

Quality Distance Learning Programs and Processes

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INTRODUCTION

With today's advances and capabilities in electronic communications, distance learning is a natural extension to any quality educational program that wishes to maximize its reach to qualified students. Any institution that desires to provide quality distance learning opportunities must commit to a significant investment in developing the infrastructure and leadership (Beaudoin, 2003). The University of Florida's (UF) Division of Continuing Education (DOCE) has provided that infrastructure to implement and build a quality distance learning effort along with executive education initiatives.

After the launch of several successful distance programs, the provost of the university established the position of Associate Provost for Distance, Continuing and Executive Education and provided the budget necessary to begin an organized effort toward building a quality distance learning infrastructure throughout the university (www.aa.ufl.edu/itr/pdf/DistanceEd.pdf). Ten percent of the gross revenue from those programs was distributed to an account for distance education initiatives in the provost's office. The DOCE was also added to the associate provost's responsibilities, as was executive education.

A successful leader, who had implemented early distance learning programs, was appointed to the associate provost position while dually maintaining his position as dean of one of the colleges on campus. He enlisted various directors within the existing DOCE structure to begin building the infrastructure and to advance the processes by which new programs could be developed, marketed and evaluated. The newly organized office under the associate

provost became known as the office for Distance Continuing and Executive Education (DCEE). Its mission was defined as promoting and supporting the development and application of distance learning, continuing education and executive education for the University of Florida. The office became the leading source of information, resources and recommendations for colleges and departments interested in developing non-traditional courses, seminars, certificates and programs.

Prester and Moller (2001) note that "high-quality organizations actively support performance through processes, structures and feedback systems that are aligned with organizational goals"; subsequently, one of the first efforts for DCEE staff was to create a process for developing new distance learning programs. This process started with open discussions among department/college representatives about content, timelines, staffing and budgets. The DCEE office developed expertise in marketing intelligence studies to determine if a market exists for a program prior to building it. Rather than a "field of dreams – build it and they will come" program development approach, the DCEE office took a business approach to determine if programs would have a viable market, allowing for an economic model that would provide internal or external revenue for the department and college involved. The DCEE office assisted departments and colleges in developing a business plan so that resource needs and revenue projections are understood and properly allocated. Recognizing the importance of economic viability, the DCEE office wanted to ensure that scarce resources were not depleted from other programs. A positive revenue flow was necessary for reinvestment in distance programs and distribution to other programs as well.

In further developing the program, a decision was made to provide the following additional services:

- Organizational planning (This includes providing a consultant to assist faculty in developing an idea into a viable distance learning project)
- Program management
- Financial planning
- Student administrative services (admissions, registration, ID services, etc.)
- Faculty services (training, coordination and funding)
- Administrative services (administrative processing and approvals)
- Technical services (Web support)
- Production and design support

Given the lack of fiscal and human resources available to departments and colleges to develop a well-supported online program, most departments choose to utilize all of these services. Once a program is up and running and develops its own steady state of revenue, individual departments or programs within those departments may take over some of the student services function.

Another important factor that the DCEE staff chose to consider was the importance of maintaining regional accreditation standards. All program planning and development is based on the guidelines set forth in the “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs” (2000) (www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commadap.pdf), endorsed by the university’s accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), for distance education program quality assurance.

While most of the UF’s distance learning programs are Web-based and have electronic interactions between students and faculty (e-mail, discussion boards and chat capabilities), many university stakeholders saw the importance of also providing face-to-face contact. Young (2002) accurately captured the feeling of many seasoned faculty members by noting that “hybrid [distance learning] models appear less controversial among faculty members than fully online courses have been, though some professors worry about any move away from an educational system that has worked for centuries.” Over time, faculty found that their role had expanded

beyond teacher. They also served as: facilitator, organizer, grader, mentor, role model, counselor, coach, supervisor, problem solver and liaison.

In almost every program developed at the UF, potential faculty facilitator/mentors have been identified in geographical regions located relatively close to cohorts of our distance learners. Regional activities occur, normally once a month, in which the facilitators meet face to face with students to carry out academic exercises designed to enhance the learning of the electronically delivered content. For example, the facilitators may review problem-based case studies or critique student presentations.

The most desirable ratio of distance students to facilitator/mentor faculty is approximately 12:1 (Riffie, 2003). If there are 36 students in a particular city or region of the country—defined as a distance that would require no longer than one hour drive time—then three part-time facilitators would be recruited for that city or region. These facilitators are identified through recommendations from current, or former, students and facilitators, university faculty in a particular locale, and through advertisements in professional journals.

The credentials of faculty facilitators are vetted through the faculty of the home department, and the facilitators are appointed through the university’s personnel system. The selection process involves interviews by at least two members of the administrative team of a program. During these interviews, assessment is made of teaching skills and experience, clinical experience (requisite in particular professional areas), time availability (in addition to the full-time employment they may now hold), and compatibility with the “safe learning environment” philosophy we hold for all of our programs. The candidate’s curriculum vita is reviewed and references are checked thoroughly.

Once a facilitator/mentor is selected, there is a period of initial training involving several required components:

- Shadowing of a current facilitator/faculty member
- On-site (where the facilitator/mentor is located) training by an administrator of the program
- Training at the university from which the program evolved

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