

STUDENT SUPPORT AND PROGRESSION

Dr. V. Sujatha

Abstract

Student support in the broadest terms is the gamut of all activities that help in the progress of students in their studies and successful completion of their studies. Best practices related to student support and progression embraces all the actions that take place from the pre-entry contact with the institution to not only the point of exit but also beyond. Any best practices in student support and progression shall contribute to enhance the quality of student support, help the student to successfully navigate the curriculum. Networking in all fields of human activity has become inevitable for survival of any institution. Education is not just about passing the examinations. Provisions for co-curricular and extra curricular activities, activities that help the student interact with local community would inculcate a sense of belonging to the society, appreciate the cultural differences outside their own environments would complement the study based knowledge and contribute to be a good citizen.

*Principal & Head,
Department of Commerce,
Cauvery College for Women,
Trichy – 18.*

Student support and progression is a very important parameter in the assessment of quality of education imparted in any academic institution - a college or a 'university. Student support in the broadest terms is the gamut of all activities that help in the progress of students in their studies and successful completion of their studies. The range and the quality of student support services differ from institution to institution. Many factors contribute to the development and maintenance of quality -student – support systems. Some of the factors are:

- the competitiveness of an institution to attract best students
- the status of the institution
- the socio-economic-education culture in which the institution operates.

Many institutions believe that the student support is limited to making

available good teachers, good class rooms, good library and spacious play grounds. But today, students and parents expect an academic institution to provide support services in addition to the routine support services limited to learning and studying in a classroom with the mediation of a teacher. It has been established that the range and quality of student support services have a direct bearing on student progression - successful completion of the programme, reduced rates of failures and dropouts, performance in co-curricular, extra-curricular and extension activities. The argument that many students do not take advantage of support services provided to them is to be viewed from either the lack of information that such services exist or from a failure to disseminate the information about the benefits, such services provide in the short run and in the long run.

Student Support services may be broadly classified as:

- Information services
- Registration and records services
- Tutorial and Remedial services
- Counselling services
- Library services
- Value Addition services
- Institutional Networking services
- Career Guidance services
- Placement services
- Feedback services
- Alumni Services
- Community services
- Student Welfare services.

Providing these services of a reasonable quality requires, appropriate investments in Human and Financial resources and evolving administrative arrangements at appropriate levels. This itself will be possible only if necessary policy decisions are taken at the highest management level and an implementation apparatus is evolved

It is to be emphasized that availability of support services is different from the accessibility of these services to all students. The heterogeneity of student population in regard to their socio-economic - geographical backgrounds, language and cultural differences, calls for internalizing the quality culture and institutionalizing the dispensation of support services.

Criteria of Best Practices with respect to student support & Progression

Criteria of best practices refer to the standards of best practices. Best practices are dynamic and continuous and are the result of identification, experimentation, reflection, feedback and innovation based

on experience. Best practices must be available for documentation have the potential for replication, transparent, accountable, affordable and accessible to all students. Best practices must result in change for better and help the student realize his full potential during and after his studies. Best practices must result in superior performance of a student in all the activities - academic, interpersonal and co-curricular. Best practices shall contribute to learning outside the classrooms and should not take for granted the learning challenges and learning systems. Best practices related to student support and progression embraces all the actions that take place from the pre-entry contact with the institution to not only the point of exit but also beyond. Let us consider now some of the sub-sub-systems like information, registration, enrolment, student records, student management, welfare activities, financial support, library, learning environment, teaching, tutorials, counseling, leisure activities and examination, of the sub system of student support and progression.

Student information system shall make available to the students detailed information on the programmes one offer, availability of choices, minimum entry requirements, admission policy, academic calendar, fee structure, refund policies, examination system, promotion and detension rules and avenues for financial support available to various types of students. All this information is made available to the student in the form of a prospectus which is sold along with application for admission. But this information may not be available unless a student purchases the application form. The language and the jargon - many times

- can not be understood by all the students. The clarity and brevity with which the information is updated, revised and provided to the student is a criteria for the Best practices on this sub-sub-systems.

In today's knowledge society with alternate- forms of communication systems, in addition to the print medium, this information can be made available through internet and web-site. Internet and website information if made available to public at large, a poorly managed website, poor quality of information, uncertainty of access, the lack of correctness and currentness of information may become counter-productive and may turn about to be bad practice instead of a best practice.

