophisticated learning management systems such as Blackboard and Angel. Yet despite these new advancements in technology, the students’ need to feel connected to each other, the faculty members and even the institution, has remained largely unfulfilled. Today’s distance learning model should provide students with the equivalent advantages and resources that a traditional face-to-face learner may receive. As more colleges begin to offer distance learning, they will soon be competing for students in different manner. “In order to attract and retain students, institutions will need to meet the students’ expectations for accessibility and a high quality education that will provide the same level of academic excellence as courses taught in traditional modes” (Diaz, 2000, p. 14).

As distance learning continues to grow in popularity, enrollment in these programs has followed suit. Some organizations “are projecting that by 2020 students will take up to 60
percent of their courses online” (Bart, 2011, para. 2). More students enrolled in distance education programs could equate to higher attrition rates, which is why many institutions are beginning to consider the importance of student engagement in student retention. College administrators struggle to determine the best course of action to decrease student attrition. “The absence of physical contact with students creates the need for new structures for recruiting and retaining students (Hitch & MacBrayne, 2003, p. 1). However, according to Carr (2000), online student retention has been suggested as one of the greatest weaknesses in online education. Frankola (2001) suggests that studies have shown that online dropout rates are 10 to 20 percent higher than the traditional on campus environment, which ranges from 20 to 50 percent. While Diaz (2000) reports online dropout rates 13.5 percent compared to 7.2 for traditional campus based students. While there does not appear to be a “common national retention rate” for online students, it does appear that majority of reports agree that online retention is far lower than campus based retention, and is an area of concern.

John Arie, faculty chair of life sciences at Rio Salado College (a community college in Phoenix), believes that there are several factors resulting in distance learners dropping out (Murray, 2001):

1. Students taking these courses for the wrong reasons
2. Lack of activity and social stimulation in online classes
3. Limited access and opportunity for guidance and faculty feedback
4. Students are overbooked between personal and school work
5. Student may lack the technical skills required

“A successful online program is a delicate balance of student, faculty, program design, administrate support and the OLE (online learning environment)” (Gleason,2004, p. 1). While
many factors that have an impact on retention rates, (similar to John Arie’s factors), each institution and program may report differences and similarities based on their strengths and weaknesses in the services provided.

Lorenzetti (2002) reports that one of the main factors in online student retention is a result of poor course design. Many institutions rely on faculty to develop and design the majority of the online courses. In addition, many of these faculty do not receive any additional compensation, they are provided with limited or no training on designing coursework for an online community.

Murray (2001) states that lack of communication is one of the major problems with online retention. With the flexibility of time that online classes provide, each student will participate in activities at different times. This asynchronous style of learning can result in lack of communication which impacts the student focus. “In addition, miscommunication and the lack of prompt, clear feedback from the instructor can contribute to the student’s feelings of frustrations” (Gleason, 2004).

According to Murray (2001) institutions can take the following steps toward improving retention rate, and gaining a better understanding of the online learner:

1. Provide training to faculty to teach online
2. Give students plenty of information
3. Make registration easy
4. Provide opportunities for students to feel connected from day one
5. Offer technical support
6. Reach out to students for academic advising
7. Have students work in teams
8. Check in with students on a regular bases

There is, however, no commonly accepted “right way” to replicate online the student services resources offered on a brick and mortar campus. For these reasons, student retention for online programs is a topic which needs serious attention. In a 1993 paper by Vincent Tinto, he outlines conditions that are “supportive of retention, namely expectation, advice, support, involvement and learning” (Tinto, 1993, p. 2). He continues to express the need for students to have “clear and consistent information about institutional requirements and effective advising” (Tinto, 1993, p. 2) and that students “are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social and personal support (Tinto, 1993, p.2).

Access to student services provides the distance learner some form of personal contact by allowing them to engage in social interactions with their fellow classmates and faculty members. Student services could be offered in an online community through the use of chats, bulletin boards, applications or event the development of an electronic student union. The creation and development of applications and learning management systems are important to curriculum development and access. They are also just as important to student support and student resources, and as such need to be given further attention.

A critical issue in retention for online learners is the feeling of belonging. According to Abrami and Bures (1996), some distance learning students report feelings of isolation, lack of self-direction and management, and eventual decreases in motivation levels. In addition, these feelings of isolation can be compounded by the frustration some online students have due to the lack of skills needed to be successful. Time management, the ability work alone, knowledge of technology, and learning independence are just a few of the skills that are demanded from a
distance learning student. As a result, student support services are a critical component of a successful retention program.

