

Online Pedagogy: Catalyst for Transforming the Teaching-Learning Enterprise

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Overview

The complex process of developing an academically and financially successful fully online program will be presented from both faculty and administrative perspectives based on the case example of one private, tuition-driven institution. While this institution faced many common challenges in its attempt to initiate a fully online learning program including resources and resistance from faculty and administration, it has achieved its goals of achieving learning outcomes, student and faculty satisfaction, and fiscal success through a student-centered model based on online pedagogy. This paper will discuss major elements of the process that resulted in an online program that has proven successful and sustainable over time.

Case Study: RUOnline

Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois is an independent, private institution with a highly diverse student population. It gave little attention to online learning prior to 2000, and when it did, it focused on fiscal viability rather than on quality of learning. Everything changed for Roosevelt University in June 2000 when the McCormick Tribune Foundation offered a generous two-year grant to initiate a fully online learning program. An administrative-faculty triad based in a non-traditional college was appointed to plan, design, and implement an online initiative to launch no later than 2002 when the grant funding would expire.

RUOnline premiered in fall 2001 with 77 enrollments in seven courses. Three years later, the program yields approximately 700 enrollments in over 40 course sections each semester. The program offers one complete degree each at the bachelor's and master's levels as well as certificates and courses in several academic areas. Through these programs, it has attracted new student populations to the university. Most importantly, it has moved both the faculty and administration from resistance to acceptance, and it has improved the quality of teaching and learning in both online and face-to-face formats.

Measuring online success: Some guideposts

Many online programs have entered the academic arena. Some have become well-known and successful, some have maintained static enrollments, and others cease to exist. To embark on a successful online initiative, it is important to identify markers of

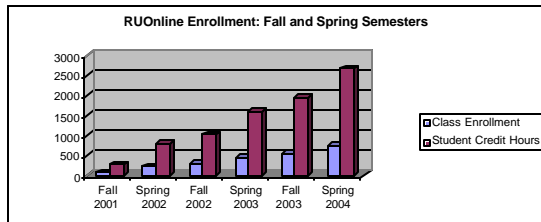
success, to set targets in each of these areas, and to craft a strategic plan that defines an institutional approach to achieving and sustaining success.

For RUOnline, primary measures of success included the following:

- 1) recruiting new student populations to the university
- 2) aiding student retention through student satisfaction
- 3) achieving fiscal sustainability
- 4) contributing to the university's overall strategic plan.

Recruitment of new student populations

Through targeted marketing campaigns, RUOnline increased overall enrollment each semester since its launch in fall 2001. More importantly, its enrollment changed from students who live and work near one of the university's physical campuses to students in more than 15 states including one student in Alaska and a member of the military stationed in Korea.



Retention through student satisfaction

It is one thing to attract new student populations; it is quite another to retain them. RUOnline focused on students and their attainment of academic goals in every aspect of program planning from course design to faculty training to student service. This focus on student learning resulted in a high level of student satisfaction; in spring 2004, 92 percent of fully online students who responded to an end-of-term survey said they learned as much or more in their online classes than in face-to-face classes. Because students are satisfied with their fully online learning experience, 90-98 percent have completed their courses each semester, and over 90 percent of students who begin online certificate or degree programs re-enroll in subsequent semesters. In addition, students who relocated after beginning their studies at a physical campus have been able to complete their Roosevelt University degrees as a result of the online program, increasing the university's overall retention rates.

Fiscal viability

A program cannot be considered successful unless it is financially sustainable over time. The goal for RUOnline was to be financially self-sustaining no later than 2005, three years after the end of the grant period. RUOnline surpassed that goal. Not only is the program self-supporting; it is highly profitable. In fiscal year 2004, RUOnline generated ten times its operational budget in tuition revenue, and its contribution margin increased from 22.56 percent in fiscal year 2003 to 50.51 percent in fiscal year 2004.

Achieving online success: Essential elements

Supporting the university's strategic plan

Strategic planning is the first and most fundamental step in implementing and sustaining a successful online program, and its success rests in its integration with institutional vision and mission and coordination with the university's strategic plan.

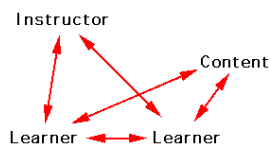
Roosevelt University went through a major strategic planning initiative focused on student success and the university's historic mission of access. RUOnline adopted this institutional focus and based its strategic vision in pedagogy and in extending the mission of access beyond the university's physical borders. To do this, RUOnline founders read available research literature and studied a range of online programs including the most notable successes and the most profound failures because we could learn from each school's experience.

RUOnline also sought external benchmarks against which it could evaluate its effectiveness. Initially, RUOnline used a research-driven list of quality markers for online education developed by the National Education Association and Blackboard, Inc. (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000) and addressed each of the 24 benchmarks in the areas of institutional support, course development, teaching/learning, course structure, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment. RUOnline also used research on best practices in online learning including Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of effective teaching for the online environment (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) and Cross' analysis of teaching and learning in the next century (2003). Currently, RUOnline uses the Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Associations for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (Higher Learning Commission, 2003) and research conducted by Carol A. Twigg through the Center for Academic Transformation (Twigg, 2004) to guide its practice.

