After-hours help desk services assist online students around the world

Thomas Edison State University
The Challenge

About ten years ago, Thomas Edison State University (TESU) started seeing a significant increase in enrollment. Located in Trenton, New Jersey, TESU provides flexible learning opportunities for self-directed adults. The university’s programs, with the exception of its accelerated second-degree nursing program for non-nurses, are offered fully online. Students complete their degrees at their own pace.

The average age of TESU’s students is thirty-six. Many of the university’s students are in the military. In 2015, 27 percent of TESU’s graduates were active-duty military and 6 percent were veterans.

TESU had help desk services for technology and the learning management system, which supported students during the university’s business hours. But as more adult learners from across the country—as well as members of the military deployed in such countries as Afghanistan and Iraq—enrolled in the school, TESU realized it needed to provide after-hours support to accommodate students in different time zones.

“Students couldn’t reach us,” explained Drew Hopkins, TESU’s chief information officer. Sometimes students needed immediate help with a technical issue and couldn’t wait for the staff to return to the office the next day and respond to a help desk ticket. “We weren’t providing the level of student services that the college staff and the students had come to expect from us,” he said.

After hiring a provider to offer after-hours support, TESU found that all students benefited from the extended support hours—not just students overseas and on the West Coast. Since many adult learners worked full-time, even students on the East Coast took advantage of the extended hours. In addition, by contracting with a provider, TESU was able to offer help desk services on the weekends and holidays.

Over time, TESU became dissatisfied with the level of service it was receiving from its after-hours provider. The services were expensive, and the help desk staff was not as responsive as the university would have liked.

TESU needed a partner that would provide high-quality services at an affordable price. The university also sought a partner that could provide support for Moodle, which it planned to use as its new learning management system (LMS).
A Flexible Solution

After researching providers and consulting with colleagues, TESU decided to partner with Pearson’s Help Desk Services. TESU hoped to leverage Pearson’s experience with higher education institutions, and the price of its services made financial sense.

The implementation process started in mid-May of 2013. By July 1, Pearson had taken over the after-hours support. According to Hopkins, the process went “seamlessly.” “It far exceeded my expectations,” he commented. “There was no pause in support to our students. I was expecting there to be a few challenges; there were none.”

Chip Stoll, the director of Management Information Systems, credits frequent, open communication with Pearson for helping to make the implementation process go smoothly. Since then, regularly scheduled calls have helped ensure that TESU hasn't encountered any major challenges in after-hours support.

The after-hours help desk team addresses questions concerning the LMS, with the number one issue being login problems. Since some adult learners have limited experience with online learning, the team walks them through basic processes and helps them become comfortable with the LMS.

Originally, the help desk team was supposed to address only issues relating to technology. However, analyzing call patterns, Pearson noticed that students had questions about using the Online Student Services website—where they register for courses, for example—and asked TESU how the Pearson team could assist these students. TESU created scripts so the team can now respond to website questions as well.

“Pearson is always looking to help us give better service to our students,” remarked Stoll. “They understand our mission and help us succeed in delivering that mission.”

TESU values the flexibility of Pearson’s Help Desk Services. The team—which Hopkins described as “highly elastic”—has the ability to ramp up or ramp down, depending on the university’s needs.

Three years ago, the help desk services supported the university as it switched to Moodle for its LMS. Even during regular business hours, TESU could not handle the dramatic increase in calls to the help desk from students grappling with the new system. So it relied on the Pearson team to extend the university’s staffing and handle the overflow calls.

“Pearson is more than a vendor; they’re a partner with us, and they have helped us through several completely unexpected challenges.”
—Drew Hopkins, Chief Information Officer, TESU

“I am so thankful for this service!! The tech was great, and I’m happy it is available at night when I get much of my work done!!”
—TESU Student
Last year, TESU upgraded its portal, which students use to access their accounts and courses. Instead of taking eight hours, as expected, the upgrade took four days. Frantically working to get the portal up and running, the TESU staff faced a large spike in calls from students who couldn’t get into the portal and couldn’t figure out how to access their classes. But Pearson “took up the slack,” said Stoll, and handled all of the calls.

“Students continued to learn even though at times they were panicking,” Stoll explained. “Pearson walked them through the whole process and got them into their classes. We had very few complaints, and no one asked for money back for their classes. That’s because Pearson took care of us.”

The Results

Pearson’s goal is to answer 80 percent of calls to the help desk within 60 seconds. In the past two and a half years, the service level performance for this goal—called the Phone SLP 80/60—has improved by approximately fourteen percentage points (see Figure 1).

During the same period of time, the abandon rate—the percentage of callers who hang up instead of remaining on hold—decreased by more than three percentage points (see Figure 2).

On surveys, respondents have given Pearson’s Help Desk Services strong ratings. During the period from July 1, 2015, to January 19, 2016, the average overall quality rating was 85.36 percent, with 75 percent or higher representing good and 100 percent representing excellent.

Responding to a survey in December 2014, one student commended the help desk team by saying, “The TESU technicians are always prompt, knowledgeable, professional, and competent. Good job.”

Referring to the help desk’s response time and level of service, Hopkins remarked, “I never worry about after-hours support anymore, never. That wasn’t always the case.”