

The Online Adventure: Creating an Innovative Graduate Program of High Quality

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Moore, Winograd, and Lange (2001) refer to online learning as the next major use of the Internet because of the flexibility to provide high quality education to non-traditional learners. The need to provide a flexible, high quality education is central to teacher education, particularly at the graduate level when students are most often practicing professionals (Stein, 2004). One way to ensure high quality is to design courses to maximize student engagement, an essential component of online learning (Jorgenson, 2003; Notar, Wilson, & Friery, 2002). This paper will describe ways these goals can be met both at the institutional and instructional levels, while sharing examples of how one program has incorporated mandatory activities designed to engage students not only with each other but in meaningful, applied ways with the course content. Additionally, this paper will address ways a university can establish policies to ensure timely and professional interaction between students and faculty, another critical component of effective distance learning (Notar, Wilson, & Friery, 2002; Stein, 2004).

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goals can be met both at the institutional and instructional levels, while sharing examples of how one program has incorporated mandatory activities designed to engage students not only with each other but in meaningful, applied ways with the course content. Additionally, this paper will address ways a university can establish policies to ensure timely and professional interaction between students and faculty, another critical component of effective distance learning (Notar, Wilson, & Friery, 2002; Stein, 2004).

Institutional Support for Online and Blended Programs

As institutions of higher education develop online and blended programs, it is critical that the program's goals and delivery methods align with the institution's mission and values (Law, Hawkes, & Murphy, 2002). This aspect of institutional support should be addressed during the initial stages of program development. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2002) suggests that new online programs should provide evidence that the institution's mission and values were considered during development and that this evidence was integral to the internal approval process. The faculty at one institution addressed this issue by including the institution's core values of excellence, community, integrity, respect, personal development, and responsible stewardship as dispositional values to be addressed and assessed in its new teacher preparation program. This values-focused approach not only showed an alignment with institutional mission, it also helped provide a connection with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards, (NCATE, 2002).

A part of the internal review process for new programs should include input and approval from other faculty, administration, and all university stakeholders. Such a process can help ensure alignment between the online program and university goals and

missions. Additionally, such an approval process will formalize the institution's commitment to the success of the program, including the need to provide monetary support as related to course development and technological needs (Law, Hawkes, & Murphy, 2002).

Additional areas of institutional support include the implementation of an advisory program; course information including objectives, ideas, and learning outcomes; sufficient access to online library resources; and an established expectation regarding student/faculty interaction (Pratt & Palloff, 2003). Students should be assured structured access to faculty advisors as part of the institutional support of the program (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). In order for this to be successful, the institution will need to release faculty from other duties and make student advising a priority in determining faculty workloads. Additionally, structures must be established to meet the needs of students who attend courses via the Internet as they will not be on campus (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002). One way to achieve this is through an online course site devoted to programmatic issues (Kassop, 2003). Another approach can be to have the advisor instigate email interaction with advisees prior to course registration. Through the use of these sorts of online communications, students can have "on demand" advising that is not limited to traditional office hours.

Next, the institution can provide program support by providing course information that includes objectives, learning outcomes, and concepts to be included during instruction (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). This can be accomplished through the implementation of standard syllabi or curriculum guides. This approach provides all instructors with a clear set of expectations for course development and ensures that

students will have a consistent learning experience regardless of the instructor or semester. The teacher education program at the authors' institution requires that all sections of a course use the same textbooks, course objectives, state and national standards, assessments, and grading rubrics. This ensures consistency in courses and provides institutional structure for adjuncts who teach in the program.

The fourth prong of institutional support lies in provision of library resources (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Library services that should be available include online reference services, document delivery, remote access to library services, and online databases (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002). This aspect of institutional support is especially critical for students engaged in graduate studies, where research expectations are higher. Access to electronic books and journals, including databases through which to locate journals, is of critical importance for online students and must be addressed prior to the implementation of an online or blended program. This institution provides a library tutorial for all of its online students to make them aware of the resources available and how to access them. Additionally, all courses have a link to the library website to simplify student access.

Lastly, the institution needs to set policies regarding expectations for assignment completion and faculty feedback (Palloff & Prong, 2003). One policy that needs to be addressed is the need to ensure that it is the student enrolled in the class who is completing the assignments (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002). Additionally, institutions need to have safeguards in place to detect plagiarism. One institution has purchased access to an online service that is designed to help students and faculty search papers for plagiarism. Students can submit their work electronically and

receive a report that indicates if the information is taken from other electronic sources, through an internet search. In a proactive approach, students can revise and resubmit their work. If a student chooses not to make such revisions, the faculty member could be aware of this and grade accordingly. The same university has established guidelines for timely response to student queries and assignment submissions. It is expected that students will receive feedback within 48 hours of submitting an assignment. Kassop (2003) indicates that this immediate feedback is one of the strongest advantages of an online environment.

