

Chapter 16

Program Administration and Implementation of an Online Learning Initiative at a Historically Black College University

S. Suzan J. Harkness

University of the District of Columbia, USA

ABSTRACT

In the pages to follow, this case study describes the organization, policy development, strategic initiatives, implementation, and assessment of establishing online learning initiatives at an urban land-grant historically black college university (HBCU). The chapter describes a collaborative effort by university administration and faculty to facilitate a strategically measured approach to online learning. In addition to institutional collaboration, this chapter discusses how an external partnership with Quality Matters provided structure and a best practices model. The chapter lays a blueprint for thought and action for establishing online learning at a small- to medium-size college or university. The case describes a strategic approach that spanned a period of four years (2009-2013), whereby online learning grew incrementally in a measured fashion through a collaborative approach among faculty, administrators, and external partners. The outcome provides a strong foundation upon which online learning may flourish, while at the same time describes complications of sustainability.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University is relatively young and old at the same time. The University was created after an act of Congress granted limited home rule to the District of Columbia. At this historical punctuation, a newly established city council passed a law in 1975 which authorized the consolidation of three very different institutions into one University. One of the original institutions dated to 1851 as a “school for colored

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girls” which morphed through time and legislation into an integrated teacher training college while other institutions were a city college and a technical institute. The composite of older established institutions and their academic programs were arranged into one new comprehensive University in 1977. The University has an 1862 classification under the first Morrill Act as a national land grant college and is also a HBCU founded with a mission to educate black Americans.

The University in its present state is a medium sized nonresidential urban land-grant institution with a Carnegie classification Master’s Colleges and Universities (smaller programs). The University offers 75 associates, baccalaureate, and graduate degree programs through its six colleges and schools including a community college and law school.

The total enrollment at the University is approaching 6,000 whereby the majority are underrepresented minorities, 62% are women, 56% are non-traditional, 57% are part-time learners, 15% are international students, and 12% are graduate or law students (fall 2012 figures). The fall 2012 FTE including graduate and law students was 3667; without graduate and law students fall 2012 FTE was 3034. Undergraduate FTE students are nearly equally divided between the flagship and Community College. The University employs 218 full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty, 37 full-time visiting faculty, and another 200 adjunct faculty each semester. Traditional classes are small ranging from 12 to 20 students although some larger core courses may have upwards of 30 or more students enrolled.

The mission of the University is to provide affordable post-secondary education that prepares students—especially its local resident’s immediate entry into the workforce, the next level of education, specialized employment opportunities, and life-long learning. The vision of the University is to be a diverse, selective, teaching, research and service University in the land-grant tradition, serving the people of the local city, the nation and the world. The University is fully accredited and falls under the jurisdiction of Middle States. In addition to Middle States, several programs hold additional and specific accreditation (ABA, ABET, NAAB, NCATE etc.).

SETTING THE STAGE

The impetus for online learning grew organically from a small number of professors who began experimentation in 2001. At the urging of faculty, the University purchased a license for Blackboard as a learning/course management system (L/CMS) in 2001. The L/CMS was hosted by Blackboard Hosting Services and administered by a faculty member in the Learning Resources Division (a unit of the library). The faculty who served as its first system administrator was supported by one technician, but neither had previous experience in systems administration or L/CMS tools.

In 2001, a small number of professors began holding meetings and workshops that focused around online teaching and learning. By 2005, the institution’s Provost charged a taskforce of faculty and deans to explore and devise a plan for online learning. The Dean of the library secured a Title III grant and established a competitive summer initiative to include stipends for faculty to explore innovative approaches to instruction and gain certification to teach online. From this summer initiative several courses were conceived and curricular development got underway. The Provost further directed a task-force to work collectively from 2005 to 2007 to devise a detailed strategic plan for online learning and a policy statement for intellectual property. The plan was compiled and presented to the administration. One of the key first steps in the strategic plan called for the establishment of a centralized office and the hiring of a director to facilitate and oversee online learning at the University.

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