Chapter 1.3
The Proliferation, Pitfalls, and Power of Online Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online education has been a growing field in higher education for the last decade, and the number of students choosing online over seated classes continues to increase. The proliferation of online programs forces one to ask, "Is online education a good thing?" The resounding answer is YES, when best practices are followed. However, even the best online programs experience challenges as they deal with institutional, student, and growth issues. These struggles, their resolutions, and the knowledge gained from them are the focus of this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of distance education programs in the last few years is unprecedented in the history of higher education. Technologies such as video conferencing and the Internet enable the delivery of educational content at a speed and level of interaction not previously possible (Monolescu, 2004, back cover).

As a professor with a Ph.D. that focused on military history, the term proliferation conjures up very negative connotations. My seven years of graduate school were spent focusing on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation of rogue governments, the proliferation of terrorists, etc. Therefore, with so many books and articles discussing the proliferation of online programs, it begs the question, "Is online education a good thing?" The resounding answer is YES, when best practices are followed.

BACKGROUND

Drury University began offering online undergraduate and graduate level courses in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Between 1999 and 2004, the growth rate of students enrolling in online classes increased by nearly 50% every year. In 2004, the University requested and acquired accreditation to place all of the degrees in its College of Graduate and Continuing Studies online. In their request, Drury pledged to predicate its growth on the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) "Best Practices for Electronically

Offered Degree and Certificate Programs". After careful market analysis pointed to online courses as the wave of the future for the adult learner, the program became the "technological and pedagogical hub around which CGCS configured its future growth" (HLC Change Request, 2004, 6). With this commitment to adherence to best practices and future growth, the online education wing of Drury University set off on its path for excellence.

SETTING THE STAGE

Online education has been a growing field in higher education for the last decade, and the number of students choosing online over seated classes continues to increase. This nationwide trend is incredibly strong in the Midwest, where—in many colleges and universities—the online program's growth continues to outpace all other areas of university growth. Sloan Consortium found that "The nearly 20% growth rate expected in online enrollments far exceeds the overall rate of growth for the entire higher education student population" (Sloan-C, 2002). While many of these programs are praised by their peers and customers, the online programs have experienced challenges and growing pains. These struggles, their resolutions, and the knowledge gained from them are the focus of this chapter.

The first question asked when someone mentions online classes always has to do with the students. How can you teach students you cannot see? How can you engage online students in various media of learning and experiences? How do you keep them from cheating? How can you build the rapport that small, liberal arts colleges are famous for if the students are spread out across the world? The answers to these questions are the keys to successful online teaching.

Successfully helping you deal with all of the challenges, both positive and negative, that an online program faces is the overall goal of this chapter. Online education is a rapidly growing

part of higher education. The strengths it offers mean expanded opportunities for persons in all regions of the developed world, a way for students to curtail the amount of their small budgets that goes to transportation, and a way to bring great minds from diverse locations together to engage the problems of the 21st century. Mastering the art of educating people over the internet is a must for schools vying for a place in the future market, and the most successful way for them to do that is by learning from others' experiences and following guidelines for best practices in online education.

CASE DESCRIPTION INCLUDING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The issues faced by a successful online program can be grouped into three categories: student, institutional, and those associated with growth. These issues are similar whether the program is at a small, Midwestern, liberal arts school; a large public university; or a community college. The successful resolution of all three of these issues is necessary for any online program to grow and prosper.

Student Issues

Reaching students in an online class is one of the issues most often debated. How can you teach students you cannot see? The truth is that a multitude of distance education programs have successfully been teaching students they could not see for decades. For example, correspondence courses have been used in colleges and universities for years, and the instructor does not see the student in a classroom setting.

The beauty of online is that now the distance can be spanned through multiple interactive means through the internet rather than through the static medium of a paper or a video distance education

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