Chapter 2
Online Teaching Partnerships in Diverse Socio–Cultural Institutions

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present the case of an inter-institutional online teaching partnership. The partnership has allowed faculty and students from racially and socio-economically diverse institutions to interact with each other through synchronous and asynchronous distance learning technologies. Courses were developed and team-taught by faculty from the three partner institutions. Faculty who were new to the online teaching environment collaborated with and were mentored by experienced online instructors. These instructors became more experienced in teaching a diverse student population and more comfortable and competent within technology-mediated teaching environments. Students from diverse socio-economic, racial and experiential backgrounds engaged in a more heterogeneous learning environment and learned how to be more effective online learners. Cross-discipline partnerships resulted in new courses being added to the curriculum. The inter-institutional online teaching partnership is a way to provide teaching and learning that is socially accessible, technologically adaptable, economically viable, and politically agreeable.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Online Teaching Partnership (OTP) was sponsored by a four-year grant-funded project involving three Illinois public universities, each with distinct and unique student populations. The OTP provided the opportunity for students and faculty to join across geographic, cultural, socio-economic, institutional and racial boundaries. The overall goal of the project was to assist the three partner institutions to meet the challenges associated with educating a diverse student population, provide enhanced curricular offerings, develop instructor capability and address under-enrollment, student retention and time-to-graduation issues (Scheinbuks & Piña, 2009).

In 2002, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) funded a collaborative effort between the University of Illinois at Springfield and Chicago State University to promote the use of online learning to reach previously underserved student populations. The Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA) grant (**IBHE**, 2005) was initiated by Chicago State University as a vehicle to assist in building its online learning program and allow the University of Illinois at Springfield to meet an institutional goal of reaching out to underserved populations. In 2004, the proposal was amended to include online teaching partnerships, allowing for online collaborations between individual faculty and students at the two universities. In 2005, the partnership was expanded to include Northeastern Illinois University as a third partner institution (Piña & Scheinbuks, 2008b).

The University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) is a small, rural campus with a predominantly white student population of about 5,000. Its online program has been highly successful, with 17 fully online degree programs and an annual student enrollment growth of 30%. Retention of students in online courses at UIS is equivalent to that of students enrolled in face-to-face courses (Oakley, 2004). Training, development and technical support for online courses and faculty is provided by the UIS Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning (OTEL). In 2007, the University was awarded the 2007 Sloan-C Award for Excellence in Institution-Wide Online Teaching & Learning (Sloan Consortium, 2009).

Chicago State University (CSU) is an urban campus in the southern end of the country's third largest city, with the largest minority student population in the state. More than 80% of CSU's 7,000 students are African-American. The University had a developing distance learning program that offered several online courses, but no online degrees. CSU's instructors were less experienced in teaching within a virtual environment than those at UIS. Training, development and technical support for online courses and faculty is provided by the CSU Office of Distance Learning (ODL) (Piña & Scheinbuks, 2008b).

Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), the newest partner institution, is an urban public campus on Chicago's north side with a student population of approximately 12,000 (about the same as UIS and CSU combined). NEIU is recognized by US News and World Report as the most racially and culturally diverse campus in the Midwestern United States, with a population that is 26% Hispanic, 13% African-American and 11% Asian (U.S. News, 2005). Unlike UIS and CSU, NEIU had no dedicated distance learning department and offered no fully online courses or online degree programs when it joined the partnership. Training, development and support services for faculty participating in the OTP were provided by NEIU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) (Piña & Scheinbuks, 2008b).

SETTING THE STAGE

The nature of the OTP involved the establishment of mentor-mentee relationships in planning and implementing the instructional partnership. The faculty partners did not assume exclusive roles of mentee and mentor, but shared these roles as they exposed each other to their strengths and weaknesses (Gatliff & Wendel, 1998). In working together, the faculty partners were introduced to new instructional technologies and their own best practices. Some faculty members had developed expertise using these technologies and served as mentors for the other faculty members. Some faculty members served as content experts for collaborative projects. This was especially important for partnerships that served a cross-disciplinary theme (Piña & Scheinbuks, 2007).

A faculty partnership was established when the partners agreed to the extent of collaboration (full semester or unique units). The partners cooper-

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