Moreland and Carnwell (2000) defined learning support needs as the “assistance, guidance and assurance students need to maintain their involvement and activity in academic studies sufficient for them to complete and (hopefully) succeed in their studies” (p. 173). Research conducted in 1998, which focused on community nurses and distance learning, revealed different types of support distinctive to distance learners: academic, emotional and practical. Academic support was defined “in relation to access to appropriate information, responsiveness and availability of tutors in a supportive role” (Moreland & Carnwell, p. 180). Practical support was defined as “effective help with work tasks, housework and childcare” (Moreland & Carnwell, p. 180). And lastly, emotional support was defined “in terms of tolerance, cajoling and emotional reassurance by significant others” (Moreland & Carnwell, p. 180).

As a result of the recognition and analysis of the three types of support, Moreland & Carnwell wanted to further investigate not only the exact types of emotional, academic and practical support needed, but to compare and contrast the types of support in different regions. The development of the Learning Support Needs Questionnaire (LSNQ) was created to determine support requirements and their relationship to connectedness between students and faculty (Carnwell & Harrington, 2001). This 20-question instrument was given to distance education student in the U.S. as well as distance-based nursing degree students in the U.K. Even though the sample of students was small, 211 in the U.S. and 126 in the U.K., some significant differences in support needs (outlined in table 1) emerged between the two groups.
The Student Commons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items where students in the U.K. differed significantly from U.S. learners</th>
<th>Type of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Time for study earmarked</td>
<td>Practical Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Domestic division of labor allows for study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Non-interference (distractions) from others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Feelings of being daunted are not allowed to be destructive</td>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunities for cooperation with follow students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunities for face-to face contact with faculty</td>
<td>Academic Supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Overall guidance to student processes and assignments are provided</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: (Carnwell & Harrington, 2001, p. 14)

**Method**

Bryant & Stratton College was founded over 155 years ago in Buffalo, New York. While the mission of the college has always been dedication to career education, the method and mode of delivering education has evolved over the years. In the early years the college was focused on providing practical workplace education. Since the skills in the workplace have changed in the last 155 years, the college has transitioned as well. Today Bryant & Stratton have 18 campuses in four states, and an online division that provides education to students across the globe.

The online division began offering degree programs that were exclusively online in 2000. In order to remain dedicated to the college’s mission of personal education and lifetime success, the introduction of full online degrees brought on a new challenge to way in which education and student services were going to be delivered to each and every student.

Today there are over 2,000 student enrolled in online classes at Bryant & Stratton. Although major changes and adjustments have been made in the delivery of services, in
particular support services, it is my opinion that not enough is being done to encourage success and increase retention.

I surveyed four online academic advisors to determine resources Bryant & Stratton Online provide and areas in which they are deficient, as well as their opinions on delivery, success and retention. I emailed each advisor a survey containing six questions and explained that the information would be confidential and names would not be used in the study. The responses were very similar, and provided me with a structure and initial design for an online Student Commons group.

Results

According to the data I collected, similar expectations and suggestions were noted in regards to student resources at Bryant & Stratton College online. Although each of the four associates have been employed at the college for a large range of time and have uniquely diverse backgrounds both in education and professional experience, their understanding and opinions about online students were not only comparable but provided a substantial framework for the development of the Student Commons group.

My survey’s first question asked advisors the five most commonly asked questions by students. Amazingly enough there were only nine answers to this question, with the most popular being, “what happens if I fail this class”, “what are the log ins for Angel”, virtual library, etc and “when does my refund check arrive.” On average, an academic advisor spends 70 percent of the work day speaking with students on the phone, in chat and answering emails.
With each of the academic advisors carrying a case load of 200- plus students, the experiences and expertise they are relayed are indicative to the students concerns and problem areas at large.

Question two asked what tools or resources does Bryant & Stratton excel at providing? This question was included to ensure that resources that are already available would not only be considered, but also to determine what areas might not need as much attention or consideration. The following were mentioned in the survey; Smarthinking (online tutoring), foundation courses, academic advisement, first year experience, webinars, physical textbooks and contact with the financial aid office.

As a follow up to the second question, the third question asked “what tools and resources should be provided to assist with student success and retention?” The answers to this question were very distinctive and ranged from experience to support, to assessment needs for students. The results of question three are as follows: mandatory orientation; mandatory learning center for struggling students; set office hours for instructors; remedial writing assistance; tutoring for APA formatting; career specific groups and clubs; mandatory academic advisement.

