



Sustainable Success: Aligning Online Program Development with Institutional Priorities

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Introduction

Over the last decade, a radical change has taken place in higher education: Online learning has become acceptable practice at most institutions. According to data from the United States Department of Education, enrollment in credit-bearing distance education courses increased from 1.344 million in 1997-98 to 2.876 million in 2000-01, and distance education course offerings increased from 47,500 to 118,100 (Kierman, 2003). The greatest growth has been in internet based courses where in Illinois, for example, internet courses increased 45% from 34,549 in spring 2002 to 50,125 in spring 2003 (Illinois Virtual Campus, 2003).

Almost all institutions of higher education engage in some form of online education. Eighty-one percent of all institutions of higher education offer at least one fully online or blended course, and 34% offer complete online degree programs (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Even elite schools such as Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, previously resistant to online learning, are beginning to offer online courses and programs (Forelle, 2003). Overall, fewer than 20% of all schools surveyed by the Sloan Consortium (2002) believe that online education is *not* part of their long-term strategy, while 67% responded that online education is a critical long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Indeed, "online students are becoming an entirely new subpopulation of higher-education learners" (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003).

Given the growth that has already taken place and the expected future expansion of online programming, institutions need to plan strategically to ensure success. Students must meet academic objectives, programs have to be fiscally viable, and most importantly, the entire online program has to meet institutional imperatives. Roosevelt University, a private, metropolitan, tuition-driven university in Chicago and northwest suburban Schaumburg, Illinois, followed a strategic plan to develop, implement, and sustain a successful online program, RUOnline. The Roosevelt University example will illustrate a strategic planning model that can be applied to institutions of varying sizes with differing resource availability and distinct missions.

Strategic Planning Components

Effective strategic planning for online learning is comprised of the following components:

- alignment with institutional mission and vision
- market potential
- requisite organizational change including considerations of institutional support
- implementation including policies, procedures, expectations, and accountability
- quality assurance
- financial planning models.

Alignment with Institutional Mission

The most important and most overlooked component of successful online programming is alignment with institutional mission and vision. Institutions often view online programs as separate from or extensions of the campus-based academic operation rather than as central to the institution's academic programming. Successful online programs embrace the institutional mission and are designed to advance it. The primary strategic consideration in planning online programs, therefore, is aligning the mission of the online program with the long-term institutional mission. RUOnline used the Roosevelt University strategic plan and the university's historic mission as it considered the direction of online learning. "Online learning should arise from the existing mission of the university; it should not become the mission of the university. The initial step in developing an online learning program has to be identification of the appropriate purpose at Roosevelt. The next step is to define the components necessary to achieve and maintain that purpose" (Gersten & Knerr, 2000). An online strategic plan must embrace the institutional direction and move with it into the future as the institution embraces online learning as central to its long-term success.

Market Potential

Another major strategic consideration is market positioning in an increasingly competitive online arena. Included in this consideration is the intended audience, especially whether the online program will be supplementing campus-based instruction or attracting new student populations. The former requires high quality online instruction but not complete or strategically planned programs; it also generates little new revenue to the institution. Programming for new student populations requires consideration of potential markets in the context of institutional strengths and market saturation. Programming considerations include scope—courses only, conversion of existing degree programs, or new program development; credit versus noncredit; program length such as certificates; and competition. Once these issues have been considered, the institution has to determine availability of needed resources and institutional support.

Organizational Change

The amount and scope of institutional change required to implement and sustain online programming is a critical consideration. On a macro level is the depth of support from

the highest levels of the institution. If institutional leaders do not have a long-term commitment to online programming, the program has little chance of success. If the leadership is committed to a long-term online endeavor, the organization has to determine what current practices have to change to develop, launch, and sustain an online program. The robustness of the technological infrastructure including what course management system will be used, what will be handled in-house or outsourced, system integration, remote access to academic resources, and support are essential. Roosevelt University determined that its infrastructure was insufficient for the demands of a fully online program, so outsourcing was the better choice. That decision involved significant additional costs, and those costs had to be considered in the strategic plan.

Organizational barriers to effective online learning also have to be considered. What structural elements, institutional priorities, operations, or resource limitations might present obstacles to successful online initiatives? What student services are not currently available at a distance, and what systemic changes would be necessary? Connection to the institution, to the faculty, and to other students is an important element in student success and retention. What would be needed to connect distant students to the organization? Institutional branding has to be considered. Many institutions are well-known and sufficiently branded in their local communities. Distance education programs, however, require brand recognition by much larger populations spanning broad geographic regions. An institution has to determine if the online program will share the institution's brand or craft a related but unique brand as well as ways of extending brand recognition to desired student populations. Finally, attitudes have to be considered. Ultimately, a successful program depends on the commitment of the people involved with it. Sufficient numbers of faculty and staff have to be willing to commit their time and energy to the program and to the students it serves. This is often the most difficult organizational barrier to overcome. Roosevelt University had some early pioneers who made the program an almost immediate success, but gaining broader support is an evolutionary process. Since this is true at most institutions, a strategic plan has to consider the time it will take to gain the broad support needed for wide-scale online programming.