Registration and student record services is a part of administrative services. To qualify for Best Practice these services must be student friendly and operate in an affirmative environment. The administrative staff must be trained to be supportive to the student needs and exhibit patience to deal with student queries. Maintenance of student records, constant updating of student files, quick retrieval of information call for technology mediation in the process. One benchmark of a best practice is the careful planning of computer aided maintenance of student records. The day may not be fair - off when institutions use Information Kiosks; or call centre approach, where students can readily access any non-confidential information directly in 24/7 mode on-line without having to visit the office of the institution.

Academic support services to qualify for a Best Practice shall recognise alternate pathways to teaming. Catering to

the individual differences slow learners and advanced learners - providing tutorial and remedial support in difficult areas of teaming, encouraging students sharpen their listening and writing skills, improve communication skills, overcome language barriers, will contribute to make academic support in an institution a best practice to be emulated by other institutions. Technology support in class room teaching - using multimedia - as a learn' support device is also a criteria to make academic support a best practice.

Counseling support services will contribute to enable students to overcome their inhibitions, mindset and societal and linguistic barriers. The advice, help and support given by a trained counselor would enable a student to make satisfactory progress. At the pre-entry level students have a right to know what their expectations are when they opt to study a subject or an area of study. Counseling support has two dimensions - counseling on academic related issues and counseling on personal issues. Academic related counseling pertains to advising the applicants on choice of programmes and courses, protocols of administrative nature, tasks and dead lines, participation co-curricular and extra curricular activities and behaviour patterns in the campus. Personal counseling by a trained counselor would help students to familiarize with social etiquette, peer group interaction, attitudinal changes, over come emotional problems. And reduce dropout rates resulting out of non-academic and non-financial reasons. The preparedness of an institution to provide counseling services in the campus and the quality of service is a criterion for best practices.

Library support services would contribute and supplement the teaching and tutorial support services and the progress of student in their studies. Library services are not limited to stocking the library with text books and reference books but must ensure their accessibility to all students. Materials and facilities, information services, reading room facilities and access to internet facilities and reprograph facilities would contribute to make this a criteria for best practices. Open access to the library and computerization of library facilities and a policy on acquisition of latest books and subscription to discipline based and information based journals and magazines would be a criterion to make library support service, a best practice. The last but not the least is the positive attitude of library staff in encouraging students to, fully utilize the services available in the library.

Value addition services refer to the facilities, those that are not included in the syllabus and curriculum but would help the student to face competitive employment market after successful completion of study. Communication skills, vocational skills, computer skills supplemented to the curriculum would enhance the competencies of students and develop their own personality. A good institution would make provision to make available value added services that would give a fitness of purpose to each student and would contribute to 'learning to be'. The quality of value added services and their easy accessibility to all students would be a criteria for best practices.

Networking in all fields of human activity has become inevitable for survival

of any institution'. However great and mighty an institutions may be, it cannot provide all facilities and services of the best quality to all the students. Today's knowledge society has to thrive on, principle of sharing - sharing of resources, sharing of experiences and sharing of facilities. No institution can survive isolation. Linkages with industry, national and international institutions in having exchange programmes, would provide students with experiences in working together with students from different backgrounds and cultures, test their theoretical knowledge in the field and working with people outside their communities and would be a criterion for Best practice.

Career guidance and placement services refer to provisions of linkages to the campus life of students with the realities to be faced by them when they seek employment or opt for further higher studies. Career guidance to a certain extent is provided in the library under information services. But specific information on the competitive examinations, the choices available in careers, the avenues to seek information, preparation for and acquisition of additional soft skills, motivation and sustenance call for an exclusive cell to cater to the specific needs of students. In present day's context, there is information gap between employers and employment seekers. The curriculum based education seldom provide the students with employability skills, the prospective employers look for. Campus based interviews have become a common practice in elite colleges and universities. A benchmark of a best practice is the establishment of a career guidance and

placement services department headed by a competent and student friendly officer with required competencies.

Feed back services contribute to self regulation and midway course correction in modifying, altering and bettering existing support services. The analysis of feed back studies help reduce the entropy in the system. Students join the system with certain expectations and aspirations. But once in the system, there will be a gap between what ought to be and what it is. Similarly the institution expects certain levels of performance from the students. The perceptual differences and communication gaps could be marginalized if quality feedback services are continuously used to utilize the services at optimal levels. The students feed back on teaching in the class rooms, the quality of teachers, the quality of support services, the quality of empathy of the persons that matter to the student needs is an indicator of the performance of the institution at micro as well as macro level. The days where teachers and service providers arrogated themselves that they alone are competent to decide on what is good to the student have gone by. Not only collecting the feedback from the students, parents and public at large on the performance of the institutions but an unbiased, systematic and scientific analysis of the collected data to be used as an important input for future guidance make this service candidate for best practice.