Question four addressed student complaints that are heard most often. While the majority of answers were in regards to communication and interaction with instructors, the areas of technology, student log information, time management, organization and college policies and procedures were also mentioned. The typical Bryant & Stratton online student is a first generation college student between the ages of 26 and 44 who is experiencing college level coursework for the first time. As a result, the needs and expectations for each student are not only diverse but at times can seem overwhelming and difficult to achieve.
The next to the last question asked for five suggestions that should be included in an online group to help with student success and retention. The suggestions were as follows:

- A virtual area where students could ‘hang out’
- A place where instructors and students could connect
- A place where students could easily access policies and procedures
- Videos of step by step instructions, for example, how to cut and paste, how to run a grade report, how to hide classes, etc.
- Group by specific majors
- Peer Mentors
- Peer Tutoring
- Discussions and forum chats
- Instructor and advisor referrals

The final question asked all four advisors to share their opinions about the set up and design of the Angel system, taking into account components they would like to change and components they would like to see remain the same. The majority of the advisors agreed that Angel can get complicated especially in regards to the number of clicks it takes you to get to one place. They expressed a concern over technology issues such as Mozilla Firefox verses Internet Explorer and PC versus Mac users. In addition, the communication tab in all Angel classes is unreliable and in many instances is not turned on or will not accept incoming messages. However, advisors enjoy the announcement board and wished that more instructors would use the calendar tool to set up assignment deadlines and other important information such as office hours. Overall advisors felt that Angel has some great features, but fell short by not providing
students with the proper training and support on how to use the tools and resources available to them in the Angel system.

The Student Commons

At Bryant & Stratton College the online program not only prides itself on providing a “nurturing academic environment dedicated to helping [students] grow personally and professionally” (Bryant & Stratton Online Website), but also on being committed to lifelong learning and life time success. Moreland and Carnwell (2000) state that “lifelong learning will become a reality only when the providing institutions identify and help address the learning support needs of the students in their care” (p.173). To date, Bryant & Stratton’s online program, in my opinion, provides very little support in regards to emotional and practical assistance. Emphasis is on academic content rather than student needs. To address this, I designed and created a “Student Commons” area for all enrolled online students. The focus of the Commons is to establish an environment of accessible student support services, as well as to provide a sense of belonging. I theorize these simple steps will help decrease attrition while increasing student retention and satisfaction.

Focusing on the three types of learning support needs, as defined by Moreland & Carnwell (2000) in Table 2, the Student Commons area reflects and imitates the same basic needs and structure.

Utilizing Bryant & Stratton’s learning management system, Angel, I have created a new Student Commons group which will serve to foster practical, emotional and academic support. The Commons will be an area beyond the classroom where students can get academic and technical support, learn about the latest news and events, chat and connect with fellow
The Student Commons is an area beyond the classroom where students can get academic and technical support, learn about the latest news and events, chat and connect with fellow classmates, participate in various student clubs, organizations and activities, and access additional support services through the online student community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical Support</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space for study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities e.g., computer, books readily available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable working arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for study earmarked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic division of labor allows for study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment from family/partner to study obtained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/partner displays interest or non-hostility to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance and emotional space provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance and cajoling available from family/partner/friends when required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for cooperation with fellow students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of any opportunities for face-to-face contact with tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active intervention from tutor(s) available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor(s) taking a personal interest in the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance from tutor(s) available throughout the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Guidance to study processes and assignment provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Moreland & Carnwell 2000, p.187-188