Policies and Procedures

Any successful program needs clarity to assure equality among all participants, quality programming, and guidelines for sustaining a program over time. A process needs to be in place to assure strict adherence to copyright laws. Ownership and compensation are issues that can derail online efforts, so policies and processes have to be clearly defined in the planning process. Who owns the courses, what people will be paid for course development and teaching, faculty load, course size, and tenure and promotion decisions are all critical issues in a strategic planning process. Policies have to be negotiated and procedures have to be in place to assure the policies are enforced.

Quality Assurance

Online courses represent the academic quality of the home institution, so they have to meet the institution's academic standards. This requires development of a quality assurance cycle. Every online program needs core academic values from which it will

not deviate. These values should be based on best practices in online learning, on existing research, and on departmental and institutional values. Regardless of the specific department, each online course has to reflect the academic integrity of the institution and has to focus on student success. To accomplish this, the institution needs to develop guidelines for the course development process, a maturity cycle, and approval processes for courses and programs.

Financial Planning

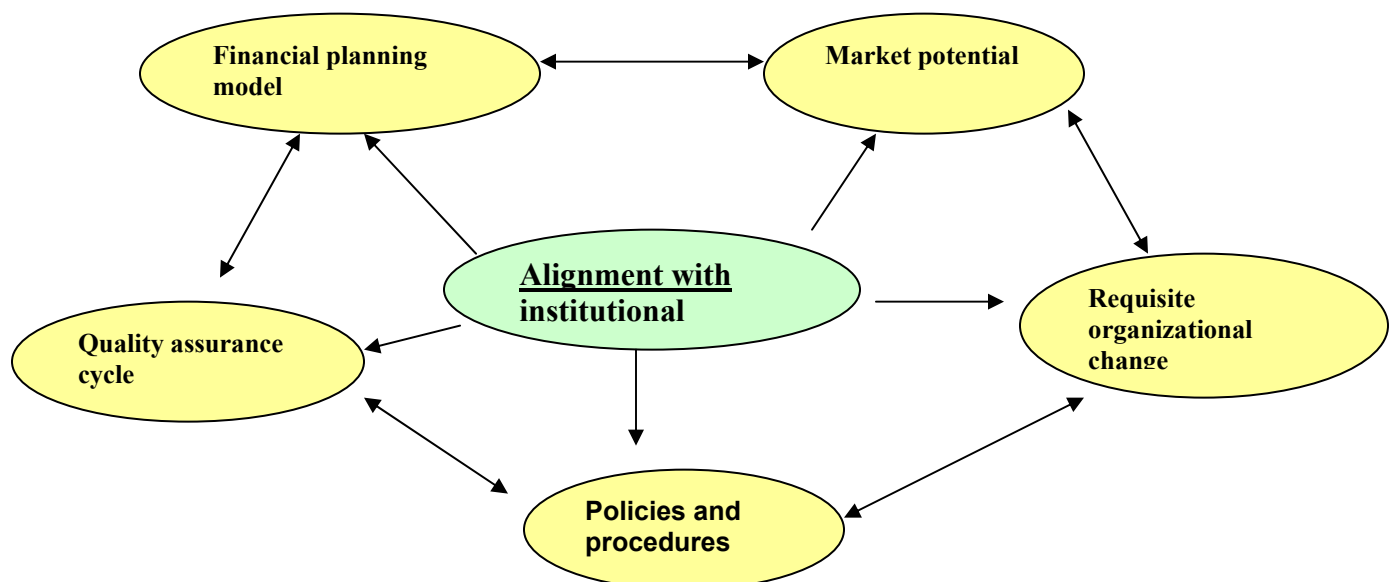
Insufficient attention to financing online programming has led to the demise of many online programs, most notably NYU and eUK (Garrett, 2004), and noted educators are concerned about the difficulty of competing in the current online market (Levine, 2005). Both obvious and hidden costs are involved in online programming. Chief among them is the cost of keeping technology current; providing sufficient support for all faculty, students, and staff regardless of where or when they study; competitive and ongoing marketing efforts. Consideration of start-up, maintenance, and growth costs have to be evaluated against projected revenue gains. Careful planning that balances tuition and other revenue projections against projected costs over time and in the context of institutional and programmatic goals has to drive online development.

Conclusion

Some speculate that as much as one-half of all higher education programs will soon be available online (Finkelstein et al. 2000). Others question the ability of most institutions to succeed in online endeavors (Levine, 2005). The only things certain about online learning are that it will continue to impact higher education for many years and that each institution has to plan strategically, implement diligently, and monitor continuously to achieve success.

Distance Education

Strategic Planning Model



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