Alumni are the ambassadors of an institution and more often than not, the achievements of the alumni contribute to the enhanced prestige of the institution. Though institutions bask in the glory of

their alumni, it is only recently it is recognized that alumni services contribute to the further growth of the institutions.

Even though examples exist where alumni contributed to the growth and development of the institutions, majority of academic institutions have neither systematically maintained the alumni records nor drawn on their expertise and good will. It is only recently that formation of Alumni associations is taken up and involve alumni in the student welfare and institutional development activities. A criteria for best practices would be the quality of the alumni services.

Community services and extension activities have become a part and parcel of extra curricular activities. Educational institutions draw on the good will of the local community for their survival and growth. Though N.C.C. / N.S.S. wings are generally engaged in these activities, there is a need to coordinate their activities with NGOs and SHGs to achieve optimal results at the field level. A criteria for best practice is the innovation in the existing practices and identify new thrust areas for reaching the unreached.

Student welfare is a support service which encompasses a variety of services. With the increasing cost of education and entry of students from socially, economically and geographically challenged sections into institutions of higher education, it has become imperative that a best practice would be to ensure that no student would discontinue studies because of non-affordability and financial constraints. Though several scholarships are available to students from socially

challenged sections, the financial support may not match their needs. Students not covered by statutory considerations find it most difficult to continue their studies because of financial difficulties. In spite of 'earn while learn' 'poor boys aid fund', loans from banks, scholarships instituted by philanthropists and Alumni associations, there are still large body of students who find it difficult to continue their studies because of financial constraints. In addition, provision for medical and health services, provisions of hostel facilities, a forum for redressal of grievances and a mechanism to contribute to student welfare would qualify as a criterion for best practice.

Description of Best Practices

Any best practices in student support and progression shall contribute to enhance the quality of student support, help the student to successfully navigate the curriculum, demonstrate acquisition of knowledge and skills resulting in progress and successful completion of study. A best practice shall also equip the student with soft skills to give a competitive edge in the employment market or in further higher studies and in overall personality development. The study and training shall make provision for participation in off-campus activities to make a student more tolerant to accommodate attributes of a pluralistic society with moral values to make him / her a good member of the community.

The preparation of Information Brochure in print must be made it available on institution website and internet. The language should be simple, clear and understandable. A section on FAQs and

answers to FAQs would help a student to clarify the doubts without contacting the institution.

Tutorial and remedial services must be organized in a formal way, incorporating the schedule into regular time table. Constant monitoring of progress and record keeping is essential. An analysis at the end of the year / programme is to study the impact of the services and making this an input for improvement would serve the purpose of this support.

Open access to the library, computerization of library service and make library not only as a repository of books, magazines and journals but as an information dissemination centre. Networking with other libraries would be an added advantage. Keeping the library / reading room open and accessible after the working hours would help the students utilize the facility at optimal levels.

Reducing dropout rate to nil would reduce the drag on the system as well on the resources. One of the reasons for dropout is the mismatch between the expectations and achievements. The second reason may be financial difficulty to continue the studies. A student leaving an institution and opting to join other institution in a better programme of his / her choice cannot be considered as a dropout. This is true especially in science programmes where a student takes admission as an insurance - or as a stop gap arrangement till he joins in a professional college. Barring such cases and cases where a student secures employment, other dropout cases are to be properly documented. Counseling -

academic, personal or psychological would help to reduce dropouts. A regular feed back on support services would identify a would be dropout.

Career guidance and placement services would bridge the gap between educational institutions and employment market. Training for competitive examinations, acquiring communication and competency enhancement skills would give competitive edge to students when they step into outside - campus world. Campus interviews have become a norm of the day in good institutions.

Education is not just about passing the examinations. Provisions for co-curricular and extra curricular activities, activities that help the student interact with local community would inculcate a sense of belonging to the society, appreciate the

cultural differences outside their own environments would complement the study based knowledge and contribute to be a good citizen.

Student welfare is a broad term that encompasses several support services, one important component, being financial support services. With increased cost of education many students find it -difficult to continue their education. Though several schemes like scholarships of different kinds, loan facilities from banks and awards for the bright students are available, they do not cover all the needy. An institution that makes it a policy to help all the needy and ensure that no student is denied access to higher education because of financial difficulties is one that can be identified as the best institution.