

Build an Online Program Consortium

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INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities (OCICU) was launched in January 2005 after several years of successful classroom-based partnerships, a failed attempt at a previous online collaboration effort, and extensive market research.

Beginning in 1990, New Ventures of Regis University formed partnerships with independent, not-for-profit (NFP) colleges across the country. These partnerships focused on helping colleges develop and implement classroom-based, accelerated degree programs for working adults based on the experiences of the Regis adult education programs which had been established in 1979 (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). In all, New Ventures assisted over thirty colleges to launch or improve their adult education programs.

By 1999, many of these partner colleges were requesting assistance to develop the delivery of online courses for their adult learners. In response, New Ventures and fifteen colleges worked for two years to develop online collaboration whereby students would be given the opportunity to transfer online courses among the members of Partners in Accelerated Global Education (PAGE). All fifteen colleges hoped to be part of the management of this initiative. This venture, based on transfer credit and a multi-management structure, never got “off the ground” as a virtual enterprise. However, the seeds were planted for future online collaborative endeavors.

In 2004, New Ventures conducted a two-year market study with over 75 schools to determine their levels of existing resources and capabilities in establishing and developing online academic programs. Just as the 2005 Alfred P. Sloan Foundation sponsored study results demonstrated, these schools, given their limited resources, could not implement online programs on their own (Allen & Seaman, 2005). A consortium, whereby

these schools could share resources, emerged as a cost-effective solution, as well as a way for the schools to compete with better-resourced institutions.

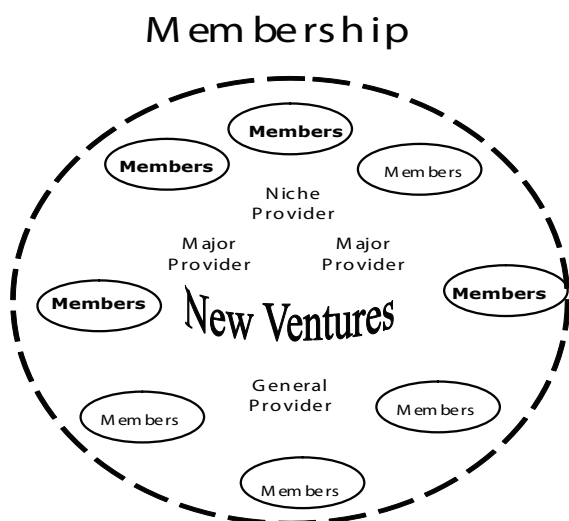
Shaped by the ultimate user, OCICU represents a marriage between an accepted academic collaborative model with current education trends. It has created an opportunity for the smaller independent colleges and universities to offer online courses as part of their repertoire.

BACKGROUND

There are many examples of academic consortia in higher education, most of which are classroom-based. A consortium may be defined as formal collaboration that offers members the opportunity to leverage and pool their institutions’ respective resources to other members toward mutually-beneficial goals (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999). Such an arrangement enables students to register, pay tuition, and gain academic credit at their school while technically attending classes at a member institution. OCICU is founded on the same principle. However, the colleges may be located anywhere within or outside the United States since geographic boundaries are non-existent. There is also an inherent benefit of consortium courses over transfer credit. Transfer credit does not generate any tuition for the member while OCICU courses provide tuition revenue. Opportunities for financial aid also exist at the member institution. Overall, OCICU helps to retain members’ students because of the flexibility provided.

By 2007, the OCICU, a totally online “virtual” consortium with no degree-granting authority, was comprised of 64 member colleges and managed by New Ventures of Regis University. The glue that holds the consortium together lies in the nature of the member institutions. Like-minded, philosophically similar colleges form a bond by the very essence of their respec-

Figure 1. OCICU Membership Levels



tive missions, usually having to do with their emphasis on the personal approach to their students (Ekman & Kennedy, 2007). A large majority of the institutions are members of the Council of Independent Colleges.

The three levels of membership in the OCICU (charter, enrolling, and provider) provide cost-effective alternatives for the delivery of online courses. Members use the courses to complement, supplement, reduce, or replace their own academic offerings while presenting flexible alternatives to their students. In all, over 500 undergraduate and graduate courses are made available to OCICU members by major, general, and niche or specialty providers.

While online learning may be combined with traditional classroom-based delivery in ways that can be described as hybrid, blended, web-assisted, or enhanced, OCICU deals only with courses delivered totally online in an asynchronous manner. Courses selected by enrolling members are reviewed and approved through their institutional course approval process. Because OCICU courses are accepted by the members as their own, the students register, pay tuition, and receive transcripts as they would any other course from their institutions.

Each member determines the tuition rate to be charged for its Consortium courses. Members then pay a per-enrollment fee to the OCICU and retain the remainder of the tuition as revenue. Other than the enrollment fee, members incur no direct expenses for offering a selection of online courses because the provider schools with existing online programs bear the

expense for faculty, course development, and course management systems. Indirect costs are absorbed in existing offices such as the registrar and business office and are offset by additional tuition income.

OCICU providers gain the opportunity to promote their online courses nationally to a target market eager for their offerings, while converting space available in their online courses into income. The provider institution is responsible for selecting, developing, and managing faculty who facilitate OCICU courses delivered by their institution.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

In the beginning, the concept of the OCICU appeared to be fairly straight forward and uncomplicated. However, numerous issues and challenges became evident once the OCICU was about to become operational. These issues and challenges included:

- **The autonomy and independence of each member college:** Despite apparent commonalities of colleges, each member prides itself on its uniqueness and culture. In fact, each member has a personality emanating from its leadership and tradition.
- **Institutional inertia:** Colleges are unique organizations that depend on collegiality and consensus. Decision-making can be convoluted and lengthy. Change and adaptation are attributes not readily associated with colleges (Clark, 2004).
- **Accreditation implications:** Different regional and professional accreditors apply varied limitations and requirements to members. Depending on the status of individual members, requirements may differ significantly.
- **Common quality standards:** Online course quality standards, including student support services, are critical to consortium success. The OCICU has established a set of standards expected of all providers, regardless of their level of participation. These “best practices” are consistent with the regional accreditation standards for online programs (Higher Learning Commission, 2003) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2003).
- **Faculty resistance:** Traditional faculty members are well-known for their skill in teaching in the

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