

Chapter 5

Leading a Change Initiative: Efforts to Improve Faculty Perceptions of Online Courses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores the challenges that a college of education in a South-Central university faced with online learning. Nationally, there has been an exponential growth in the demand and subsequent delivery of online courses. The college experienced a similar growth trend and has had its share of successes and disillusionments in its journey. The college's technology committee explored faculty perceptions of online learning. This case study details the findings of the action research and presents the initial steps for implementing changes to improve practices and perceptions with online learning. However, the initial efforts of the technology committee have just begun to scratch the surface of systemic change. The chapter concludes with the committee's goals, objectives, and action plans to continue to lead the college through a change process to improve the practices and perceptions of online learning.

NATIONAL STUDIES ON THE GROWTH OF ONLINE LEARNING IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Online learning has proliferated in the past decade in higher education institutions across the nation resulting in an increasingly competitive market for distance learning among institutions (Wil-

son, 2001; Rodriguez, Montanez, Yan & Ooms, 2005; Allen & Seaman, 2005, 2006; McCarthy & Samors, 2009). The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) reported there were "more than 90 percent of public institutions of higher education reporting online course offerings or degrees in fall 2005" (NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2007, p. 7). In response to the rising demands to offer online courses, many

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colleges and universities have felt the pressures to maintain their viability with student recruitment or else “risk becoming ‘obsolete’ if they do not adapt to changing demographics and market forces, as well as to the expectations of both traditional and nontraditional students” (McCarthy & Samors, 2009, p. 7). In these past ten years, as students have become more technologically savvy, the attractiveness and demand for taking courses anywhere, anytime has placed a burden on many public colleges and universities to respond in earnest to the market forces by offering more online courses to simply stay abreast of an increasingly competitive market.

With the rising market demand for online learning, many university leaders adopted the view that if more courses were offered online, student enrollment would increase (NASULGC-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2007). These views created a gap between many universities’ traditional values and their purposes within the university system to offer online courses and/or programs. Some universities have included online learning in their strategic planning processes, but for many, these efforts have not fully reconciled the traditional values of the university with their purposes for increasing online learning. McCarthy and Samors (2009) found that a majority of university leaders recognized the importance of offering online programs, but less than half of the institutions’ strategic plans included online programs, and “this gap exists even at a time when the number of students taking at least one online course continues to expand at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments” (p. 9). While many higher education institutes may have recognized and responded to the market-driven forces, the response has been reactionary and primarily focused on attracting students to maintain enrollment numbers. For many public higher education institutions, online learning has challenged traditionally held values and has been met with a certain level of resistance among some university leaders and faculty.

However, online learning is now “embedded in the fabric of public higher education. Yet, while demand for online learning continues to accelerate, concerns persist that these institutions are not fully prepared to take strategic advantage of online to meet continuing challenges” (McCarthy and Samors, 2009, pp. 50-51). Universities may be responding to the market demands for more online programs, but many leaders and faculty members continue to struggle to keep pace with the changes and the emerging challenges that come with online learning.

Coinciding with universities’ increased use of online learning, higher education institutions have also begun to systematically market their schools to attract more students. The rise of marketization, coupled with the increased use of online learning in universities, has placed additional challenges on the traditional values and purposes for higher education (Levidow, 2002; Askehave, 2007; Newman & Jahdi, 2009). In a discussion of the role of students, faculty, and universities, Barta (2009) interviewed university administrative and faculty members to ascertain their perceptions of the emerging role of today’s students. The essential questions centered on whether they viewed students as traditional students, or as customers, or as both. Another view that was discussed in the Barta paper was that students were a product (the graduates) of a university (the middleman) for the employment agencies (the customers). Compelling cases were made to support each view. The Seaman (2009) study noted that “a lack of acceptance by potential employers ... consistently ranked at the bottom” of faculty’s perceived barriers to teaching online courses. Furthermore, Askehave (2009) offers the following comment on the current marketing trends of universities to offer

... innovative products to ‘demanding clients’ on the look-out for the best possible university ‘experience’. A choice which I suggest is ideologically significant and may have consequences for our

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