Eight Key Elements of Successful Self–Funding E–Learning Programs

Yair Levy
Nova Southeastern University, USA

Michelle M. Ramim
Nova Southeastern University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The Greek philosopher Aristotle indicated that learning is the outcome of both teaching and practice. Clearly, learning is not confined exclusively to classroom lectures. In the past several decades, educators explored the possibilities of providing learning experiences to remote students. With improvement in technology and the growing popularity of Internet usage, e-learning caught the attention of both corporations and educational institutions. However, traditional learning methodology began transforming when elite universities embraced the Internet as a vehicle for their degree programs (Forelle, 2003). Progress in e-learning has increased its popularity in the past decade (Levy & Murphy, 2002). Consequently, it is carving a new brand of universities causing traditional schools to rethink their business model. Furthermore, some elite schools have developed specialized online degree and certificate programs. In doing so, these schools strive to compete on this new learning medium and create a new source of revenue, especially due to the declining enrollment and lower government funding resulting from the events on September 11, 2001 (Roueche, Roueche, & Johnson, 2002, p. 10). This paper provides definitions of the eight key elements any institutions should have in order to successfully implement self-funding e-learning systems.

BACKGROUND

In the past few decades, universities and colleges have been faced with a growing demand to graduate qualified students. At the same time, however, universities and colleges were faced with increased demand by local communities and governments to provide more scholarships and financial aid for local students, in spite of the reduction in financial support allocated to academic institutions (Cusick, 2003). As a result, higher education administrators have been seeking to increase their overall revenues from corporate sponsors and investors by crafting specialized degree and certificate programs. Not surprisingly, universities and colleges have been relying on international students to compensate by admitting a large number of full-fee paying foreign students (Surek, 2000). Since this has become such an important revenue stream, many business schools have gone beyond designing attractive specialized programs for international students and have even collaborated with international universities around the world to create joint programs.

In the post-September 11, 2001 era, because some of the hijackers came to the U.S. on student visas, new tougher Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) regulations were installed to control and evaluate the issuing of student visas. These new regulations are dramatically affecting the number of international students seeking U.S. education. That impact is a result of a decrease in overall student visas issued by the INS and the sluggish process of new student visa seekers. At the same time, current international students who were already in the U.S. were forced to return to their home countries and reapply for student visas under the new regulations, and then wait months for permission to come back. As a result, online learning programs have become an alternative solution for international students seeking U.S. academic degrees.

In the past few years, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as online learning, has grabbed the attention of many higher education administrators. In the late 1980s, Canadian schools invested enormous amounts of time and resources to develop learning programs for a distance delivery. U.S. schools quickly followed with some top business schools like Duke and Michigan implementing online learning programs in the 1990s. As the use of the Internet increased during the second half of the 1990s, many other U.S. universities, headed by their business and engineering schools, implemented online learning programs where almost all included one version or another of MBA programs (Davids-Landau, 2000; Forelle, 2003).

Today, more than ever, higher education administrators are very much interested, in online learning programs,

as they face declining student enrollments, an aging student population, and a reduced level of federal, state, and local funding. This has resulted in a growing number of institutions that are looking for new innovative ways, mainly through the use of ICT, to attract both U.S. and international students in remote or distance locations. However, literature suggests that faculty members without prior online teaching experience have very little understanding of the skills needed to make their online teaching effective (Conrad, 2004). Moreover, literature suggests that tremendous efforts are needed also from institutions in order to prepare their faculties to effectively teach online (Chacon, 2001). Thus, the next section of this paper concentrates on the key elements needed in order to deploy a successful online learning program.

THE KEY ELEMENTS

Overview

Implementation of e-learning systems can be challenging, as only a limited number are successful in sustaining programs to the point of self-funding. In order to achieve a successful self-funding e-learning program, investment of both time and capital is essential in the period prior to implementation. Nevertheless, successful implementation of an e-learning system is a success ticket for a self-funding program. This paper will present the eight key elements of successful implementation (See Figure 1). Additionally, it will provide a roadmap that can help institutions to develop self-funding e-learning programs, along with the justifications for the importance of each key piece that comprises the overall success of the project. In the following sections, definitions of the eight key elements of successful self-funding e-learning programs are provided.

Figure 1. Eight key elements for self-funding e-learning program.

Strategic Plan

A vital step in the project is to devote adequate time for proper planning. A good strategic plan should include an analysis of all key elements presented in this paper, along with the development of a detailed blueprint—or strategic plan—of the implementation process. Such a plan should also include foreseeable problems and some suggested solutions or avenues of findings solutions to such challenges. A viable plan should be based on a gradual development process, rather than implementing a full-fledged program without proper adjustment by faculty, students, and administrators. This suggested methodology will allow institutions to progress with their projects one step at a time, while building and improving based on feedback and constructive comments from users, faculty, and administrators. At the same time, a detailed strategic plan would provide a solid plan for scalability and ability to reach a self-funding stage.

Administrative and Institutional Support

Administrative and institutional support is another key piece of successful implementation in the pursuit of a self-funding e-learning program. It is important to emphasize to the administrators the potential benefits associated with such programs and, at the same time, candidly present the challenges foreseen in such projects. The lack of knowledge related to the benefits and limitations of such technologies may cause some misconceptions and reservations about such projects resulting in roadblocks for the successful implementation.

Numerous institutions that seek to provide e-learning programs invest tremendous efforts in the development of e-learning courses, faculty training, and equipment, but lack the overall united institutional support for e-learning students. Institutional support for e-learning students goes beyond the access to the e-learning system and interactions with the professor. Students enjoy all of the benefits as if they are on-campus, but in a format that is available via the Internet or the web (Levy & Ramim, 2003). Such a support activities and benefits should include online access to: registration, financial aid, library, bookstore, advisors, student organizations, and virtual communities. In most institutions, these support functions are already available and just need integration or a single point of link to provide students' with a centralized point of entry. Such a centralized point of entry, or portal, can be created via the e-learning platform where links to the institutional support functions are provided along with links to the online courses. Furthermore, a centralized point of entry would enable a seamless integration of online and on-campus services.

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