

Chapter 6

Setting Up to Thrive by Anchoring in Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors describe their guiding principles for development and improvement of an online program, offering specific examples of how these have played out. They then describe how an evaluative thinking approach allowed them to build an environment conducive to creative design and continual innovations. Specifically, they have a habit of meeting to focus on critical review of work, they value and continually incorporate feedback from diverse stakeholders, and they challenge assumptions through consistent consideration of data. They provide examples throughout the chapter of how an evaluative thinking approach has looked in practice. By including concrete examples, this chapter provides insights to those planning a new program or refining one in place, recognizing that evaluative thinking is a mindset that is valuable in many contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, readers should gain an understanding of applying evaluative thinking and evaluation practices to the implementation and innovation of online education. We describe the impetus for building an online program, the principles that drove its development, and how an evaluative thinking approach has allowed us to build an environment conducive to creative design and continual innovations. We of-

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fer many examples of how we have integrated evaluative thinking in our work, with the hope that our framing and practical examples can be applied in developing and improving others' online programs. We begin with a description of our online program.

BACKGROUND

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online learning, online education was already on the rise in the United States. Recognizing this trend, the [redacted] offered an internal eLearning Innovation Initiative (eLII) funding program in 2015. This grant program coincided with a time when policymakers were emphasizing the significance of evidence-based design and evaluation in publicly funded programs. Faculty in [redacted] recognized an opportunity to meet the increasing demand for professionals skilled in academic and applied research by expanding graduate studies, advancing research or evaluation work, and extending the program to students who could not physically attend the [redacted]. Thus, a team of [redacted] faculty, under the leadership of [redacted], submitted a proposal and received grant funding to establish an online master's program in Research Methods in Education.

[redacted] developed the Research Methods in Education program to offer a versatile skill set in research methods, applicable across disciplines, to address the evolving needs of students and employers in the dynamic job market. Its expansion into an online modality was designed to enhance accessibility for students from diverse backgrounds. From its inception to current practice, faculty members with expertise in research methodologies have played a crucial role in course design and delivery. The program not only supports professional growth but also acts as a catalyst for new career paths and admission to Ph.D. programs. Additionally, it equips students in teaching and research roles with essential skills.

The program grew organically based on the aspirations of students seeking post-graduation positions and pursuing courses to acquire the necessary credentials. The curriculum development focused on constructing a comprehensive master's program that expanded to include the Graduate Certificate in Research Methods, thereby broadening the program's scope and reach. Valuable feedback from employers and recognized demands in fields such as testing, medicine and healthcare, institutional research, and evaluation across the nation informed the program's design. Offering core courses online in an asynchronous format enhanced the program's marketability, providing flexibility and fostering collaborations across departments and colleges within the university.

The expansion into online education, making courses and degrees more accessible to a wider range of students, was arguably one of the most significant features of the program's development. Moreover, this expansion provided an opportunity for faculty members to showcase their expertise in research methodologies. The program also played a crucial role in advancing the professional growth of its students, enhancing their careers by opening new paths or securing promotions. The comprehensive skill set offered also made its graduates highly competitive in admissions to Ph.D. programs nationwide. Furthermore, the program supported the growth of students as stronger teaching assistants and research assistants, equipping them with the necessary tools to contribute effectively to the department's endeavors. Ultimately, the program emerged from the intersection of student needs, industry demands, and faculty expertise. Its impact extended beyond the department, offering valuable research skills that were marketable across disciplines and providing opportunities for professional and academic advancement and collaborative partnerships.

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