Chapter 16

Building Quality Assessment into Online Courses Across the Institution

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case shows how a long-term, campus-wide effort balanced technological, pedagogical, financial, and political considerations to develop and implement a system for online course quality assessment at a medium-sized public university in the Midwest. The case shows how the need for an assessment system came to be recognized, and how the committee charged with creating the system arrived at a solution which took into account both course design and instructor performance. Thus, the institution now has, for the first time, a tool for improving the quality of its online courses. Moreover, it is hoped that administrators, faculty, and faculty developers will see that the quality assessment system joins a course management software suite development effort and a series of faculty training workshops in a wide-ranging list of tools for enhancing faculty competence as users of technology for teaching and learning.

THE CASE

This case study describes the events that led to the development and implementation of a system to assess the quality of **online courses** offered by a comprehensive, Master's-granting, public university in the Midwest. The University, which was founded in the 19th Century as a Normal School, enrolled 8000 students by the mid-1990's; enrollment has since grown to almost 11000, with almost 11% of credit hours now generated from **online courses**. From 1997 to 2008, the faculty grew from 380 to 400 in number. As the case study reveals, the institution's regional mission - shaped by sensitivity to the disadvantaged economic condition of much of the region - was a major factor in the development of a strong schedule of **online courses**.

While implementation of a system for **quality assessment** of **online courses** is the ultimate focus of this case study, it is useful to trace the history of

online courses at the institution, for it is through the history that we see how the users of the assessment system – faculty and administrators – became educated in the art and science of online teaching by the development process itself. Had that education not occurred, the assessment system would have been impossible to develop, and meaningless to implement. Much like a qualifying exam in a Master's program, the institution's **quality assessment** system serves simultaneously as an indicator of how well the institution responded to the challenge of online teaching, and a predictor of its future success. The process described in the history was not perfect. Rather, it was the product of many faculty, professional staff, and administrators, serving on several committees over many years. The process was shaped by political imperatives, funding levels, and, importantly, the time that the various committee members were able to commit to the effort. Despite the many variables, the institution came to consensus on a system for assessing online course quality. Perhaps because of the many variables, this case study offers its users insight into the complex problem of online course assessment.

Creating an Online Course Capability

The following is a highly paraphrased conversation between members of the Technology Associates, a **technology** steering committee consisting of a member from each academic division, and formed to assist the University's teaching and learning Center, *circa* 1995:

The Committee Chair: "You know that we recruit students from every part of the United States and beyond, but our primary service region consists of 26 nearby counties. And some of them are among the most economically disadvantaged counties in the nation."

Committee Member #1: "Yes, I read Census data showing that some of those counties are actually losing population …."

Committee Member #2: "Mmmm … other than some farming, there's not much going on there." (Mumbles of agreement from Committee Members #4, 5, 6, and 7).

The Chair: "That's right, but they're in our service region, and we need to be more effective in providing them with educational opportunities." (More indications of agreement from the Committee.)

Committee Member #3: "Well, students could drive to campus, but they'd have to be awfully motivated. I once did a workshop for a school district at the border of our region; I had to drive over two hours on narrow, winding roads to get there. I felt like I'd fallen off the edge of the world!"

Committee Member #2: "I know we send faculty to teach night courses, using rooms in some of the high schools. Surely we could just increase the number of those classes."

The Chair: "A major problem is that faculty don't like going off campus to teach. Even if we pay mileage to drive there, faculty complain that driving time doesn't count for promotion and tenure. In fact, some departments won't even count off-campus courses toward faculty teaching loads. We can't afford to open a branch campus in every town, and students – especially those with jobs or families – don't have time to drive to the main campus to take courses during regular class sessions. Besides, the cost of transportation alone may prevent many students from taking courses

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