

Best Practices for Student Affairs Supporting Online Learners

Abstract: This document provides an overview of the opportunities and challenges facing student affairs programs, as degree programs move online. In this white paper, we provide a vision, review opportunities, and share guidelines for campuses as they adapt to the online ecosystem.

08.01.2018

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Introduction

The development of online degree programs presents a unique opportunity for universities to rethink how they serve and support students as they progress through their lifecycle in the university environment. Creating services in reaction to the changing student population results in silos across higher-education institutions. Today, campuses can instead utilize a proactive and integrated approach to serving students. The single access point—the student’s computer—opens doors for seamlessly navigating the “inside” and “outside” of classroom experiences.

Technology makes it possible to integrate often-disjointed policies, practices, and infrastructures to create a cohesive student support system. Optimally, programs provided to online students are so tightly coupled with ground-based programs that students can move between worlds seamlessly. Campuses have the unique opportunity to re-imagine online education and create a state-of-the-art ecosystem that is forward thinking and inclusive of online learners. Student affairs educators can leverage the online learning platform to provide support and learning experiences to and for students and build an online university community. At Noodle Partners, we work closely with our university partners as they create a vision for the kind of community and support infrastructure the campus wants for its online ecosystem. From there, using our depth and breadth of experience, we co-create a plan for transforming student success and support initiatives.

The purpose of this document is to share, with prospective and current student affairs partners, our vision and recommendations (based on research and best practices) for creating a high-quality experience for online learners. We’ll provide an overview of the role we play in supporting campuses as they launch and create these innovative experiences. On the following pages, we document our vision of what a high-quality, online student experience looks like, the challenges and demands of supporting online students, and guidelines for facilitating best practices in supporting online students across five student affairs or support categories. The five categories are:

1. Student success/retention support (including technology support)
2. Community building/social engagement
3. Orientation/immersion experiences
4. Academic support
5. Career development

The Vision

Like on-ground programs, online programs should be anchored in research-based best practices (like those defined in this document) for serving and educating students. Eventually, Noodle Partners expects the line between “online” and “on-campus” to evaporate. Students will enroll in “a program” and attend online or on campus as their situation and preferences dictate. Until then, we believe that



a high-quality, holistic student online experience:

- Is grounded in research about students' needs, learning, and development with specific attention to the population being served (e.g., undergraduate, graduate, adult learners, first generation college students, students from marginalized backgrounds) in the online modality.
- Ensures that any individuals providing direct services to online students understand the unique needs of the students they are serving.
- Is created and deployed around the concept of inclusive excellence, where inclusivity and excellence are viewed as interdependent—one cannot claim to be excellent if he/she is not being inclusive. Any individuals interacting with prospective or current students should identify and uncover explicit and implicit biases that could affect how they work with one another and how they work to support students. Any programs, units, or campus partners that serve students should undergo thoughtful reflection to identify areas of strength and change working toward inclusive excellence.
- Is co-constructed and supported by stakeholders across the university enterprise with a clear understanding of how online students will be supported and how that support is financed (e.g., what fees are paid by students, etc.).
- Aligns with the Universal Design for Learning Principles to ensure that all

individuals have equal opportunities to learn.

- Integrates elements of the campus culture, history, and traditions into all aspects of the online program design and delivery.
- Utilizes learning strategies, people resources, and current technology to motivate students to succeed.

Trends in Online Learning

Approximately one third of all graduate students are currently enrolled in online programs nationally.¹ We know that, much like on-ground students, online learners drop out early on in their program—within the first two weeks.² Many factors influence a student's decision to disenroll from their online program. These factors are associated with their knowledge, skills, motivation, and/or organizational barriers³ such as:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Socioeconomic factors
- First generation status in college
- Military status
- Lack of independence and motivation
- Poor self-management
- Lack of computer and technological skills
- Previous history of online withdrawals

- Study habits
- Academic preparation
- Life circumstances such as work, family commitments, health, and access to reliable internet)⁴

Scholars and practitioners alike acknowledge the importance of supporting the success of online learners in and beyond the classroom.

