

---

# Help Line: The Ultimate in Distance Support

---

*by Janet Gubbins*

*Distance Learning Curriculum Specialist*

*State University of West Georgia*

Nothing can be more frustrating for a distant student than spending hours on the phone trying to find out pertinent school information. As distance education continues to grow, so does the need for more responsive student support services. To meet the needs of these remote students, administrators have come to realize the importance of a distance learning phone Help Line. In what is sure to become an increasingly competitive area of education, providing a friendly, efficient, and effective single point of contact for distance students is a public relations and marketing coup.

There are several factors a distance learning administrator must consider before implementing a Help Line. These factors include the method of phone service, the scope of the services offered, and the hours of operation. In addition there are staffing concerns, procedures to identify, and records to maintain. Finally, evaluation tools should be planned, in order to ensure effectiveness. Ultimately each of these aspects, discussed herein, will greatly depend on the institutions' need and resources available.

**Method of Phone Service.** A '1-800' number is the optimum type of phone help line for remote students, since the student will save money on long distance calls. If the need does not yet justify the cost of using an 800 line, a regular phone line will suffice. Either service should have voice mail capabilities when a staff person is unavailable.

**Scope of Services Offered.** Every decision associated with implementing a Help Line will be directly related to the scope of the services offered. At a minimum a Help Line should provide information on scheduled courses, program advisement, registration, and how to get books and other course materials. Technical assistance is also important, especially if classes are being offered online. An administrator must plan ahead to determine how much information the Help Line will be able to provide directly and how many inquiries may have to be referred to another campus offices. Collaboration with other institutional information resources will certainly be a necessity in either case.

Some Help Lines actually work as liasons between the students and their professors. In this way, students call in for assignments, set up appointments at proctored testing sites, and leave messages for the instructor.

**Hours.** The hours of operation will depend directly on the demand to be met. Larger distance programs may need a fully staffed line from 8am-5pm Monday through Friday. While some institutions may provide a 24 hour call-back service, others may need to operate with a staff only two days a week.

Administrators must take into account the schedule of their primary service group. For example, if a program mainly appeals to the non-traditional working student, it will be necessary to at have at the very least a voice mail service to answer after the traditional 5pm workday.

In addition, utilization of the help line will almost certainly correspond to the academic calendar. Hours of staffed operation may need to be extended at the beginning and towards the end of each semester, to handle the additional calls.

**Staffing.** The central questions associated with staffing include: who, how many, how often, and what level of expertise is needed. While trained student assistants may be competent to answer some questions, one would not want a student acting as an academic course advisor. Ultimately an administrator must

remember that the department will be held accountable for all information disseminated.

Though some help lines may choose to hire the most technologically versed, others may be more concerned with hiring 'people oriented' representatives. According to the Help Desk institute, most managers prefer good communication skills, customer service experience and an ability to handle stress (Verghis 1998).

At times, more than one staff person at a time may be necessary to man multiple phone extensions. For very large programs, experts suggests using data gathered from previous months to apply the 'gross staffing model' of forecasting staff requirements (Murtagh 1996).

**Procedures.** Standards must be set for phone etiquette, in addition to guidelines and information archives provided to the staff. If the staff person does not know the answer to a question or is not qualified to respond, procedures must be outlined on how to handle the situation. While some help lines may act only as a referral service, the central policy at the State University of West Georgia is "if we don't know we'll find out for you". The UWG Help Line assistant makes the necessary calls around campus for the information or gets the student directly to the one contact that may best respond. In this way, the student avoids what can often turn into a frustrating round of expensive phone calls just to locate the correct institute representative.

**Maintenance of Records.** Records of each help call should be kept in order to assimilate a useful source of information for future calls. Records are also important in estimating future needs, troubleshooting problems, and protecting the department from unfounded charges of giving the wrong information.

Some distance learning departments may simply keep a written log or database. Important information to note should include:

- time and date of the call
- a call reference number
- caller's name and contact phone number
- name of course (if applicable)
- the problemthe solution
- date resolved and by whom

More automated techniques may include call tracking and management software that can archive who called, when, and why. Used properly, such automated services can help identify trends which can lead to pro-active service (Verghis 1998).

**Supplemental Resources.** While departments may conduct Help Lines via e-mail or the WWW, these resources will do no good if the student does not have access to a computer when needed or if the problem IS related to their computer. For this reason, these other ways of responding to student inquiries should not be used exclusively but as supplements to the traditional phone line.

Supplemental help materials will cut down on the amount of incoming help calls all together. For example, problems and their solutions may be archived on a searchable FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) webpage. Distance Learning Handbooks may also be mailed to registering remote students, detailing the most basic FAQs as well as information about the program and institution. In any case, the Help Line should be promoted as the students' ultimate support system.

**Evaluation Tools.** To ensure friendly, quality service, it is sometimes necessary to monitor calls. In addition, written or phone surveys may be conducted. Surveys may be directed at a random sample of callers, or administered to all distance students while in class. Regular evaluations will help maintain the effectiveness and efficiency of a Help Line.

In sum, students in distance education deserve the same level of support available to on-campus students.

They have come to expect additional help needed in dealing with administrative, technical, or personal problems related to the course or program (Moore, Kearsley 168). According to experts, "Having a means of providing student support if and when it is needed is critical to the success of distance education programs (170)." Providing a Help Line is the best way to meet this need.

---

## **References**

Moore, Michael J, & Kearsley, Greg. (1996). Distance Education: A System's View. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Murtagh, Steve. (1996, March/April). The Gross Staffing Model: A Six-Step Plan for Projecting Your Staffing Needs. The Help Desk Institute [online]. Research in Brief. Available: WWW URL [http://www.helpdeskinst.com/members/96m\\_alr1.html](http://www.helpdeskinst.com/members/96m_alr1.html).

Verghis, Philip. (1998, March) Section 1: The Help Desk Basics. Philip Verghis' Help Desk FAQ [online]. Available: WWW URL [http://www.philverghis.com/section\\_one.html](http://www.philverghis.com/section_one.html).