

Chapter 9

A Program–Based Approach to Developing and Implementing Blended Instruction: The University of Vermont School Library Media Studies Sequence

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ABSTRACT

A program-based approach to converting a site-based post-baccalaureate teacher education program to a blended format is described. While the face-to-face version of the program was able to serve a very limited number of prospective students in a predominantly rural area, the blended approach has attracted so many participants that double classes are regularly required to meet demand. Major issues covered include designing curriculum with regard to adult learning theories, balancing synchronous and asynchronous instruction methods, and developing adjunct faculty competencies. Results of a program evaluation based on survey data from students and faculty are included, indicating a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences overall, balanced by requests for improvements in course design and strong faculty involvement in both online and videoconferencing formats.

INTRODUCTION

Many adult learners undertake post secondary education in order to acquire competencies or credentials that will advance them in their careers or lead to new employment opportunities.

Educational offerings targeted at these students are often organized into academic or professional programs, structured curricula or course sequences that lead to a certificate, rank or degree. When such a program incorporates blended learning, there may be significant benefits to transitioning the entire program to a consistent format rather

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than adopting a course-by-course approach based on individual faculty members' levels of interest and expertise.

The University of Vermont School Library Media Studies Sequence was an early adopter of the blended learning format. Since 1999, the sequence has provided a high quality post-baccalaureate teacher education program to adult learners using a combination of on-campus meetings, interactive television, and course management software. The coursework, which is offered through a structured two-year cycle, is now in its sixth iteration. The UVM experience indicates that designing, developing and implementing blended learning by the program can provide demonstrable advantages to administrators, faculty and students.

This case study outlines the rationale for changing a well-established site-based program to a blended format and reviews the process employed. The impacts of that decision on the faculty are considered, and the measures taken to address their needs are discussed. A detailed analysis of curriculum design follows, with particular emphasis on the adult learning theories that underlie the course assignments and activities. An original qualitative research study conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of specific elements of the blended learning format is described, results are provided in detail, and conclusions are summarized.

The study, which is based on a comprehensive survey of faculty and students, explored the following research questions:

1. Do students and faculty believe that active learning techniques such as collaboration, group work, and field studies were effective instructional methods in the blended format?
2. Do students and faculty believe that educational technologies such as interactive television and the online course management system were used successfully in the blended format?
3. What do students and faculty think the impact of changing from interactive television to individual computer video cameras would be and how do they feel about that prospect?
4. What do faculty think about a template for the course management system, various methods of faculty teaching and technology support, and team teaching?

BACKGROUND

Most of the published scholarship concerning blended learning in higher education deals with student satisfaction with various course elements, or with comparing and contrasting the teaching effectiveness of face-to-face, online, and blended formats (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007). A few researchers have considered the benefits of designing, implementing and evaluating a coherent blended learning program, as opposed to transitioning on a course-by-course basis.

Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger, and Toth (2007) conducted an extensive qualitative study that collected survey data from 450 students and 9 instructors concerning a blended learning program in teacher education. Results indicated several major categories of issues central to successful implementation, including development of program policies supportive of teaching and learning, creation of common procedures and expectations across courses, allocation of face-to-face and online time, support and training for instructors and students, and ongoing program evaluation. They concluded that although attending to this broad range of concerns demanded time and effort, focusing on the program was the best way to ensure a high quality blended learning experience for students and faculty. If institutions concentrate primarily on "the design and delivery of individual course offerings, problems such as disjointedness, a lack of 'program' focus, and overall poor quality can arise from neglecting to examine the program as a whole" (p. 333).

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