1) Poulin, R. and Straut, T. (2016). "WCET distance education enrollment report 2016." Retrieved from <http://wcet.wiche.edu/initiatives/research/WCET-Distance-Education-Enrollment-Report-2016>

2) Nistor, N. & Neubauer, K. (2010). "From participation to dropout: Quantitative participation patterns in online university courses." *Computers & Education*, 55, 663-672.

3) Clark, R. E., & Estes, F. (2008). "Turning research into results: A guide to selecting the right performance solutions."

4) Crawley, A. & Fetzner, M. (2013). "Providing service innovations to students inside and outside of the online classroom: Focusing on student success." *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(1), 7-12. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

5) Ludwig-Hardman, S. & Dunlap, J. C. (2003). "Learner support services for online students: Scaffolding for success." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 4(1), 1-15.

6) Pullman, M. (2011). "Online support services for undergraduate millennial students." *Information Systems Education Journal*, 9(1), 67-98.

Messaging (and Delivering) Inclusiveness

All students, including online students, do better academically when they feel valued, welcomed, and supported.⁵ Some institutions do not realize this, but when they fail to modify their current practice, they signal that online students aren't "real" students. There are many ways institutions demonstrate their lack of consideration for online students' needs, including:

- Office hours and class schedules that do not consider multiple time zones.
- Inaccessible campus events.
- Services, such as counseling or health centers, that do not adapt to serve the needs of online students.
- Fees, such as student activity fees, that get charged by may not apply to online students.

On Demand Service Needs

Online learners, in particular, expect service, immediacy, and interactivity. This means support mechanisms need to be provided anytime and from anywhere,⁶ which is not a model most campuses are used to providing. Online students want to accomplish their tasks without thinking about what department is serving them; they want to log into one place at any time of the day and find the options and services they need, when they need them. They want real-time and accurate responses with relevant, just-in-time resources.

Service Beyond Tech Support

Many support services provided to online learners focus on administrative or technology-related issues (such as using the LMS or registering for class), but they fail to consider how to implement high-quality practices in other areas of student affairs such as advising, access-related support, or community building.⁷

Preparing Support Services Across Student Affairs

Student Affairs stakeholders and leaders should begin by creating a vision for the kind of community the campus needs for its online ecosystem and how it would like to support online learners. From there, each functional unit should consider how it can contribute to the vision by transforming its services to operate in this ecosystem's broader vision.

While some campus services may not translate well to an online setting, there are six things you can do to embrace and support online learners:

1. Ensure all language (e.g., mission statements, purpose statements, etc.) about each area/unit/initiative is inclusive of online learners—check websites and other documents provided to students.
2. Secure the digital tools and technology necessary to video conference with online students, and train staff in their use—confirm that administrative processes can be completed without having to come to campus.
3. Consider what information can be provided in an online orientation to introduce resources and services to students.
4. Assess any student fees that are being charged to online students to ensure that they are being used to provide equitable services and activities when compared to on-campus students.⁸ Identify engagement strategies that will be created specifically for online learners or existing strategies that can be inclusive of online learners.
5. Create an (or weave online students/ initiatives into an existing) assessment plan for evaluating the degree to which the vision for supporting online learners is being achieved.

7) Ludwig-Hardman, S. & Dunlap, J. C. (2003). "Learner support services for online students: Scaffolding for success." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 4(1), 1-15.

8) Dare, L. A., Zapata, L. P., & Thomas, A. G. (2005). "Assessing the needs of distance learners: A student affairs perspective." In S. R. Jones & S. K. Watt (Eds.), *Engaging the digital generation* (pp. 39-54). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

As the unit considers how to integrate online learners and the workload associated with this endeavor, it should do so with the understanding that student success coaches (described below) can provide a personalized and high level of support. With this in mind, the unit should determine what an escalation plan



might look like (i.e., what support mechanisms are important to be retained by the campus unit, and what would be best to delegate to the student success coaches).

