



TeamBTE: An Organization Created To Assist In the Development of a Consumer-Focused Distance Education Program in Business Technology

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of a novel student-driven campus organization known as TeamBTE. The mission of TeamBTE is to provide an electronic communications vehicle and supporting infrastructure through which students, faculty, administrators, alumni and others interested in business education at the university level can interact on issues of mutual interest. As of the date of the May 2002 IRMA Conference, TeamBTE will have been in full operation for approximately one academic year (two semesters). Feedback on TeamBTE and its official electronic communications publication, E-BITS, indicates that TeamBTE has become recognized as a preferred source of information relating to the Business Technology (BTE) program at Miami University for both on-campus and off-campus individuals. The success of the concept is allowing TeamBTE to become a major driving force in the development of an online, university-level distance education program in Business Technology.

DEVELOPING ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE TARGET STUDENT POPULATIONS

The current research is being conducted on the Middletown and Hamilton branch campuses of Miami University, a public institution that is part of the State of Ohio university system. Miami offers Associate's, Bachelor's and Master's level degrees in business across three campuses located in neighboring cities of Southwestern Ohio. The Associate's degree program, falling under the auspices of the BTE department, operates on the aforementioned branch campuses. BTE students typically may be characterized as fitting one of two demographic models. In brief terms, these models are (a) students fresh from earning their high school degrees who are attending school full-time but do not wish to immediately pursue a four-year degree, and (b) older, returning students who are employed within the surrounding communities and are pursuing their degrees on a part-time basis. In either model, students may consider the Associate's degree to be their terminal degree. Alternatively, they may transfer to Miami's main campus at Oxford, Ohio, or to a variety of competing schools within the general area, to complete a Bachelor's degree in Business. These two models, taken together, define BTE's target market segments.

As part of the BTE department's strategic plan for the next several years, department faculty and administrators are committed to the implementation of a high-quality, online distance education program in Business Technology. The overriding goal of this effort is to increase enrollment across the department's degree specializations. An important tactical approach in reaching this goal is to design online program offerings that increase the flexibility and the attractiveness of the program for both target market segments. Data generated through the roll-out of TeamBTE are critically important to the design of appropriate online courses, seminars and other offerings.

RESULTS TO DATE

Preliminary research data generated through TeamBTE work established that this type of electronic communications vehicle can

greatly facilitate interactions among various stakeholders in the Miami University BTE program and new potential customers of an online distance education degree program. Initial efforts were concentrated in the following areas:

1. Development of a TeamBTE constitution and confirmation as an official campus organization.
2. Design of an electronic database populated by names and e-mail addresses of various groups of individuals likely to be interested in business education at Miami University and the surrounding communities.
3. Development of a marketing strategy to build interest in TeamBTE.
4. Development of a biweekly electronic newsletter, known as E-BITS, that will function as the official communications vehicle of TeamBTE.
5. Preliminary design of a Web site to provide more detailed information on BTE offerings.
6. Execution of initial fund-raising activities to support TeamBTE programs.
7. Sponsorship of guest speakers to gauge interest among members of the campus communities.

Specific results generated include quantitative assessments of the use of TeamBTE publications, tracking of faculty participation through guest column submissions and other measurements, and readership increases among on-campus and off-campus individuals. Qualitative assessments of the value of TeamBTE activities included informal group discussions among student readers plus tracking and responding to requests coming in from the entire readership on a special TeamBTE e-mail "hot line" for Q&A interaction. Representative results include:

1. Total readership of E-BITS, the TeamBTE electronic newsletter, increased from an initial base size of roughly 50 individuals to a current base of just over 1000 regular subscribers.
2. Off-campus business readership, a critical measurement of penetration into the local and regional business communities, increased from 10% of the readership base over the first month of TeamBTE operations to slightly over 25% of the readership base by the end of the first semester.

3. Readers' use of ancillary documents, attachments and informational Web sites referred to in E-BITS publications averages between 40% and 65% of the reader database for each issue. (This information is automatically tracked via "hit counters" associated with files referred to in E-BITS.)
4. BTE faculty guest column submissions have increased by a factor of 2.5 over the course of the first semester. Representation from both branch campuses ensures a diversity of topics and viewpoints.
5. E-BITS readership now includes Business and Computer Science teachers at the majority of the public and private high schools within a 30-mile radius of the two Miami University branch campuses. This segment of educators is of critical importance to the overall success of the BTE program at the University. High school Business and Computer Science teachers are extremely influential in recommending Miami's programs to prospective students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY AT MIAMI UNIVERSITY

Interest in business education plus interest in TeamBTE provides a fairly accurate indicator of students who may be inclined to enroll in an online (distance education) program or at least take a selection of their courses via this nontraditional means. Numerous discussions over the sixteen-week Fall 2001 academic semester, many originating within the TeamBTE community itself, reveal substantial interest in online learning but also a variety of potential potholes that would need to be avoided in the roll out of any new online distance education program in business. These potholes include expected and unexpected issues as outlined below.

