Chapter 69

Developing Successful Online Degree Programs at a Historically Black University:
Challenges and Opportunities for Broadening the Impact of HBCUs and Minority-Serving Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an overview of the process of building online degree programs from the ground up utilizing data from the process at a four-year liberal-arts institution in the United States that also has a designation as a Historically Black College (HBCU). The university has expanded both its research and global focus in the past several years, and the development of online degree programs was a natural extension of a desire to produce global leaders through the lens of a traditional liberal arts degree program. This chapter discusses some of the challenges HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs) face entering the online education marketplace, particularly the challenge of how HBCUs and MSIs can use their historic legacy and missions to distinguish themselves from competitors and meet the needs of online students.

INTRODUCTION

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), particularly those designated as Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs) have been slow to jump on the bandwagon of online learning. For MSIs investing time and resources into online education was long viewed as secondary to the traditional mission of providing a quality education and mentorship to underserved minority populations and first generation college

students. MSI campuses have also traditionally been viewed as safe spaces for African American, international, and other ethnic minority students (Wilcox, Wells, Haddad & Wilcox, 2014), highlighting the importance of campus presence. However, increasing diversity within student populations is prompting many HBCUs and MSIs to consider broadening their impact beyond regional and national boundaries. Under pressure to establish a more global presence and serve a growing non-traditional college student population, HBCUs and MSIs may find the process of entering an already crowded online space to be a challenge. Similar challenges are faced by small, liberal arts, and religiously affiliated colleges throughout the United States, for whom resources and international exposure tend to be limited. This chapter walks through the process of establishing online undergraduate and graduate degree programs step-by-step, with a specific focus on addressing challenges that may be unique to HBCUs and other Minority Serving institutions (MSIs).

This chapter presents lessons learned from the development of fully online degree programs at a small, private, and religiously-affiliated, four-year liberal arts Historically Black College and University that is a tuition-driven institution serving an overwhelmingly low-income, first-generation African American college student population. The university decided to embark upon the development of online degree programs with little knowledge of best practices in online learning, or required program infrastructure. Faculty and administration had limited previous experience with online course development with the exception of developing and pilot testing a handful of online courses a few years prior to the launch of the fully online programs. Faculty usage of the learning management system (LMS) was around 50% of faculty using the LMS to some extent ranging from posting the syllabus, using the gradebook, posting instructional materials, or administering quizzes. Faculty comfort with online learning, and therefore support for developing online degree programs was similarly split at the time of launching online programs.

The experiences documented in the present chapter may prove beneficial for college administrators at HBCUs, MSIs and similar institutions who are considering offering online degree programs at their institution, are looking to strengthen their existing programs, or wish to change some aspect of their current program. It can also be beneficial for faculty wishing to integrate technology into their courses at HBCUs or MSIs with an interest in developing hybrid or fully online courses in the future. It can also help policy makers and other stakeholders who are focused on the success of minority students to understand the challenges related to technology integration for minority-serving institutions and their students.

The university partnered initially with a third-party service to help faculty develop online courses. This strategy, though costly, allowed the university to develop its internal infrastructure over time, gain a better understanding of the needs of its student population, and build faculty buy-in by providing comprehensive instructional design and pedagogy training. The third-party company provided a range of services that could include marketing and enrollment services, but only course design, hosting, training, and tech-support were purchased. Marketing, admissions, enrollment and transcript processing were handled internally by the institution. A fully online summer session geared toward traditional students was the first program launched, focusing on general education courses that all students need to take to graduate. The university drew upon its successful evening program for non-traditional students as the foundation for initial expansion into fully online programs. Curriculum already in place for non-traditional evening students was translated into the online environment. Similarly, the university's MBA program was an evening and weekend program that attracted locals within an approximate 30-mile driving range. The MBA program was simultaneously launched as the first fully online graduate degree program along with the two undergraduate programs. The goal of the institution was to successfully enroll around 25 students into the new programs to reach break-even status. The first year saw an enrollment of close to

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