With a clearly defined escalation plan in place, a well-integrated support system can be provided to online learners. The support mechanisms are communicated clearly to students via orientation, the LMS, and through online course faculty; while faculty do not need to be the ones to provide these services, they should be prepared to help make connections between students and the services they need.⁹

Noodle Partners works alongside our university partners through the discovery and implementation phases as a thought partner on visioning the kind of community the campus wants for its online ecosystem, revising language and processes to be accessible for and inclusive of online learners, and establishing an assessment plan and cadence that can inform practice while avoiding survey fatigue among students. We typically spend time with representatives in the following areas:

- Health services
- Personal counseling
- Academic advising
- Financial aid
- Judicial affairs
- Accessibility programs
- Programs for students from marginalized populations

Noodle Partners works with each campus to establish a budget that will provide staffing for highly impacted areas.

Noodle Partners' Student Affairs Support Areas

In the following section, we delineate general best practices in key areas of online student support and describe how Noodle Partners collaborates with partner institutions to realize their visions for each area.

1. Student Success/Retention Support

Online learners need a strong and coordinated support system to proactively support, identify challenges, and help foster their success. The ideal student success and retention support infrastructure should be an integrated solution. This solution must encompass a “platform trio” with key ingredients that include:

1. Technology-based retention platform
2. Student support desk
3. Student success coach

The first ingredient, technology-based retention, is the “hub” for understanding student behavior and is leveraged by both the student support desk and the student success

9) Crawley, Anita. (2012). Supporting online students: A guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating services. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



coach. The platform aggregates information about students by gathering data points typically housed in disparate systems (e.g., LMS, SIS) to create a holistic picture of student activity. This data can trigger alerts that identify a potential concern for a student being at-risk and the need to follow up.

The second ingredient in the retention trio is a support desk available 12-24 hours a day that is easily accessible and can provide thorough and accurate technology-based support for students. The support desk should capture information about student concerns and feed alerts into the retention platform (e.g., students with multiple technology issues within a short time-frame). An escalation plan should be created that details what issues or questions are appropriate for support desk representative to address (Tier 1) and what should be referred to others, primarily campus personnel (Tier 2). See the table below for the framework of Tier 1 and Tier 2 support.

With the support desk, Tier 1 and 2 are largely dependent upon the level of system access the campus is willing to provide. For successful Tier 1 troubleshooting, the support desk representatives need access to administrator

tools (e.g., user management tools for password resets) and access for re-creating problems in platforms (such as the LMS).

The final, and arguably most important, ingredient to the retention trio is a dedicated success coach who makes personal contact with students, ushers them through the admit-to-enroll process, and checks in on them at key touch points throughout their journey to build rapport and demonstrate consistent support through graduation. Ideally, the same person should closely monitor the retention platform to follow up with early alerts/notifications within 12-48 hours.¹⁰

Noodle Partners brings the retention trio to our campus partners. We work carefully with each campus to personalize and train our highly qualified providers to give best-in-class retention support to online learners. We work closely with each campus to define escalation plans to establish protocols for issues that should be addressed by campus personnel. This approach provides a strong and proactive retention support system while judiciously managing the use of on-ground resources as the online programs scale up. Below we outline the details, functions, and benefits of each type of support.

10) Britto, M. & Rush, S. (2013). "Developing and implementing comprehensive student support services for online students." *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(1), 29-42.



Student Success Coaching	Support Desk
Tier 1 - Student Success Coaches <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning for success (goals)• Troubleshooting potential obstacles for success• Time management support• Program requirements• Process for registering a disability• Accessing personal counseling• Academic calendar questions• Add/drop/incomplete deadlines and processes/procedures• Registration process• Patterns of at-risk behavior discovered through retention platform or individual sessions• Support through personal challenges	Tier 1 - Support Desk Team <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Available 12-24 hours per day• Performed via phone, chat, or zoom• Addresses general student questions• LMS functional support• Zoom (video conferencing used for live sessions) support• Username assistance (depending upon system access available)• Video/audio troubleshooting
Tier 2 - Campus Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic advising<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course availability concerns• Program planning• Selecting electives or concentrations• Field placement or practicum selection• Graduation clearance• Transfer credits• Internships or independent studies• Financial aid questions specific to the student• Concerns with faculty member• Concern for student or student community safety	Tier 2 - Campus IT <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SIS• Proprietary campus technology• Account issues that Tier 1 does not have access to resolve