Students indicate a concern regarding the direct equivalency of online and traditional courses. Although there does not appear to be an expectation that each upper-level course would be available in both an online and a traditional lecture format, students clearly expect that entry level and program-required courses carrying the same title would be interchangeable between the two programs. When polled to clarify this concern, students indicate that there is a definite "wait and see" attitude about online learning. By guaranteeing that they could readily apply online courses to the traditional lecture-based degree and vice-versa, the Business Technology Department could partially alleviate this concern.

The root issue of equivalency, however, goes somewhat deeper to include approval not only within the University community but also with the students' employers. A very high percentage of the students on Miami's branch campuses are already employed in either full-time or part-time positions. Many of these students receive educational reimbursement from their employers on a course by course basis. Several students have stated that their employers will not automatically approve courses taken online for reimbursement under company guidelines. Where this does occur, potential online students will be quick to select the traditional lecture-based course as an acceptable alternative. The finding that an online program might not immediately meet the guidelines of local and regional employers was new and important information. Such inputs, while essential to hear, also add to the complexity of successfully rolling out not only a full-fledged online program but also any series of online courses given as optional parts of a traditional lecture-based degree. Addressing this issue with local and regional employers is a key aspect of building the long-term viability of a new online program.

Students have also expressed concern regarding the computer expertise required to navigate online courses. Although the vast majority of potential program enrollees consider themselves to be computer literate, they also demonstrate a high anxiety level for computer usage beyond the sending and receiving of simple e-mail messages. Educating potential online students on the need for good computer skills without overstating the requirements is a critical "to do" item in the near future.

Students are concerned about the possibility that online course work may leave them feeling isolated from their fellow classmates.

Especially at the undergraduate level, socialization with one's peers is a very important part of the educational experience and many students are afraid to miss out on the opportunities afforded by physically attending class with their peers. This concern seems to originate most with the students who are or are contemplating maintaining a full-time academic schedule that would ordinarily keep them on campus for most of the day. For students who work part-time or full-time, the social interaction concern is significantly diminished. These students tend to see online learning as something that will help free up an already crowded schedule — perhaps leading to more time to spend with family and friends.

CONTINUING THE RESEARCH: REFINING A MODEL FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION IN BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY

Over the remainder of the current academic year, students, faculty, administrators and advisors associated with the Business Technology program at Miami University will be working collaboratively to develop a more succinct understanding of consumer needs and wants regarding a distance education program in Business Technology. This effort will include, in part, survey and focus group research among potential students (customers) of such a program, interviews and/or surveys of regional business owners and managers having operations that could benefit from enhanced employee training through a distance education program and a thorough investigation of potential competitive offerings within the desired market. Explicit questions to be addressed in this process include:

1. Considering input from all stakeholders in the Business Technology program, what success factors for a distance education program may be defined and implemented? Stated in other words, how might an initial distance education program in Business Technology be appropriately assessed?
2. What are the "critical few" decision-making criteria that students will use in deciding whether or not to enroll in a distance education program in Business Technology?
3. What mechanisms are likely to be most successful in educating the local and regional business communities on the advantages of supporting a distance education program?
4. How can interactions with key "feeder" high schools be optimized to establish consistent support for a distance education program in Business Technology?

PARALLEL RESEARCH EFFORTS

While the questions outlined above are under investigation, two additional research efforts are underway to further define issues relevant to a full-scale roll-out of a distance education program in Business Technology. In the first of these efforts, an extensive literature review is being conducted to identify distance education models that have been successfully applied in two-year undergraduate programs, community colleges and other academic settings of equivalent level. Second, the author is offering an online version of a popular Business Technology Economics course during the Spring 2002 semester. Every effort is being made to keep the curriculum of the online course as parallel as possible to that of the traditional lecture-based course, also taught by the author. A comparison of student achievements in both courses, made using standardized evaluation instruments, will contribute important data to the current research effort. Qualitative feedback on the new online course will also help identify points in need of refinement before more extensive online offerings are proposed.

It is anticipated that all research discussed in this paper will be completed and ready for final analysis during the summer of 2002. Formal proposals to expand the online distance education program in Business Technology will then be prepared and submitted to the University administration during the Fall 2002 semester. If approved, the program could be implemented as early as the Spring 2003 semester on both branch campuses.

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