

Episode 6: Student Services | How Faculty and Staff Can Help

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to Get Online from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. Get Online has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

Today we are kicking off the first of a three-episode series that explores how to best support online learners through strategic student services. Our guest host for this episode is the fabulous Rachel Ohmes who is my colleague at Great Plains IDEA. Rachel, take it away!

Rachel Ohmes:

Hello! My name is Rachel Ohmes. We have a real treat for you today because my colleagues Tristin Campbell and Casey Smith have joined me for a conversation about the role of a distance education coordinator, what one is and how this role can work together with faculty and staff to enhance the online student experience. Before we dive in, I'd like to tell you a little bit about me, my background, and my job.

I've worked in higher education for about 10 years now and I have experience as a faculty member, student services professional, and I've worked with face-to-face and online populations. With the majority of my experience being in the online space, I am passionate about relationship-building within online communities as well as how we can develop student services professionals, including distance education coordinators, both professionally and personally.

I have worked with Great Plains IDEA at Kansas State University since 2016 where I have served as the K-State Campus Coordinator and the Great Plains IDEA Lead Campus Coordinator. I have the privilege of serving K-State learners, anyone who takes a course at K-State, and I get to support 26 other campus coordinators who are located at our member universities.

If you're new to our podcast you might not know that Great Plains IDEA is an online consortium consisting of 19 member institutions who collaboratively offer programs in both human sciences and agriculture, which we refer to as AG IDEA.

Thanks again for joining us today Tristin and Casey! So tell us just a little bit about you, what you do, and how you've gotten to be a distance education coordinator.

Tristin Campbell:

Hi Rachel, it's nice to be here. Well, my name is Tristin Campbell and I am the Great Plains Campus Coordinator here at Texas Tech University. I've been a part of this program for a little over two years now, working with both GP IDEA and AG IDEA students and faculty.

Becoming involved in distance education has really opened my eyes to a new world of learning and is part of the reason I'm getting my Master's in Instructional Design and Technology right now. You know, I went into this field with very little knowledge and it has been a wonderful experience getting a new understanding in this area.

Rachel Ohmes:

Thanks, Tristin. And how about you, Casey?

Casey Smith:

Yeah, thanks for having me today, Rachel. My name is Casey Smith. I am one of the campus coordinators at Iowa State University. I work in an online learning center in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and we also work with a program within design.

I became the Distance Coordinator, more specifically, after my supervisor stepped down recently, Michelle Xander, and she was a great role model for me in how to navigate both our online students in the GP IDEA program as well as what we call Course Shoppers here at ISU where we have many on-campus students who will supplement their course load with online classes here and there.

I am working, currently, on my Ph.D. in higher education. I have a great interest in online learning as it comes through gaming and through a specific phenomenon known as esports where competitive gamers get together and play, and we're seeing that a lot more on college campuses. So that's my research interest, there, and once again, I'm glad to be here. Thanks.

Rachel Ohmes:

Thanks so much to both of you, once again, for taking the time to be on our podcast today. I want to further define what a Great Plains IDEA Campus Coordinator actually is because we're really using that term interchangeably with a Distance Education Coordinator.

Throughout the 19 member universities that participate in Great Plains IDEA there are Distance Education coordinators known as Campus Coordinators at each institution. Some work with all of their university's programs, like Tristin, while others split the responsibilities based on program, like Casey. These campus coordinators are really a student's go-to contact for a lot of things including navigating university processes, accessing resources that are available for online students, helping students with enrollment, course access, really, so much more.

Campus Coordinators really act as a liaison between their university and Great Plains IDEA faculty, staff, and students and one of the other unique components to a Great Plains IDEA Campus Coordinator is that these coordinators are responsible for supporting, assisting their home university students, or students who are enrolled as students at their respective institutions, but any student who takes a class at a university-- an Iowa State student or a Texas Tech University student-- so campus

coordinators help those non-home university students also gain course access throughout a semester.

Now thinking of the student side of things, we also have, especially with Great Plains IDEA, it's important that our Distance Education Coordinators help students, but also they serve a role that makes sure that they are also helping faculty and staff.

Casey, can you speak to a few ways that you work with or support faculty and staff in your role?

