Emerging Framework for Planning and Implementation of Online Programs

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic growth of online education over the past two decades is requiring colleges to make a shift from fragmented approaches to program planning and implementation towards a framework integrating both into a coherent support system. This article provides an overview of an emerging holistic framework for planning and implementation of online programs calling for shared strategic planning needs assessment strategies, and establishing program consensus. Guided by a program vision, curriculum and instructional strategies are identified along with internal and external supports needed for successful implementation. The framework suggests demand-driven strategic planning, benchmarking approaches to implementation practices, and interactive feedback to ensure effective program planning and implementation.

Keywords: Assessment Strategies, Curriculum and Instructional Strategies, Effective Program Planning, Online Education, Shared Strategic Planning

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online education has been dramatic over the past two decades and has confirmed its viability as an instructional delivery system. Online student enrollments have risen steadily over the years thanks to the widespread appeal of learning anytime-anywhere made possible by web-based teaching and learning strategies (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Fletcher, Tobias, & Wisher, 2007). Universities everywhere have seized the increased demand for online undergraduate and graduate education. At the graduate level, in particular, the demand for online education has emerged from working professionals seeking online courses and programs to accommodate flexible schedules to balance education, work, and family (Hernandez-Gantes, 2009). Facing an increased competition for this growing segment of the student market, universities have rushed to embrace online education, which in some cases has yielded mixed results (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Bower, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). As online programs become more prominent, the uneven quality of online education has been a lingering issue over the years, prompting some authors to equate online programs as "diploma mills" (Noble, 2002).

At issue may be the lack of standardized institutional procedures for program and course-work development treating online curriculum development in traditional ways regardless of the obvious differences in delivery requirements (Hernandez, Kirby, & McGee, 2004; Hernandez-Gantes, 2010). The pressure to keep up with the demand for online coursework has prompted universities to emphasize quick implementation strategies for online course and program development. Thus, reports of institutions demanding faculty to convert their face-to-face courses into online format are not uncommon (Bower, 2001; Noble, 2002). In this context, strategic and holistic approaches to planning and implementation to ensure the quality, success, and sustainability of online education have received only scant attention in the literature (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; Hache, 2000; Levy, 2003). The planning process for justifying a shift to online education to ensure program viability appears to be taken for granted in the literature, while implementation approaches have primarily focused on curriculum and instruction with limited attention to other internal and external supports as a comprehensive approach (Bunn, 2001; Levy, 2003; McPherson & Hansen, 2009). In recent years, however, the calls for quality assurances extending to program justification and sustainability have gained ground (Lee & Dziuban, 2002).

This article provides an overview of an emerging holistic framework for planning and implementation of online programs. The article begins with a brief description of general online education trends followed by a discussion of issues associated with program development and implementation. Next, planning and implementation factors are introduced drawing from a related review of literature and experience delivering online programs in career and workforce education. The article concludes with an outline of an emerging holistic framework for online program planning and implementation and relevant underlying trends.

BACKGROUND

Online education has become a viable and popular alternative to traditional classroom instruction in higher education. However, as it evolved over the past two decades, the term has been associated with many terms warranting clarification. Concurrently, the growth of online education has been remarkable and it is important to highlight enrollment trends as evidence of its rising prominence and the need for systemic approaches to planning and implementation.

Clarifying Online Education

In this article, online education is referred to as the delivery system underlying a wide array of programs and courses involving different combinations of technology such as the Internet, electronic libraries, web-based conferencing, virtual discussions, and e-mail communication (Anderson, 2008). Online education falls under the broader umbrella of distance education involving formal and planned delivery of instruction to students attending at different locations either at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous) (Havice & Havice, 2005; Conrad, 2008). Because online education is delivered completely on the Internet it is also considered as a subset of virtual education, which is defined as asynchronous learning involving minimal or no classroom interactions (Anderson, 2008; Conrad, 2008; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Further, Web-based education is a variation emphasizing the use of online learning strategies, while hybrid or blended education refers to classroom instruction complemented with online components. Typically, web-based management systems such as Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, and others are used to deliver online education (Conrad, 2008; Hernandez-Gantes, 2009).

The Rise of Online Education

In university settings, online courses and programs are typically available at the graduate

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