2. Community Building/Social Engagement

Online learners may not come to the campus, but they still need to feel connected to the institution and feel a sense of belonging to the community, as both are factors associated with academic success and increased retention.¹¹ Technology can be harnessed to allow students, faculty, and staff the flexibility of communicating or connecting in multiple modalities. Once defined, the community-building and social-engagement strategies provided to online learners become a great vehicle for connecting with part-time, night-time, or commuting students.

Campus Events & Commencement

While the essence of campus culture can be embedded in orientation and woven into synchronized communication to students before and during their educational journey, inviting online students into on-campus events is a great way to help online students feel like

members of the community. Signature events, traditions, or guest speakers should be live streamed. Careful consideration should be dedicated to determining how to appropriately weave online students into commencement; campuses are often surprised by just how many online students physically attend commencement ceremonies.

Noodle Partners works with campuses to establish a plan for integrating online students into on-campus events with specific attention to establishing a cadence and communication plan for participating in major events, such as commencement ceremonies.

Interaction:

Peer-to-Peer and Faculty-to-Student

Providing opportunities for students to interact with each other and with faculty is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and connectivity. While this connectivity is often achieved through interactive and engaging coursework, out-of-class content can further stimulate connectivity and foster potential mentoring partnerships.

Virtual student groups

While interaction will likely occur in events as detailed above, online students should have access to student activities such as an online newspaper, student government, student chapters of professional associations or honors associations, and special interest clubs and organizations.¹² Creating connections to such organizations can also facilitate peer mentoring opportunities. As with on-campus organizations, faculty involvement should be encouraged in clubs and organizations.¹³

11) Crawley, A. (2012). *Supporting online students: A guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating services*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Floyd, D. L. & Casey-Powell. (2005). "New roles for student support services in distance learning." In B. L. Bower & K. P. Hardy (Eds.), *From distance education to e-learning: Lessons along the way* (pp. 55-64). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

12) Crawley, Anita. (2012). *Supporting online students: A guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating services*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

13) Fontaine, S. J. & Cook, S. M. (2014). "Co-curricular engagement for non-traditional online learners." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, XVII(III).



Noodle Partners works with campus partners to define appropriate pathways for connecting to existing student groups and/or defining new involvement opportunities.

Virtual gathering spaces

Students should have a place within the LMS to “meet” and dialogue with one another in both asynchronous and synchronous modalities.¹²

Noodle Partners leverages the LMS to create a “Virtual Student Union” and “Virtual Cohort Groups” and provides best practices for facilitating virtual groups.

3. Orientation/Immersion

Orientation

Online learners need an orientation experience that boosts their confidence, provides a sense of belonging and community within the institution, equips them with necessary information (e.g., policies) on how to be a positive community, helps them prepare to be academically successful, provides them with a tour around the technology they’ll be using in this program, and introduces them to available resources. Indeed, students who participate in an orientation have higher retention rates.¹⁴

Noodle Partners has created an online student orientation that captures the essential information needed for a successful transition.

The [outline for the orientation](#) is shared with campus partners who work with us alongside an instructional designer and video production crew to create an orientation experience that exemplifies the culture of the campus.

Immersion

Various models for implementing face-to-face immersion experiences, often called residencies, exist to complement the online degree program. Models include, but are not limited to, on-ground orientations, location-themed immersions, course-based immersions, and skill-based immersions. Immersions solidify students’ connections to each other, the university, and faculty and staff, all of which enhance student satisfaction and increase retention. Immersions serve as a vehicle for community building and foster a unique connectivity that can be gained effectively through the energy and synchronicity of real-time, in-person interaction. Many immersions incorporate alumni involvement, thus expanding students’ network for support of professionals in their field of study.