Instructional Support for Online and Blended Programs

Online delivery of instruction is a rapidly developing field, and as such the idea of “best practice” is constantly evolving. However, as with all new programs, it is critical that faculty look at current literature to make informed decisions. To that end, this section will address current “best practice” as defined in the literature and begin to look at a process of program development, including collaboration with stakeholders from diverse geographical settings. One institution’s strategies for achieving this will be shared.

Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) landmark work identified seven principles for good practice in higher education. California State University, Chico (2002) adapted these seven principles to develop a rubric to evaluate the effectiveness of online instruction. This rubric provides “best practice” benchmarks that can be used to evaluate the instructional effectiveness of online instruction. It can also provide a framework from which quality instruction can be developed. Each of the seven principles is addressed here, along with ways one program strives to meet them.

Online organization and design includes the organization of the homepage, the syllabus, the aesthetics, accessibility, and multiple opportunities for student input and feedback. In order to increase student comfort, all homepages for one exceptional student education program courses are being developed in a standard format that includes links for (a) course content and related materials, (b) communication tools, (c) study tools and, (d) my grades. Each of these links uses an icon that is common throughout each course. Additionally, a course menu along the right-hand side of the screen allows students direct access to all sections of the course with the ease of only one “click.” The highly structured, well-developed home page creates easy access to all components of the course. Students have opportunity for input and feedback via the discussion board, private email, and chat room sessions.

Instructional design and delivery includes offering multiple opportunities for interaction and communication among students, between students and instructor, and between students and content; clearly defining learning objectives and performance expectations; employing strategies for meeting multiple learning styles and promoting critical thinking; and providing regular student feedback. The program being described here requires student-to-student communication in every course. This is achieved through the use of discussion postings, cooperative learning, and group projects. For example, in one course students in work groups are given access to a “locked” discussion forum that is accessible to only group members and the instructor. It is expected that all group work be completed within this forum, thus allowing the instructor to monitor the contributions of all members and ensure that a group approach is employed. As stated above, learning styles are accommodated through the many delivery options of course

content. Additionally, students are expected to make practical application of content in course settings and to use Internet resources outside of the course web site. Assessments and activities require students to engage in reflection, make application of theory to practice, compare different theories and perspectives, and even to engage in action research in a K-12 classroom. All of these activities require critical thinking.

Assessment and evaluation of student learning includes having students self-assess their readiness for online instruction, aligning course objectives and assessments, using multiple assessment strategies, and providing regular feedback to students in a timely manner. The institution described here offers an introductory course for online instruction to all distance learning students. This course allows students to develop skills needed to be successful.

Appropriate and effective use of technology includes using a variety of technology tools that facilitate communication and learning, using technology to enhance learning rather than for the sake of using technology, learning objects are relevant, optimized for Internet uses, and engaging, student feedback is used to improve technological delivery of content. One program uses extensive variety of technology to increase communication (CD-ROMs, discussion boards, email, chat rooms). The courses use technology to enhance learning rather than for the sake of technology. This is seen in that the approach has been kept simple and straightforward. Students are expected to make use of current technology, but the “bells and whistles” that would not improve learning have not been incorporated in the courses. One example of this is the use of streaming video. The program had the option of including streaming video of course designers explaining/lecturing. Faculty decided that rather than increasing learning, this

tactic would only decrease the universality of design and that the same outcome could be achieved through well-developed course content and real-time chat sessions. So far, student feedback has been positive and retention is high.

Learner support and resources include having important information accessible through the course welcome page, including links to information sources, and offering access to media resources. As has already been explained above, all course home pages include relevant information and several links to pages within the course. Each course provides links to the home page and to needed Internet sites. The library website offers access to several media resources, including online reserves for course readings. This is one way the program is able to make connections between good instructional practice and the need for institutional support.

Online and blended programs such as the one discussed are still in the infancy stage of development. Careful development and implementation of programs will ensure that online students receive access to the same quality information, interaction and services as ground student receive. Following “best practices” in program development and implementation will result in courses that are well-designed, responsive to the learner, provide interaction among students and faculty, are consistent with university’s goals and mission, and are consistent with the stated learning objectives and outcomes. Program monitoring and evaluation is needed as this online adventure continues to ensure the delivery of a graduate program of high quality.

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