

## Chapter 2

# Blended Courses as Drivers of Institutional Transformation

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### ABSTRACT

*The authors discuss the transformational potential of blended learning and the importance of alignment with strategic initiatives of the institution. They show that key elements for student and faculty support result in numerous positive outcomes, including increased access and the ability to manage growth effectively. Research findings with very large student samples show the impact of blended learning on student achievement, identify predictors of student success, and illustrate correlates of student satisfaction with blended learning when ambivalent feelings mediate student perceptions of the educational environment. By illustrating these principles through a case study in a large metropolitan research university, the authors contend that strategic alignment and evaluation results inform each other in an incremental, transformational process.*

### INTRODUCTION

Blended courses, or courses in which both traditional classroom and online methods are employed to deliver instructional content and interaction, have proven to be among the most popular choices

for students. At first glance, this popularity seems intuitive because blended courses allow a student to take advantage of much of the flexibility and convenience of an online course while retaining the benefits of the face-to-face classroom experience.

Although fully online learning has become well established in U.S. institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010), many institu-

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tions appear to be struggling with conceptualizing and implementing blended learning. While both classroom-based and fully online instruction are well understood, it appears that the mixture of the two modalities poses challenges for some institutions.

Yet, where blended courses (also known as hybrid or mixed-mode courses) have succeeded, they have most often done so when strategically aligned with an institution's mission and goals. The development and delivery of blended courses can be used to address a variety of institutional, faculty, and student needs. For universities, blended courses can be part of a strategy to compensate for limited classroom space. For faculty, blended courses can be a method to infuse new engagement opportunities into established courses or, for some, provide a transitional opportunity between fully face-to-face and fully online instruction. For students, blended courses offer the conveniences of online learning combined with the social and instructional interactions that may not lend themselves to distance delivery (e.g., lab sections). If an institution's blended learning strategy can be designed to address the needs and dynamics of all three constituencies (institution, faculty, and student) simultaneously, then the modality can become a powerful force for transformation.

However, the converse is also true. When blended courses do not succeed, it is often the result of a misalignment with institutional, faculty, and/or student needs. An example of an institutional misalignment would be offering a blended course that time shifts face-to-face meetings on an irregular basis (e.g., the first three weeks of the term are in class, the next two meetings are online, followed by two weeks in class, and then every other week online). While possibly making instructional sense, such a schedule would not allow an institution to leverage the blended format to maximize classroom space utilization. Because of the irregular schedule, the classroom would need to remain reserved for the entire term, even during those sessions that are conducted

online. A more effective approach might be to schedule blended courses so that they accommodate a regular, predictable meeting schedule. An example of misalignment with faculty needs would be arbitrarily compelling unwilling faculty or inappropriate topics into the blended modality. Forcing a subject best addressed via a different modality into a blended format will create extra work and unnecessary angst for already-busy faculty. For students, the benefits gained by a blended course are realized only if the associated risks are mitigated; for, without careful course planning and design, the blended format could offer the worst aspects of both the live and online modalities instead of offering the best. Students must also possess the self-motivation required to be successful in online learning. If an institution can create a supportive environment for faculty and students to ameliorate these risks, the transformational potential of blended learning can be realized.

In this chapter, the blended learning initiative at the University of Central Florida (UCF) will be used as a case study to illustrate how institutional, faculty, and student needs can be concurrently served through blended learning strategies. This model for blended learning is based on the balance of micro (course) and macro (institutional strategy) requirements. UCF's strategic, transformational model of blended learning is illustrated through data points including the marginal success/withdrawal rates in blended learning programs based on several thousand student registrations; the conditional course success rates based on categories such as generational perspective, discipline, demographic variables, ability, achievement, and course level; and the student rating of instruction of blended learning courses based on prototypes of what students believe comprises excellent instruction. In addition, UCF has developed a student satisfaction model for blended learning based on the notion of ambivalence in a complex environment, showing that such models are dynamic and evolving.

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