The Student Commons is an area beyond the classroom where students can get academic and technical support, learn about the latest news and events, chat and connect with fellow classmates, participate in various student clubs, organizations and activities, and access additional support services through the online student community. Each semester enrolled students will have access to this group, beginning in September 2011. The Student Commons will be broken up into six rooms: (1) Information, (2) Bulletin Board, (3) Technical Support, (4)
Student Activities, (5) Offices, (6) Calendar. Table 3 offers a brief description of what each room will include as well as what type of support the room will provide according to Moreland & Carnwell’s three types of learning support.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Commons Room</th>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Type of Learning Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>1. Map of the common: visual map of how the navigate the commons</td>
<td>1. Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. FAQ: 20 Most Frequently asked Questions</td>
<td>2. Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Newsletter</td>
<td>4. Practical/Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar</td>
<td>1. Event Calendar</td>
<td>1. Practical/Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin Board</td>
<td>1. Student Blog</td>
<td>1. Practical/Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Support</td>
<td>1. Contact Information</td>
<td>1. Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. FAQ</td>
<td>2. Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Instructors for Tech Support Use</td>
<td>3. Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Activities</td>
<td>1. Clubs</td>
<td>1. Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Organizations</td>
<td>2. Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Links to Social Networks</td>
<td>3. Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Honor Society</td>
<td>4. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Café</td>
<td>5. Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices</td>
<td>1. Contact Information</td>
<td>1. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors Offices</td>
<td>2. Office Hours</td>
<td>2. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Tips for Success</td>
<td>3. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. FAQ</td>
<td>4. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Meet the Staff</td>
<td>5. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices</td>
<td>1. Study Skills</td>
<td>1. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Lounge</td>
<td>2. How to Demo’s</td>
<td>2. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Past Webinars</td>
<td>4. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Instructor’s Tips</td>
<td>5. Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Instructor’s Bio</td>
<td>6. Academic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Table 3: Bryant & Stratton’s Student Commons Outline

“The development of information and communication technologies is beginning to replace face-to-face teaching and paper-based distance learning materials as a means of delivering educational [programs]” (Moreland & Carnwell, 2000, p. 174). While many factors
contribute to student attrition, the lack of online support services for distance learners has an effect on motivation and reinforces a feeling of isolation due to the lack of interaction (Abrami & Burns, 1996). Through the use of high-interaction support services, such as the Student Commons, online students will feel less isolated and more immersed in their online community. They will have interaction with fellow classmates, the ability to personalize their online environment, and access to ample information and support at their convenience. The Student Commons mission is to acknowledge the challenges distance learners face and proactively address them in a non-threatening, self-directed manner.

**The Student Commons Design**

A group named the Student Commons was added to the main page of Bryant & Stratton’s Angel system under the subheading *Community Groups*, as shown below. Every student enrolled in an online class (both part-time and full-time status) will have access to the group beginning the second week of classes in September 2011. It only takes one click on the group to enter, as it is not password protected.
Taking into account the information I received from my academic advisor survey, as well as the limitations within the Angel system, I designed this group with six main tabs located on the top of the page: The Commons; Calendar; Bulletin Board; Student Activities; Tech Support; and Offices. The tabs are located on the top of each page for accessibility as well as to try to limit the amount of clicks it takes a student to get to any one location. Due to the limitations of Angel and the Bryant & Stratton template for all groups and courses, the six tabs I designed were created by adding a folder that contains all the information and content for each individual tab. This folder, labeled “Wonderland”, is located in the student activities tab. It is, however hidden to all members except those that have editing rights. With the creation of the folder Wonderland, I was able to create permalinks in order to override the initial design of each tab in this Angel group. Using the tab setting feature, I renamed each tab and linked it to the appropriate group in the Wonderland folder. The only limitation is that all edits, content revisions and additions will need to be done in the Wonderland folder and not in each individual tab.

The commons folder is hidden to all members except those that have editing rights.
When you click on the Student Commons group, the first page that opens has two main features, 

*Group News* and *About this Course*. At this point I was unable to change the wording from course to group. However, I am hopeful that by the time this group opens in September this issue will be resolved.
The Group News will be used to highlight new features or important information students should be made aware of such as registration, classes starting and ending or other relevant topics. When there is no news or upcoming events students need to be made aware of, this section will be used to highlight some of the student’s most commonly asked questions, as noted by the academic advisors in the survey.

The Information area is a link. Once clicked, it will bring students to a page with some basic information, a map on what is included in the Student Commons as well as a page labeled What Every Student Should Know. Again, this will be an area to highlight the most commonly asked questions by students and to make reference to the online orientation program all new students are encourage (but not required) to participate in.
The Policies and Forms box will be used to explain Bryant & Stratton’s polices such as changing majors, withdrawing from class, plagiarism, etc. In addition, downloadable forms will be available for produces and requests that require formal documentation.

The last component to the Information link is a basic folder where an administrator can upload the most current newsletter. Being an online school, the majority of our communication is through email; very few materials are physically printed or mailed to a student. As a result, multiple locations to access information are needed in order to increase awareness of a topic. There are many instances that emails are deleted, removed due to spam or simply ignored due to the high volume of mail in students inboxes. The newsletter page will be one more place students can be exposed to pertinent information.

