Chapter 22
Efficiency and Quality Improvement in Online Course Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter addresses the inefficiencies and quality concerns in online course development at a university and specifically the steps taken by the Instructional Design Team (ID Team) to improve the situation. Initial issues and organizational changes are identified, as well as the effects these had on the ID Team, processes, and overall function. Specifically, this chapter discusses how known issues were attempted to be solved, as well as the incorporation of Quality Matters, the creation of work groups, the standardization of documents and processes, and the promotion and creation of buy-in. Areas of difficulty and setbacks are also discussed. In addition, the chapter provides ideas and insights for organizations that might find themselves in similar situations of needing to improve the quality of online course development from initial offerings while also needing to change systems, procedures, and functionalities to facilitate that improvement.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This case study is based on an evangelical Christian university located in Indiana, in a city of about 30,000. The city is roughly 85 miles from the nearest major city and is mainly blue-collar. The university is divided into four colleges: the College

of Arts and Sciences, the College of Adult and Professional Studies (CAPS), the School of Nursing, and the Seminary. Within CAPS are three schools: the School of Business and Leadership, the School of Liberal Arts, and the School of Educational Leadership. The university strives to remain debt-free and mandates each college have a balanced budget.

The first online course was offered in 1996. In 1998 the university offered its first fully online accelerated program. In 2000 the Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) was created to facilitate the online program. By 2003 there were 1000 online students; by 2011 there were 7000. Online program offerings and students grew rapidly without the necessary strategies or structures to accommodate sustained growth, which led to many issues in the processes and procedures supporting the program. Programs are now offered at a traditional campus, regional sites, and online. Courses are onsite, online, and hybrid in nature. The university uses the cohort model. In this model, a group of students moves through all the courses in a program together. All schools and programs, except for College of Arts and Sciences, utilize this model.

In 2011 a new Center for Learning and Innovation (CLI) was created to offer academic and technological support for program and course development and to improve and promote overall course quality for the university.

SETTING THE STAGE

The course development process has changed greatly from the inception of the online program in 1996 to today. Prior to this, courses were constructed and managed solely by program directors and course writers. This led to many deficiencies and inconsistencies in course design. In 2000 the university hired its first Instructional Designer. The ID was hired to work alongside course writers to insure appropriate online delivery and that learning objectives were met.

Initially course writers were encouraged to create the course learning outcomes first, then to move on to concept mapping and workshop outlining. The mapping and outlining was done in an initial meeting, called a Design Group Meeting. Course writers typically received their contracts five months before the course was needed. IDs would receive course materials 30 days before the due date, allowing them one month to make any revisions or changes. Deadlines, however, were not enforced or upheld. IDs often received courses just a few weeks, days, or even hours before a course was set to open.

Course documents were simplistic, using a basic header over each meaningful section. However, each document contained various components of content. For example, one might contain a workshop introduction, faith and learning section,

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