

# Chapter 4

## From 0 to 60: The Case Study of a School of Education's Successful "Online Start-Up"

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter reports findings from the case study of a school of education that had not previously engaged in online education and within two years was able to offer a total of 61 online courses (ranging from hybrid to fully online) as part of its existing programs, with high student and faculty satisfaction as well as limited upfront investments. With the goal of informing academic leaders planning similar online initiatives, the chapter examines how this start-up was realized, with a focus on how the school secured quality online instructors, other key resources and infrastructures, student and faculty buy-in, consistent policies and expectations about online courses, as well as how decisions were made about the specific courses to be offered online. This study was informed by entrepreneurship as a theoretical lens to study innovations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today's higher education institutions are facing increasing pressure to provide online learning opportunities to their students. Yet, the start-up process of beginning to offer high quality courses online can be quite daunting – especially in the absence of central institutional support. The Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester was recently in this position. As of May 2013, it had never offered an online course, and only three faculty had experience teaching online. Yet by summer 2015,

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the school had offered 35 fully online and 26 hybrid-online courses, enrolling a total of 809 students with high levels of student satisfaction. Most notably, this happened without major grants or gifts, nor centrally allocated funding.

This chapter reports selected findings from a case study of this successful launch (referred to as the Warner Online Start-up, hereafter), with the goal of informing similar online start-ups. More specifically, this chapter addresses the following questions facing academic leaders interested in offering online courses for the first time:

- How can you develop and secure a cadre of high quality online instructors for your school?
- What other resources and infrastructure are needed to ensure a successful launch, and how can these be secured?
- How should you select the courses to be offered online?
- How can you secure student and faculty buy-in?
- What policies, practices, and expectations need to be developed for long-term success?

Given the focus on how a specific innovation was initiated, launched and sustained, we chose to use *entrepreneurship* as our theoretical framework. After some background information, the body of the chapter provides a data-based reconstruction of key steps and decisions involved in the Warner Online Start-up informed by the research questions identified above, followed by key lessons learned from this case study. In the conclusions, we return to each of the research questions to provide concrete recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

Since 2002, higher education has experienced an explosion in online education, as documented by the Online Learning Consortium (formerly Sloan Foundation) in its annual research studies (see Allen & Seaman, 2014, for its latest iteration). The pressure to offer online courses for institutions that do not already do so is significant. Yet, starting online offerings for the first time is not easy.

Major innovations cause resistance in any organizational environment. Higher education institutions also have some unique challenges when it comes to innovation, due to governance structures in which faculty have significant decision making power and freedom of implementation, especially in academic matters (Weick, 1976). This situation has been described theoretically as a combination of professional bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1979) and organized anarchy (Cohen & March, 1986). In practice, this means that any online start-up will require securing faculty buy-in and will take longer to implement than most innovations in business settings.

We also know from the rich literature on teacher education (e.g., Borasi & Fonzi, 2002; Capps & Crawford, 2013; Luehmann, 2007) that changing how one teaches (as required for online teaching) is not a simple matter, as it requires changes in beliefs, knowledge, skills, and everyday practices. Changes in beliefs and practices are especially hard to achieve and require much more than presentations or even hands-on workshops. For example, the literature on K-12 school reform (e.g., Borasi & Fonzi, 2002) points out the importance of developing an image of a new teaching approach in action by observing it modeled by experts, engaging as learners in genuine learning experiences employing the proposed

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