Noodle Partners walks both academic and student affairs personnel through [immersion models and considerations](#) to plan for successful immersion experiences, and can help with the planning and implementation of successful immersion programs that supplement an academic degree.

4. Academic Support

Academic Advising

Academic advising is crucial to students being placed successfully in courses and succeeding

14) Britto, M. & Rush, S. (2013). “Developing and implementing comprehensive student support services for online students.” *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(1), 29-42.

academically.¹⁵ Academic Advisors should adhere to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) guidelines, which emphasize the need for online advising services to be the same quality as those delivered on campus.¹⁶ Optimally, advising resources should be streamlined so they are concise and accessible. Key touch points and methods for contacting an advisor for help or clarification should be transparent.

Noodle Partners works with each campus and program to understand the academic advising process and resources and makes recommendations for delivery of asynchronous materials, transactional information that can be delivered through the student success advisors, and methods for implementing advising online. In some instances, on-ground graduate programs involve little academic advising because the coursework is lock-stepped, with little variation from student to student. In this case, little additional support is needed as the goal can be achieved by adding a student affairs professional who supports

multiple student support functions for online learners. This may include advising at a ratio of one staff member to 350 students / 1:350). In other models, faculty or academic advisors are much more involved in the advising process with students, which leads to a greater likelihood that more staff or faculty are needed to support this function (which could be achieved by providing additional compensation to a faculty member or hiring a professional academic advisor at a ratio of one advisor to 100 students / 1:50). Noodle Partners works with each campus to establish a budget that will provide staffing for highly impacted areas.

Academic Skill Building/Tutoring

External instructional resources, such as tutoring, need to be available for students' academic success.¹⁵ While graduate students may not need the same kind of tutoring or readiness preparation that undergraduate students do, many have specific needs for academic skill building (e.g., support with writing, formatting, statistics, etc.)

Noodle Partners works with faculty to understand what skills students typically need to build, and makes suggestions for how to support the needs. In some cases, instructional videos or resources may be embedded into orientation. In other scenarios, a tutoring platform or provider may be appropriate.

5. Career Development

The same level of career counseling/development services should be provided to online graduate students as on-campus learners.¹⁷ Career advisors need to have adequate software and hardware to connect

15) Floyd, D. L. & Casey-Powell. (2005). "New roles for student support services in distance learning." In B. L. Bower & K. P. Hardy (Eds.), *From distance education to e-learning: Lessons along the way* (pp. 55-64). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

16) NACADA. (2010). NACADA standards for advising distance learners. Retrieved from <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Commissions/C23/documents/DistanceStandards.pdf>

17) Crawley, Anita. (2012). *Supporting online students: A guide to planning, implementing, and evaluating services*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

with students virtually and be available to communicate with online students effectively.¹⁸ Career resources should be easily accessible to online students and, when possible, be offered through the LMS.¹⁹

Noodle Partners works with career development services and academic programs to understand what career resources and services are provided to on-ground graduate students and suggests a plan for connecting with online students. This plan often includes creating asynchronous materials in the LMS alongside an instructional designer and ensuring career development professionals have the tools and capacity to support online learners.

Conclusion

Many campuses are finding ways to support online learners but few are taking a truly holistic approach that results in a high-quality student experience. Noodle Partners works closely with our campus student affairs partners to create a vision for supporting online learners and co-create a plan for achieving this vision.