Casey Smith:

Definitely. I think I really like the terminology of a one-stop-shop. When I think about the support that we offer, first and foremost our faculty here at ISU in the GPIDEA program, the way that our online center runs we have a student services team, we have a video capture team, and also an instructional design team so whether it is creating and preparing a course via the camera and the capturing, the video processing, the video editing, or whether or not it's getting the canvas shell set up or moved into the next semester, making sure students are in there correctly.

I would say that is a large part of the process that intimately binds us with the professor at the beginning of each semester as we troubleshoot and work on getting students in the right places because that's when you really see that the faculty and us, we're equally invested in the success of each and every student. Trying to create the most successful scenario for the student is both of our goals even though sometimes that can be incredibly challenging for a number of different reasons.

Other than that, I think continuous communication with the faculty throughout the semester, we will try to hold faculty meetings when we can with different departments or ongoing conversations, usually those are face-to-face meetings out here on campus, but with COVID and whatnot, Zoom is just as reliable, and if anything, if people are more restricted to one space it's actually easier sometimes to have those meetings.

Then with faculty outside of ISU, I think the GP IDEA yearly meeting is a great place for me to see them, meet with them, and just have a face to the name. That helps quite a bit, I think, when I'm typing up emails specifically to the faculty, which doesn't happen often because of our communication with other campus coordinators, but every once in a while it is nice to have that personal touch of like we've met, we know a little bit about each other. I think that goes a long way in, once again, solving some of those dilemmas that help us create student success.

Rachel Ohmes:

Absolutely, and just for our listeners, our Great Plains IDEA annual conference happens once a year and it's an opportunity for all faculty, staff, our campus coordinators to get together, have meetings, do a little bit of professional development, so we rely heavily on Zoom in most things, but I do agree, having that annual conference is really helpful in

building relationships and just getting to know who you're working with a little bit better.

Something that you said really stuck with me and that is that as a staff member and one who works in student services you mentioned that you are equally as invested in student success as the faculty are and I think that is hugely important and especially that you have those ongoing conversations with faculty and even other staff.

I think that's an integral part of really building a relationship with faculty and staff, but also just moving forward with that team approach to let students know, "Hey, you've got this whole team of people who are talking to one another, we're communicating and it's all in the interest of seeing you succeed." So I really like that better-together-approach that you were alluding to there.

Now, Tristin, maybe you can speak to this a little bit, how have you built relationships with faculty and staff on your campus?

Tristin Campbell:

I like that Casey touched on the faculty and the academic side with course building because there's also the communication side of students, which is kind of a primary part of what I deal with when I'm conversing with our faculty and staff and that's maintaining consistent communication as being the main point or role that I play with students.

A lot of the times I get communication from students voicing issues or concerns they may have and my job is to ensure that the faculty member or program director is also aware of these issues and can address these obstacles that a student may be facing, and just voicing those student concerns and make sure that they go to the level for the faculty member, because a lot of times our role is to be the advocate for the student who doesn't have the opportunity to just pop on campus when they have an issue or concern.

Rachel Ohmes:

Yes, and I really like that phrase that you used to be a "student advocate" because you're right, an online student can't just pop into someone's office to chat with them of course they can always call, set up a Zoom, email, but sometimes I think it's human nature to want to physically go somewhere to have these conversations.

I think that you're right, a key component of being a distance education coordinator is being a student advocate, and I think that really helps build relationships with the faculty and staff that you're working with because they know that at the end of the day you are really there to be on the student's team and help get them the things that they need, but also, it helps build those relationships with students to know that they have that trust in you.

I want to dive a little deeper into the value of having a distance education coordinator. Tristin, what do you think are the advantages to having a distance education coordinator who is dedicated to supporting online students and their success?

Tristin Campbell:

It can be beneficial for our students, I feel, because we do have a small specific student population, and especially with our GP IDEA niche, I guess you could say I have an advantage of knowing who all my students are, where they're at in the program, what circumstances they may be facing, why they're going online versus face-to-face, as opposed to staff who may have larger numbers of students that they have to assist and try to keep track of.

I know we mentioned this, but having that main point of contact can also alleviate that anxiety for students of [asking] "who am I supposed to contact for what? I have this hold or this registration there, who is that person for our GP IDEA students?" They know that that I'm their person to reach out to, and as Casey mentioned, being proactive with communication for these students is key.