The next tab in the group is the Calendar. It has the exact same set up and features as the calendar in all online classes. This calendar will be used to make students aware of upcoming events and important dates. I am currently working on redesigning a calendar feature that would offer students the option of editing and adding dates and times. This would allow them to individually customize the calendar and in turn would encourage them to log in and utilize the Student Commons area more frequently. In addition, this tool could be useful in assisting
students with time management and organization. According to the survey from the academic advisors, a complaint most often heard is that students struggle with finding time to complete all their work and that getting and staying organized is not an easy task. A calendar that students could personalize could be a great asset to student organization and time management as well as assist with student retention. Currently, this option and feature is not available in Angel, I am, however, hoping that just like the tab settings, I can find a way around this limitation.

The third tab is labeled *Student Activities* and unfortunately has the least amount of information that has been developed by Bryant & Stratton. Currently the national honor society for associate degree students is the only group/club that is available to online students. My next task, after the Student Commons is complete, is to begin to establish additional opportunities for students to get involved.

Apart from the limited clubs and organizations this tab also includes links to social networks; Facebook and Twitter. While Bryant & Stratton’s Twitter page has a smaller following, the Bryant & Stratton Student Success page (which I created and established) has accumulated more than 800 fans.
The last two pages in the Student Activities tab are the Café and Photo Gallery. Many of our current instructors use a Café in their classes as a way to encourage students to have interaction. Some instructors will inform students that what they say in the Café will have no bearing on their grade. Others paint the picture of sitting at a local coffee shop with a friend chatting over a cup of coffee. Either way, the incentive is interaction, support and camaraderie.

My academic advisor survey indicated a need for a virtual ‘hang out’ area as well as a place where instructors and students could connect. The Café is set up and will be described as a place for students to connect and to chat about classes or other issues or concerns they may have. There has been some discussion about even having Cafés for select groups such as single parents, military members and military spouses, as well as first generation college students.

The Photo Gallery is yet another way to help students realize that they are not alone in the classroom and that there are others, just like themselves, struggling to earn their degree. It is my anticipation that students will submit photos to the group administrator so the images, once approved, can be posted. Although my initial design was to allow students to upload their own images, once again the limitations of Angel would not allow this to occur.

The Bulletin Board is a simple blog page that will allow students to post and respond to conversation. This is one of the few places in the Student Commons where the students will have full control over the content. There are many other places, like the announcement area or even Facebook and Twitter, were a majority of the conversation is initiated by administrators and not the student. The creation of the Bulletin Board is to allow the students to have not only a voice but full control over the content. This section is controversial to some of the administrators, I will however, continue to support the need for students to have a safe place where their voice can not only be heard, but also will not be judged. Unlike the Café, the design
and direction of the Bulletin Board will be student driven. Administers will delete posts that are found inappropriate, however they will not comment or engage in communication on this board.

The Tech Support area is one tab that I have had very little input and opinion in regards to the content. However the design is broken up into two sections, Contact Information and Instructions. Recently, the instructional design team at Bryant & Stratton created a Frequently Asked Questions page that has been added to all online classes. The content of this FAQ page consists of contact information for tech support and other software and resources that are used in various classes. The creation of the Student Commons group initiated the design and creation of this FAQ page, however there is a road block trying to link that page to this group. Because of the separation of rights and rules between groups and classes, content from classes cannot be linked or mapped to a group. As a result, this page will be recreated with the same information and design; however it will have to be manually updated each semester.

The Instruction component of the Tech Support tab will have videos and “how to” instructions on some basic features for Angel, Word and Excel. The academic advisor survey did indicate that Bryant & Stratton online has a population of students that are beginner computer users. Since we do not offer an introduction to computers class, I believe it pertinent to student success and retention to provide support and information on some basic computing
areas, as well as how to navigate around a class in Angel. Using free software such as Jing, has allowed the IT and Student Services departments an effortless and affordable means to create and provide such support for our students.

The final tab in the Students Commons group is the **Offices** tab which is broken up into two sections; **Admissions Offices** and **Teacher’s Lounge**. My initial design has both of these sections as individual tabs, however I merged them into one due to the fact that I was limited to only six tabs in the group. There is a way in Angel to create additional tabs, however with the new upgrade to Angel there have been complications with the coding for tab creation. As a result, I opted to stay with the original six tab design.

The **Advisors Offices** has four main components; **Meet the Staff**, **Tips for Success**, **FAQ**, and **Study Skills**. Each component was created as a result of the academic advisor survey to meet the needs of students in the areas that Bryant & Stratton are insufficient, and to highlight the
strengths of the programs presently available to students.

