Successful Self-Funding E-Learning Programs

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INTRODUCTION

The Greek philosopher Aristotle indicated that learning is the outcome of both teaching and practice. Clearly, learning is not confined to classroom lectures exclusively. In the past several decades, educators explored the possibility of providing learning experience to remote students. With improvement in technology and the growing popularity of Internet usage, e-learning caught the attention of both corporations and educational institutions. However, traditional learning methodology began transforming when elite universities embraced the Internet as a vehicle for their degree programs (Forelle, 2003). Progress in e-learning has increased its popularity in the past decade (Levy & Murphy, 2002). Consequently, it is carving a new brand of universities, causing traditional schools to rethink their business model. Furthermore, some elite schools have developed specialized online degree and certificate programs. In doing so, these schools strive to compete on this new learning medium and create a new source of revenue, especially due to the declining enrollment and lower government funding resulting from the events on September 11, 2001 (Roueche, Roueche, & Johnson, 2002). This paper provides definitions of the eight key elements any institution should have to successfully implement self-funding e-learning systems.

BACKGROUND

In the past few decades, universities and colleges were facing growing demands to graduate qualified students. At the same time, however, universities and colleges were faced with increased demand by local communities and governments to provide more scholarships and financial aid for local students, in spite of the reduction in financial support allocated to academic institutions (Cusick, 2003). As a result, higher education administrators have been seeking to increase their overall revenues from corporate sponsors and investors by crafting specialized degree and certificate programs. Not surprisingly, universities and colleges have been relying on international students to compensate by admitting a large number of full-fee-paying foreign students (Surek, 2000). Since this has become such an important revenue stream, many business schools have gone beyond designing attractive specialized programs for international students and even collaborated with international universities around the world to create joint programs.

In the post-September 11, 2001 era, since some of the hijackers came to the United States (U.S.) on student visas, new tougher INS regulations were installed to control and evaluate the issuing of student visas. These new regulations dramatically affect the amount of international students seeking U.S. education. That impact is a result of a decrease in overall student visas issued by the INS and the sluggish process of new student visa seekers. At the same time, current international students already in the U.S. were forced to return to their home country and reapply for student visas under the new regulations, while waiting months on end for permission to come back. As a result, online learning programs have become an alternative solution for international students seeking U.S. academic degrees.

In the past few years, information and communication technologies (ICT), such as online learning, grabbed the attention of many higher education administrators. In the late 1980s, Canadian schools invested enormous amounts of time and resources to develop learning programs for a distance delivery. U.S. schools quickly followed, with some top business schools like Duke and Michigan implementing online learning programs in the 1990s. As the use of the Internet increased during the second half of the 1990s, many other U.S. universities

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– headed by their business and engineering schools – implemented online learning programs, where almost all include one version or another of MBA programs (Davids-Landau, 2000; Forelle, 2003).

Today, more than ever, higher education administrators are very much interested in online learning programs, as they face declining student enrollments, aging student population and reduced level of federal, state and local funding. This has resulted in a growing number of institutions looking for new innovative ways, mainly by the use of ICT, to attract students in remote or distance locations, including international students. However, literature suggests that faculty without prior online teaching experience has very little understanding of the skills needed to make online teaching effective (Conrad, 2004). Moreover, literature suggests that tremendous efforts also are needed from institutions to prepare faculty to effectively teach online (Chacon, 2001). Thus, the next section of this chapter concentrates on the key elements needed to deploy a successful online learning program.

OVERVIEW

Implementation of e-learning systems can be challenging, as only a limited number is successful in sustaining programs to the point of self-funding. To achieve a successful self-funding e-learning program, investment of both time and capital is essential in the period prior to implementation. Nevertheless, successful implementation of an e-learning system is a success ticket for a self-funding program. This chapter will present the eight key elements of successful implementation (see Figure 1). Additionally, it will provide a roadmap that can help institutions develop self-funding e-learning programs, along with providing justifications for the importance of each key piece that comprises the overall success of the project. In the following sections, definitions of the eight key elements of successful self-funding e-learning programs are provided.

Figure 1. Eight key elements for self-funding e-learning program

Strategic Plan

A vital step in this project is to devote adequate time for proper planning. A good strategic plan should include an analysis of all key elements presented in this chapter, along with the development of a detailed blueprint, or strategic plan, of the implementation process. Such a plan should also include foreseeable problems and some suggested solutions, or avenues of findings solutions to such challenges. A viable plan should be based on a gradual development process, rather than implementing a full-fledged program without proper adjustment by faculty, students and administrators. This suggested methodology will allow institutions to progress with their project one step at a time while building and improving based on feedback and constructive comments from users, faculty and administrators. At the same time, a detailed strategic plan would provide a solid plan for scalability and ability to reach a self-funding stage.

Administrative and Institutional Support

Administrative and institutional support is another key piece of successful implementation in the pursuit of a self-funding e-learning program. It is important to emphasize to administrators the potential benefits associated with such programs, and at the same time candidly present the challenges foreseen in such projects. The lack of knowledge related to the benefits and limitations of such technologies may cause some misconceptions and reservations from such projects, resulting in roadblocks for the successful implementation.

Numerous institutions that seek to provide e-learning programs invest tremendous efforts in the development of e-learning courses, faculty training and equipment, but lack the overall united institutional support for e-learning students. Institutional support for e-learning students goes beyond access to the e-learning system

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