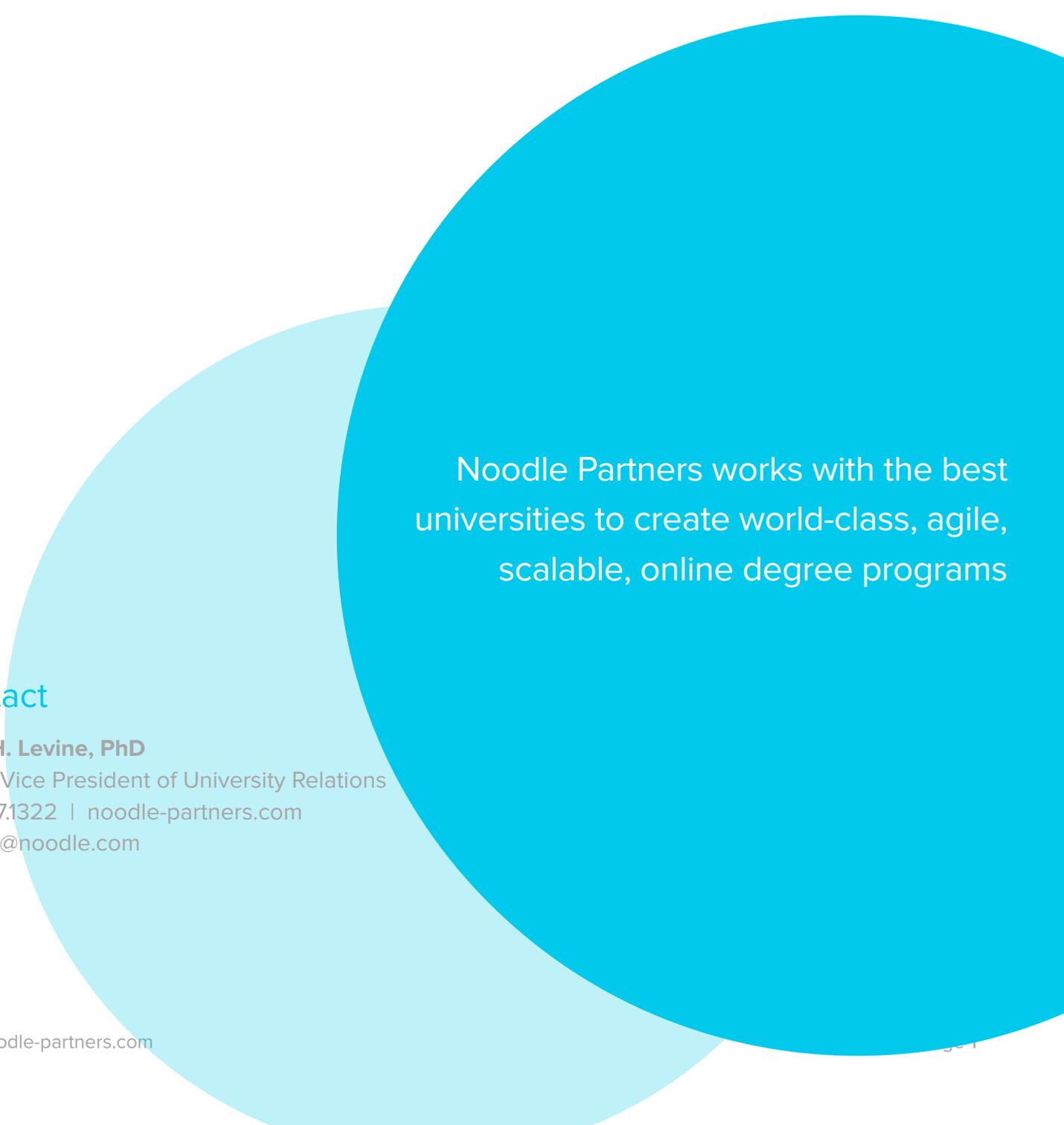
Our partners don't do this work alone. We not only join them as thought partners through the process and inform their decision making by sharing best practices but also help them strategically and effectively direct resources to the units that will be most impacted. We hope this document achieved the goals of explaining our vision and providing a blueprint for how to get there

18) NACE. (2016). Professional standards for college and university career services. Retrieved from <http://www.naceweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2016/publications/product/professional-standards/2016-nace-professional-standards-for-college-and-university-career-services.pdf>

19) Venable, M. (2010). "Using technology to deliver career development services: Supporting today's students in higher education." *The Career Development Quarterly*, 59, 87-96.

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Noodle Partners works with the best universities to create world-class, agile, scalable, online degree programs

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