The *Meet the Staff* area is a place where students can get to know not only their academic advisor, but the student success department. Currently there is a section in *Orientation* and in *First Year Experience* (FYE) where the academic advisement team is introduced. This section is minimal, however, and does not allow for individuality or creativeness. As shown below, each academic advisor has a folder and it is up to the individual to share what information they are comfortable with. Some share favorite movies or books, others share college stories and experiences. Some have even uploaded pictures of weddings, vacations and their children. Each academic advisor has the capability to create their folder as they see fit.
The Academic Advisement team has developed a list of tips that we currently send out to students via email once a week. The *Tips for Success* area will be a place for these tips to be posted, and for the team to enhance and add additional tips and suggestions as they deem necessary. It has also been suggested that weekly or monthly videos be created to highlight specific areas for student success. Some suggestions were: Tips for proper APA citation; What makes a good Weekly Reflection; How to write a professional email; and Advice from current students.

The *FAQ* will be targeted towards first semester students more so than towards returning students. Similar to national statistics, Bryant & Stratton’s attrition rate is higher after the first semester then it is after the second and third semesters. By providing first semester students with answers to questions that many students have, we should see an increase in student retention while providing students with a 24/7, easy-to-use way to get their questions answered.

The final area in *Advisor’s Offices* is for study skills to be shared in a collective and common area. Time management, organization, note taking, test taking and learning style identification are just a few areas that will be addressed in this section. Learning how to study in an online environment is not all that different from a traditional classroom setting. However, it is my experience that the idea of an online classroom, without the physical teacher and typical classroom can be intimidating for many students. Bringing students back to the basic fundamentals of learning will hopefully spark their memory from when they were in school (college or high school) but also begin to redefine or reeducate them on how to be a successful student.
The second component to the Offices tab is the Teacher’s Lounge. While it is very beneficial to hear from the Academic Advisement team on how to be a successful student, or tips on how to study or how to be successful in an online classroom environment, it is just as essential to get the instructor’s opinion on such topics.

The How To section will contain information on topics such as; How to email an instructor; How to read and understand a rubric; How to raise your hand online; and How to access your grades. While some of this subject matter has been addressed in other areas of the Student Commons, this area will reiterate the importance and value of understanding the material.

The Software Tutorials will be sometimes course specific and other times major specific. While this section will provide basic information on how to use Word, Excel and PowerPoint, this section will also address commonly asked questions for other software that is used in various courses. Once again this section has been added to provide students with a one-stop place to access a variety of information and get basic questions answered at any time of day.

The Instructor of the Month area is design to highlight some of the creative and successful faculty we have on staff. The majority of Bryant & Stratton’s faculty are working professionals from all across the country. This area will allow members of the staff who have done extraordinary things or provide such great service to the college to be highlighted and recognized for their efforts. In addition, it will give our students an opportunity to get to know their instructors in a more personal manner, which could in turn manifest into a stronger and deeper relationship and connection. I feel that if a student has a connection with just one person
on staff, their feeling of isolation decreases and their motivation to continue with school increases. A section dedicated to instructors will help foster this relationship.

The final section in the Teacher’s Lounge is for Instructor Tips. Over the last year a webinar series has been developed, designed to welcome students to college as well as to provide them other opportunities to get acquainted with the college’s rules, policies and procedures. During the second part of the webinar series, a majority of the instructors at Bryant & Stratton online were surveyed and asked to provide tips or suggestions they had for new, beginning students. The response was overwhelming and unfortunately, due to the time constraint of the webinar we were only able to use a sample of the responses received. After reading the instructors tips, it occurred to me that a majority of this information would be not only helpful to all of our students, but also a great reminder to those that were finishing up their degree. As a result, I built this section to not only share the information I currently have, but to allow instructors another opportunity to connect with students outside of the classroom. All of the tips posted have the instructors name and courses they teach attached to their tip.

**Focus Group**

Two academic advisors participated in a focus group to experience the Student Commons. The two academic advisors have different backgrounds and work with different
student populations at the college. The first academic advisor (advisor A) has been with Bryant & Stratton College for just about two years and has a background in advising and student personal. Her position at the college is to work with new students during their first semester as well as students with disabilities. The second academic advisor (advisor B) has been with the college for a little over a year, has a teaching background and works with continuing students that are in their second semester through graduation.