RUOnline: Pedagogical Practices

Student engagement

Connectivity is the key to RUOnline's success, and connectivity goes far beyond bandwidth. RUOnline attempts to achieve student engagement, a major factor in student success, by connecting students to course content, to the faculty member, to other students, and to Roosevelt University. Connections in each of these areas address principles of best practice identified by most current research and send a powerful message that RUOnline values personal connection over computer power.



Connectivity centers every aspect of RUOnline on student learning, resulting in high levels of student satisfaction, achievement of learning outcomes, and high course completion and retention rates.

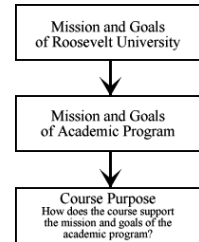
Simple questions: Profound results

Achieving student engagement begins with a course design process based on three simple questions:

1. What am I trying to do? (learning outcomes)
2. How am I trying to do it? (course content and teaching methodology)
3. How do I know if I did it? (assessment)

These simple questions refocus faculty from course content to student learning. The questions begin with the individual course, but they extend far beyond, influencing all teaching and learning conducted at the university.

After defining course-specific learning, faculty consider how the learning outcomes of one course impact the academic program it serves, the college in which it is housed, and the mission of the university. This process and the research and strategy underlying it are detailed in a course development document given to each faculty developer.



Instructional design principles based in student learning

RUOnline bases its course design on certain fundamental principles shown to help students achieve learning outcomes. Individual design principles and their combination focus on helping students comprehend information, connect new learning to existing knowledge, and apply new concepts to concrete situations.

Among these design principles are:

1. Chunking content into small blocks of material allows students to absorb and retain information more easily by aiding short-term memory (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 162).
2. Visual interest attracts and maintains student engagement, emphasizes levels of importance and relationships between elements of course content, and deepens the learning process. White space, graphics, colors, fonts, and lists are all ways to engage students in the learning process.
3. Formative assessment provides information to students and faculty as the online course progresses. Students can gauge their learning and make strategic changes they might need to ensure their success, and faculty can modify the course as dictated by student learning. This complements summative assessment that can be used to evaluate student progress and issue grades.
4. Participatory/active learning is key to online success. For students to take an active role in the learning community, the faculty role shifts from course leader to course facilitator who communicates passion for the content to the students and who empowers students to become increasingly autonomous learners. Group spaces, virtual classrooms, and whiteboards are tools that encourage active learning, but the faculty member's role is pivotal.

Institutional transformation

At Roosevelt University, faculty, students, administration, and curriculum have changed as more university constituents become involved with RUOnline.

Faculty

Many faculty, initially resistant to the concept of fully online learning, now embrace the student-centered concepts on which RUOnline is based and apply those concepts to all their teaching—online, face-to-face, and blended.

Administration

Because the initiation of fully online learning was externally funded, the university administration adopted a wait-and-see attitude until the program required investment of university resources. Because RUOnline demonstrated its fiscal viability far ahead of schedule, because numerous university constituents clearly benefited from the program, and because the university gained some national recognition for the academic integrity of its online programming, online education became regularized into the university's scheduling process, "online" was added to Chicago and Schaumburg in the university's logo, and online learning is a major component in the university's current strategic plan.

Students

As a result of online learning, new students are attending Roosevelt, current students are taking more credit hours per semester, students who relocate or whose work and family demands make it impossible to attend on-campus classes are completing their Roosevelt degrees, and when given the choice, students are opting for online classes over their campus-based counterparts. In the two fully online degrees, online enrollments comprise 43% and 46% of total program enrollments, more than either of the two physical campuses. Students see multiple benefits of online learning as exemplified from the following student comment:

I thought about how I almost didn't start down this road of going back to school because of the cost and thinking I'm just too old. It made me realize how much I would be missing out on. I would never have the opportunity to meet so many people from so many backgrounds, occupations and hear about such utterly amazing accomplishments! I love getting to know other people and this is a really great way to get a glimpse into people's lives without feeling intrusive. My life is truly being enriched because of RUOnline. My lifestyle doesn't allow for me to get back to school any other way.

Curriculum

Most compelling is the transformation in curriculum review and the desire to improve the quality of instruction. Rather than an individual orientation, faculty are working together to review courses, to define learning outcomes, best practices, and assessment tools, and to ensure each course's fit in the programmatic mission. The result: a more energized faculty and a more contemporary and consistent curriculum.

Institutional Transformation	
Faculty resistance	Engaged participation
Administrative skepticism	Support
Student ambivalence	Enthusiastic engagement
Curricular stagnation	Pedagogical focus

Conclusion

RUOnline is in its infancy, and its impact on Roosevelt University is just beginning to be realized. Nonetheless, it already has had a profound impact on the way people at Roosevelt teach and learn. As program participation increases and administration attend more closely to online programming, RUOnline will continue to influence how Roosevelt engages in the business of higher education. As RUOnline evolves, however, one element will remain constant—the core value of student-centered learning.

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