

Chapter 72

Scaling Online Education at a Small, Private University

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ABSTRACT

The online education landscape is dominated in higher education by large for-profit institutions and large public universities, but how can a small, private university develop online programs and scale them in such a way as to offer students an excellent learning experience, provide exemplary student support services, and do so with limited resources? This chapter discusses the challenges faced, and solutions deployed, by one such institution as it implemented and grew its portfolio of fully online programs.

INTRODUCTION

Online education has become a mainstay in the US higher education system. Seemingly new fully online programs are launched daily. While the online education landscape was dominated in higher education by large for-profit institutions and large public universities, many smaller, private institutions have begun to offer their own fully online programs. Indeed, leaders of small, private higher education institutions may be loath to miss out on the possibilities for new enrollment streams afforded by online programs. But how can a small, private university develop online programs and scale them in such a way as to offer students an excellent learning experience, provide exemplary student support services and do so with limited resources? This chapter discusses the challenges faced, and solutions deployed, by one such institution as it implemented and grew its portfolio of fully online programs.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

St. Bonaventure University, founded in 1858, is a small, private liberal arts institution located in rural southwestern New York. Enrolling approximately 2,100 undergraduate and graduate students in programs from its schools of Arts & Sciences, Health Professions, Communications, Business and Education, the institution is highly residential at the undergraduate level, with the vast majority of students living on campus.

St. Bonaventure launched its first fully online program, a master's in strategic leadership, in the fall of 2013. Since that time the university has gone on to add online graduate programs in integrated marketing and communications, business administration, school counseling and mental health counseling. Additionally, an online graduate program in cybersecurity is set to launch in the spring of 2019.

For the first two years of the online program initiative, St. Bonaventure's online program enrollments were relatively small. The number of online students has, however, increased significantly between the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2018. In fact online credit hours tripled over this timeframe. As a small, private institution St. Bonaventure was faced with dedicating the resources to both growing the online program enrollments as well as supporting the online programs as they began to scale up. Additionally, St. Bonaventure did not have the expertise needed to scale its online programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature was conducted to examine the state of online education in the United States' higher education system, the importance of online education to said system and the challenges higher education institutions face when moving to fully online degree programs.

Importance of Online Education

Online education has become a critical component of the US higher education system (Hoskins, 2011; Moloney & Oakley, 2010). In 2016 the total number of distance education students continued to grow, a pattern repeated every year since 2012 (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). This increase occurred despite the fact that overall enrollments at US-based higher education institutions declined during the same time period (Seaman et al., 2018). The growth in demand for online learning has spurred more campus leaders to launch online programs (Springer, 2018). As such, online education has become an increasingly important part of the curricular portfolio of many US higher education institutions (Fredericksen, 2017). Furthermore, particularly for large public institutions, online education may be used as a method to lower the cost of tuition (Deming, Goldin, Katz, & Yuchtman, 2015).

Growth among distance learning students was even more pronounced at non-profit institutions, accounting for all of the growth in distance learning enrollments from 2012 through 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). Indeed, even as non-profit institutions experienced significant growth in distance education enrollments, for-profit institutions saw their enrollments drop during the same time period (Seaman et al., 2018).

Online courses and fully online programs appeal to student learners for many reasons. Fully online programs allow for geographic flexibility, allowing students with a connection to the Internet to participate from virtually any location (Mbuva, 2014). Fully asynchronous online programs, or those programs

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