Before we met collectively, the two advisors were given access to the group so they could experience it at their own pace and become familiar with the Student Commons. Both advisors were asked to bring a list of questions and/or concerns, as well as to share any comments or experiences, whether positive or negative.

While these questions were not asked directly of the participants, the focus group objective was to help provide answers the following questions:

1. How clear was the purpose of the (online) group?
2. What, if any, problems did you have navigating through the group?
3. What did you think about the amount of information included in the group?
4. What is your opinion on the overall design and set up of the group?
5. What did you like best about the group?
6. What did you like least about the group?
7. What suggestions for improving the group do you have?
8. How do you feel access to this group will impact our students?
9. What, if any, information do you feel should be included that was not?
10. What if any, information do you feel that was included that should be omitted?

The first reaction by each of the participants was that of excitement and gratification. Both were genuinely happy that a group like the Student Commons was finally becoming a reality for their students. They both shared stories of frustration they have after seeing some students not only not get the information they were seeking, but also not have a consistent place where they return often to become more independent. While case loads are on the rise for both academic advisors, they expressed relief and hope that the Student Commons not only continues to grow, but will have as great of an impact as they would expect.

The purpose of the group seemed clear to both of them, however, advisor A thinks it will take additional email reminders and continued marketing to students to remind them that this group exists, especially for continuing students. She also would like to see this group mentioned in the Orientation program and in the FYE seminar. Advisor B, brought up the question on whether or not faculty would be made aware of this group, and to what extent would they have editorial access. This topic is one that will have to be brought up to the administration to see how they would like this to be handled.

One of the only problems with navigation that was brought up was that fact that when you are on a tab other than Student Activities, the Student Activities tab is still the one highlighted. The breadcrumbs at the top of the page are correct, so you know where you are and how you got there, but advisor A thought this could be confusing to some students. The reason the Student Activities tab is the only one highlighted is because that is where the ‘Wonderlands’ folder is housed and all the tabs are linked to.
While the amount of information that was included in the Student Commons was not discussed, some very specific content was commented on in both negative and positive manners. Advisor B was very impressed with the tab features and thought navigation was not only simple, but very self-explanatory. The map of the Student Commons, located in the information link, will prove a useful tool especially for those students that are looking for quick and easy answers to questions they may have. She did, however, comment that the overall feel of the group was one like the classroom. She questioned if colors could be changed or if the background images could be something other than what a student would see in a typical class. She thought this might show and give the impression that this group is very different than a class and might encourage students to engage in conversation and ‘hallway chatter’ online. Advisor A, agreed about the setup of the tabs and expressed gratitude for the folder, *What every student should know* and *FAQ*. In addition, she thought the *Photo Gallery* was a great place to meet the staff as it will make us feel more “real” to the students. She also commented on the *Teacher’s Lounge*, and questioned if there could be instructors office hours or bios of our faculty. Advisor A did feel that the *Study skills* and *Tips for success* seemed buried under *Offices*. She wondered if there was a different place they could be located, because she felt that it was very important information that should not be difficult to locate.

Both advisors agreed that the calendar feature was helpful, however would only be functional and probably useable if students could post. They felt strongly that if that feature was not available that the calendar would probably be a waste of time and energy. When asked what information do they feel is missing or should be included in the group they came up with the following list of suggestions: Information on accommodations for students with disabilities, the academic calendar for the year, and the link to the advisors online chat feature.
Overall their reaction to the group was positive and full of excitement. Advisor A did raise the issue of monitoring, especially in regards to the Bulletin Board and the Café. She also mentioned the idea of a rotation for the academic advisement team so all will have not only access with full rights to the group, but will have a scheduled opportunity to participate and interact with the members.

The group ended with a conversation on how this would impact students in a positive manner. One thought was on how this could be expanded upon by examining what the other Bryant & Stratton campuses offer to their students outside the classroom. Advisor B shared that she saw a flyer at the campus for speakers and tutors on APA citation, how to write a research paper, and help on how to de-stress during test time. She wondered if there was a way to have speakers in the Student Commons area. This would not only promote the use of the group, but would be another great tool and resource for our students. Advisor A agreed completely and followed it up with the idea that the speakers could be taped so those that could not make it (since we deal with students all over the country in different time zones with different schedules) can still take advantage of the material covered.

**Conclusion**

With rapid growth of online courses in higher education, student retention has become an area of great concern for many administrators. And while research on retention has been conducted for generations, the vast majority of research has typically focused on traditional brick and mortar campuses. Not until the last decade has attention shifted to allow a focus on the online learner.