It's also an advantage because my hope is if a student receives email communication from me, they're like "oh this is from Tristin, my GP IDEA Campus Coordinator, I should probably read this because it's probably important and has to do with my degree or with my courses" just because our face-to-face students, they may get communication bombarded from everywhere from admissions to financial aid to all sorts of places, but when a student knows that I'm reaching out to them, specifically, in regards to this, my hope is that they're getting some authentic one-on-one communication even though they're a distance learner.

Rachel Ohmes:

Absolutely, and I really like that you mentioned "authentic communication" because there's so much communication out there that really it's not necessary to be personalized or just simply not feasible, but the role of these distance education coordinators is to be that authentic voice, whether that is by email, through the phone, on video conferencing, who always seems to know where, like you said, where do I go to get this hold removed or what are my graduation requirements.

I think that constant support, and students just know, "okay well I can go to Tristin if I need anything at all, and she can help me out." I think it's really important and while that is important at any point within a student's journey, especially with COVID-19, I think having that constant is even more important than ever and we're even seeing that a lot with face-to-face students, a lot of them don't have the opportunity anymore to just pop into an office with a lot of institutions being on limited operations, I think that perhaps Distance Education coordinators might be ahead of the game here and really serving as that constant contact.

We have talked a little bit about COVID, but I'm curious, as a Distance Education coordinator, how has your job changed since the start of this pandemic?

Casey Smith:

Luckily, even the course shoppers that we have don't come into our office very often, so I have had the benefit of, in this case, not being essential to being on campus so I have

been working from home since March. I think I actually go in tomorrow for a quick little tutorial on some new setup we have with video capture, but otherwise, my on-campus involvement is fairly limited.

Our president kind of has a [policy], if you see face-to-face students daily, then it's probably pretty important for you to be in but take the necessary precautions; but if you are a person who can work remotely with students and has not been required to- or I should say- and does not see face-to-face students very often, then working from home is just fine. So I have been enjoying that option as of late.

Other than that I would say flexibility has been something that we've had to just be hyper-aware of with students' situations and whatnot, I think GP IDEA has some scholarships available to help students finish out, especially if they were dealing with some COVID hardships, relaying that information to them and then also just making sure that students are still on track, making sure that they're not just dropping off the face of the planet, disappearing without a word.

So that's an important piece, and then that kind of funnels into our responsibilities with other departments here on campus. Sometimes it can be difficult trying to get different tasks completed and investigating different issues that are happening because of all the moving parts of a fairly siloed place like Iowa State, but I think our departments like the registrar in the graduate college have been fairly lenient as of late with a lot of the stuff that's happening with COVID, so that's been huge.

Rachel Ohmes:

Absolutely, and again, you're really speaking to the flexibility that a Distance Education coordinator can offer for students. Tristin, how about you, has your job changed at all since COVID-19?

Tristin Campbell:

Well, like Casey, we were sent home in March to work remotely and as you can imagine working at home with a three-year-old and a seven-month-old has its obstacles, and combining that with a huge transition of our university and our students moving to online since being a campus coordinator is my only role that I play, but for GP IDEA students, yes, keeping them on track was a challenge for this part.

We had a lot of students that might have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and trying to figure out ways that they can still maintain and get their diploma and education, whether it be scholarships and things like that, working through this has been rewarding and challenging, finding out new information for our students and advantages that they can be a part of.

I'd also say, as a lot of our students have transitioned from face-to-face and become online students, we've actually had a bit more students enroll and be a part of GP IDEA because they don't know what faces or challenges may be a part of a face-to-face or going to a university, so they have decided to take the route of doing the online courses so our enrollment for GP IDEA has gone up quite a bit due to COVID-19. Or students

who were expected to graduate and get their undergraduate and then they said, "Wait, I think I want to continue and get my masters instead of joining the workforce at this point in time," has increased our enrollment, I would say, for the online distance education.

Rachel Ohmes:

We've talked a lot about the important role a Distance Education coordinator plays for faculty, staff, and students. We hope that you'll join us for part two of this episode where we chat about how a Distance Education coordinator supports students and what advice we have for online student success.

Kathryn Harth:

That's it for this week's show. A special thanks to our guest host, Rachel Ohmes, and campus coordinators Tristin Campbell and Casey Smith.

Listen next week to hear the rest of the interview.

You can download other Great Plains IDEA episodes on your favorite podcast app or visit our website to learn more about Great Plains IDEA. Just go to www.gpidea.org.

I'm your host Kathryn Harth, and until next time, Get Online!