

Chapter 35

Marketing a Blended University Program: An Action Research Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes a successful marketing effort to recruit prospective graduate students for a blended program delivered to a culturally diverse urban and suburban adult nontraditional population. An effectiveness evaluation analyzed and measured program and per class enrollment from the marketing plan from inception through the first three years. The authors detail a plan grounded in simple marketing principles and revealed through analyses based on memoranda, documents, program enrollment data, and planning and meeting notes. A collaborative team developed, implemented and analyzed how the effort increased enrollments by over a third in less than two years.

INTRODUCTION

This marketing effort promoted a blended instructional technology program in culturally diverse, metropolitan area with 6 million residents within 580 square miles. Since its founding three decades earlier, the upper-division (junior-senior level) university had offered bachelor's, master's, and certificate programs housed within four curricular

administrative units (science, business, education, and humanities) to the immediate community with the highest concentration of doctorates in the US, and to the entire region in which 11 percent of the residents held bachelor's degrees.

The 7500-student public university within a larger regional, urban four-institution system, shared two system satellite site campuses with its three other system institutions; each site campus located within one of two different high-growth areas more than 30 miles from the primary cam-

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pus was within the larger metropolitan region. The two site campuses enabled students in the high growth areas with an hour or more commute from the primary campus to attend in the institution's on-ground (courses limited to class sessions between instructor and students who are simultaneously physically present in the same classroom) courses a few minutes drive from their home or work. This mid-decade marketing effort began during period of strong regional economic and demographic growth to attract prospective students to one of the first two programs the upper division university offered online. The online courses evolved from an on-ground instructional technology program, initiated a few years earlier, to serve four burgeoning regional economic sectors: educational, biomedical, aerospace, and oil field services.

SETTING THE STAGE

The university, one of many embracing online education at the turn of this century, began offering faculty incentives, such as course releases, faculty honoraria, and development support personnel for every online course that faculty would design and develop to populate the institution's new commercial course management system (CMS). Faculty from two programs took advantage of the incentives and resources to develop online courses that comprised the first two university degree programs in which students could choose to complete course requirements online, on campus, or in any combination they chose. This case study describes marketing efforts for one of the two programs, a graduate education program.

During the initial design-development process to implement the online delivery option, a program coordinator with the Dean, who directed and managed the institution's education unit, scheduled courses for online development if the course was required for core curriculum or could fulfill the minimum elective course requirement.

Between the two marketing phases described in this case study, the Dean chose a new program coordinator as part of a planned rotation agreed upon by faculty so that no one faculty member was burdened with program marketing and course scheduling responsibilities indefinitely; the position had no budget authority or responsibilities and carried only a small stipend yet faculty still had to maintain research and teaching three courses per semester for two long semesters per year. The Dean appointed one of the two researchers as the new program coordinator from among the four tenure line positions; he continued to offer the faculty marketing agent, who was one of two full-time instructors and the other action researcher in this case study, a course release to market the online program because she brought several years experience as a successful sales and marketing representative for a major computer services corporation to the task. Several adjuncts completed the instructional technology program faculty ranks. The program coordinator during the second marketing phase implemented a team approach to build program enrollments with the eight full-time instructional technology program faculty, five of which held tenure line positions. The new program coordinator, who was one of the tenured faculty, and the instructor receiving a course release to market the program, co-authored this case study which documents how they collaboratively leveraged the blended delivery and degree and certificate curriculum options to increase enrollments.

The new program coordinator upon assuming responsibilities immediately prior to the fall semester established a faculty-team approach incorporating the eight full-time instructional technology program faculty. Program faculty had continued to develop online courses so that by the beginning of the second marketing phase, a student could complete course requirements for a Master's of Science degree in the program online although students still had to submit some forms and complete some capstone options in

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