The Student Commons structure outlined in this paper is intended to create a community that provides students with an environment that will support their academic, emotional and
practical needs. Components such as policy information, academic support procedures, blogs and clubs (in which to meet other students for emotional support), along with a FAQ’s section (for practical support) were included based on interpretation of Moreland & Carnwell’s research on distance learners. The academic advisor focus group agreed with the need for the three types of support and additionally brought to light the idea that not every student has the same educational and supportive needs because of their distinctive and varying academic and technical backgrounds.

Providing complete support for all types of students, ranging from a first generation to a transfer student attending their fifth different college, is not only challenging but at times impossible. The next section will outline some of the adjustments and revisions the Student Commons has undergone in an effort to provide even more support to the very diverse student population Bryant & Stratton Online services.

Assessing student satisfaction in terms of support can be especially valuable in the area of program and course development. Research has shown that students who are more satisfied with their overall college experience are more likely to be successful and graduate (Carr, 2000). The Student Commons is expected to go live in September 2011. The next phase of the project will be to develop a tool that can be used to not only assess student satisfaction of the Student Commons but also to measure students’ overall expectations of support services, in an even greater effort to increase retention.

**Student Commons Revisions**

Since the initial design of the Student Commons group, there have already been some changes based on the results of the focus group. One major change within the group was the addition of the FAQ tab which was added to all online classes. The FAQ tab is now located in
the Introduction link with an explanation on its use and where this information can be found in each class. In addition, this FAQ section was able to be linked to the tab in the classroom, allowing for automatic changes to this section in the group when the class tab is updated.

A second major addition to the Students Commons group is a crossword puzzle located under the Student Activities tab under the Café. One of the comments made by the focus group was the ability for students to interact with the group. Apart from the Café and Bulletin Board, the two advisors expressed that it might be nice to have other aspects in the group that students could utilize. The creation of the crossword puzzle will not only give students another opportunity to participate in the group, but will also give the academic advisors an idea of what information students already know and where they might be struggling. We will use the terms that students were unable to get correctly as announcements in the Student Commons to provide additional support. In addition, to help market the Student Commons group, prizes will be given out to students who successfully complete the crossword puzzle within the first two weeks of the unveiling.
Apart from the formal focus group, most recently several other administrators have been invited to view the Student Commons group and provide their feedback for not only the design but the content that is available at this point in time. As a result of this new information, several ideas have been not only suggested, but generated new ideas to make the Student Commons easier and helpful for students.

The topic of color and theme to help distinguish this group from a class has been brought up several times. I am in the process, as a result of working with the instructional design team to create a unique design to the group. Within this new design, the issue of the Student Activities tab always being highlighted, no matter what tab a user is on, should be fixed by eliminating that feature. If all goes well, the Student Commons will have a facelift before the group goes live in September 2011.

Additional sections have been suggested such as an area for students with disabilities, transfer students and second degree students. While the content for these areas have not been developed, I have begun to research the idea of having different homepages for specific populations. The structure and content of the Student Commons would always remain the same.
However, the main page that appears when they first log in would be unique to that population. This would allow announcements and general information to be specific to that group of students. A welcome to new students, for example, with tips on how to navigate or where to start, could be included in that first page for new Bryant & Stratton students. While I am not sure this can occur without have multiple sections of the Student Commons, I am not convinced that this is an obsolete possibility.

A peer mentor program has been suggested in many meetings as well as conferences and articles relating to student retention. Online programs are at a disadvantage as we do not physically see our students. Currently in the Orientation there is a section where students can email current students to ask questions. While this is an opportunity for new students to begin to connect with current students, very few have taken advantage of the opportunity. It is my opinion that one of the main reasons is that email is impersonal and it can be very intimating to reach out to a total stranger. Recently, I have pitched the idea that we have students create videos of themselves that provide a short biography as well as any tips they have for students beginning their educational journey with Bryant & Stratton. If this proposal is approved, there will be an additional section in the Student Commons for students to listen and then respond to the video. It is my preliminary thought that this can be the beginning of a peer mentoring program.

Apart from the two major changes to the Student Commons so far, there is still a list of adjustments and additions to the group that I think will happen over time. Even though the current design has been well received, I have valued the feedback and opinions from all that have had an opportunity to navigate and experience the Student Commons. I have come to the realization however, that this group will always be a work in progress.
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