Good planning is key to the development of a successful online learning program. For online learning (as with any form of distance education), initial planning should primarily center on two issues: identifying the educational goal of the program, and identifying the practical issues of implementation. Planners must recognize that while online learning is a technology-based activity, it must be organized around clear educational goals that are strongly aligned with one or more key areas for the institution. Although educational goals will be different for each institution, this chapter suggests common tools and strategies that can be used to help identify key goals. Once goals (and accompanying objectives) are identified, practical issues of implementation must also be carefully considered. These include determining the initial investment, deciding on profitability goals, putting strong program leadership in place, creating an effective program, and identifying support needs for faculty and students.
Introduction

If planned correctly, an online program can expand an institution’s reach, enhance its stature, and satisfy needs for its traditional and non-traditional students. For online learning (as with any form of distance education), initial planning should primarily center on two issues: identifying the educational goal of the program, and identifying the practical issues of implementation.

This chapter makes the case that while online learning is a technological enterprise, it must be carried out with educational goals firmly at the forefront; these goals must be strongly aligned with one or more key areas specifically affecting the institution. Although such goals will be different for each institution, this chapter suggests common tools and strategies that can be used to help identify them.

Once goals are in place and objectives are derived from the goals, the distance learning program will need to address a number of practical implementation issues. As seen in case studies and retrospectives by others (cf., Bennett, 2001; Gibson & Herrera, 1999), many of the implementation issues are common among programs. This chapter suggests issues that should be considered by the planning group, including establishing the program’s leadership, determining the program’s initial budget, and identifying the program’s support needs.

Keep the Focus on the Educational Goal

Perhaps you are reading this book because someone at your institution has said, “We need to have an online program.” In that case, you may be off to a bad start.

Although your online learning program will be built on a technology infrastructure, it is not “about” the technology — it is about the ability to deliver courses via technology. An online program must always be fundamentally organized around an educational goal. While this may seem obvious, too often the initial goals for an online learning program are described through technology. When a program statement begins, “Our goal is to connect our three branch campuses...
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