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Developing a New Distance Learning Program In Business Technology at Miami University

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges associated with developing a new online, distance learning program in Business Technology on two branch campuses of Miami University in Middletown and Hamilton, Ohio. Challenges and potential trouble spots for the new program are identified. The knowledge gained, combined with an ongoing dialog with student learners, provides the foundation on which to build the new online Business Technology program.

INTRODUCTION

Developing a progressive online or distance learning program at the undergraduate level requires a multifaceted effort accompanied by thorough coordination. The tasks involved center on understanding the needs of the student customer base, the talents and expectations of the faculty and the financial and/or administrative requirements of the parent college or university. Whether accomplished by a small nucleus of dedicated faculty members or by a department as a whole, each task is critically important to both the initial and the ongoing success of a new online academic offering. The challenges noted here, while used to frame the development of a new online distance education program in Business Technology, are indicative of those to be found in the majority of undergraduate academic programs.

STUDENT INTEREST AND CONCERN REGARDING ONLINE BUSINESS EDUCATION

Extensive discussions with current Miami University BTE students, held during the Fall 2001 academic semester, reveal substantial interest in online learning. Also evident are a variety of student-identified trouble spots that should be avoided in the roll out of any new online distance education program in business:

- Students indicate a concern regarding the direct equivalency of online and traditional courses. Since many students receive educational reimbursement from their employers, students note that employers must recognize the online courses as being equivalent to traditional courses covering the same material.
- Students express concern regarding the computer expertise required for online courses. Although the majority of potential program enrollees consider themselves to be computer literate, many also demonstrate a high anxiety level for computer usage.
- 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 attending class with their peers.

To be successful, an online undergraduate program in business must address these student concerns. Program enrollments on Miami University's branch campuses generally respond to two driving forces — advertising of programs across the geographic region served by the campuses and word of mouth by students already enrolled in the programs. Establishing success among students already on campus is a clear driver for the future of a new online program.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

A wide variety of universities offer online programs as alternatives to their traditional lecture-based programs or offer online undergraduate education exclusively. The literature base on such programs is quite good, containing a substantial number of references on general program content, program assessment, ideas for assignments and the logistics of handling programs when face-to-face contact with students is limited or nonexistent. What is much harder to find in the literature, however, are specific studies examining the development of online programs from scratch. Many authors allude to the challenges associated with starting up such programs but the actual body of literature discussing this aspect of program development is thin.

The process of offering online or distance education courses and programs continues to evolve with time. An intriguing thirty-year summary of some of the major changes that have occurred is provided by Greville Rumble, writing from The Open University in the United Kingdom (Rumble, 2001). Rumble observes that, during this time period, five fundamental philosophical changes have occurred. These changes have not necessarily occurred either independently or sequentially, but together constitute the basis for a huge shift in approach to distance education programs.

- Technological changes that have allowed distance education to move from purely a correspondence-based program through several intermediate multi-media stages to the present process of fully electronic two-way communications between program faculty, administrators and students.
- Philosophical and pedagogical changes that have enabled educators to capitalize on two-way communications to restore some of the personal interactions lost in typical distance education programs as compared to traditional classroom programs.
- Growing acceptance of distance education programs across the public and academic communities that has resulted in strong expansion of all types of distance learning.
- Improving perceptions of the value of a distance education degree that have encouraged more individual learners to consider this educational option.
- Evolution in education thought from a bureaucratic or modernist perspective to a post-modernist perspective that values students as the consumers of educational services.

Other research exploring pathways that lead from early forms of distance education to the online program explosion occurring today includes that of Anne-Marie Brinsmead, Gregory Lang and Lee McTavish (1999). Their work takes a three faceted approach for integrating new online program or course offerings into an existing curriculum. First, they advocate creating a well-staffed "learner care center" that is designed to make the technologies required for online learning work flawlessly for the student. Second, the authors advocate an approach that they call "multiple touch points" for learners, based on blending e-mail and Web-based delivery of materials with chat rooms and other forms of "real time" communications. Finally, the authors describe the importance of "personalization" in establishing online course work. Recognizing that many online learners will be taking courses using that medium specifically because they need more flexibility than that which is offered in traditional classroom settings, the authors stress the importance of allowing customization to occur between learners and educators within the general confines of the curriculum.

As distance education programs have converted more fully to online educational programs, the technology infrastructure necessary to maintain services at an acceptable level has become cost prohibitive for many institutions. According to an analysis by Danielle Svetcov, this "funding gap" results in two interrelated scenarios (Svetcov, 2000). First, attrition rates among online schools tend to be higher than for their traditional counterparts. This makes planning more difficult and results in funding instabilities. Second, the inability of many public and private educational institutions to solve the funding dilemma has opened the door for commercial funding to play a role in the educational process. While an influx of fresh capital may be exactly what an ailing institution needs, it also can create a potentially controversial situation regarding the roles and responsibilities of the university in society today.

DEVELOPING ONLINE COURSES: "FROM SCRATCH" VS. "MODIFIED TRADITIONAL"

While it may quickly be established that ideal online courses offered as part of a new program in Business Technology would equal their traditional lecture-based counterparts in terms of the materials taught, the work required of students and the general rigor of the instructional process, there are several distinctly different ways that such courses could be developed. The two most logical extremes include modifying lecture-based courses to "fit" within the different learning environment created by offering the courses online and developing courses entirely from scratch against a set of established requirements. Researchers Martin Westhead and Elspeth Minty (1998), Jacquelyn Tulloch (1996) and Charles Miller Jr. (1999) all provide discussions of how the former approach may be applied in an online program. Contrasting research, conducted by Heidi Schweizer (1999) and by Timothy Collins and Sarah Dewees (2001), show how the latter approach can provide a preferable framework on which to build a viable distance education program. It is imperative to note, however, that neither approach in its purest form is suitable in all cases. Instructors, particularly those with prior online teaching experience, are likely to find that some form of "hybridization" in which the merits of both approaches are valued will generally give superior results.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPING AN ONLINE BUSINESS PROGRAM

Collecting the observations, challenges watch-outs and suggestions outlined throughout the preceding sections, it is possible to develop a road map of the steps necessary to bring an online Business Technology program into reality at Miami University. Each of the following will play a key role in the development of a successful program and must be kept top-of-mind.

- Develop a vision that is far-reaching enough to keep up with the speed of change experienced in online education today.
- Develop and defend a position not only on staffing the program appropriately, but also on generating the financial and administrative support necessary for it to function.
- Break the paradigm of simply moving existing courses from the classroom to the Internet by designing coursework, technical infrastructures and learning communities specifically for online learners.
- Focus on the dual challenge of maintaining the high academic standards and integrity of the institution while meeting the needs of a new and growing customer base.

The BTE Department at Miami University has chosen to follow a mild "hybridization" approach when constructing new courses for the distance education program. A substantial portion of the new online courses will adhere closely to the spirit of the subject matter offered in traditional classroom-based courses of the same name and course number. These courses will still take advantage of modern online teaching techniques such as Internet discussion groups, online assignments and evaluations and multimedia presentations stored online for student retrieval. In general, these courses will consist of entry-level offerings to provide students who may be apprehensive about online learning with a way to try the program without substantial risk. Mid- and upper-level courses will be designed primarily from scratch to reflect the goal of offering subject matter that is specifically tailored to take the best advantage of an online learning environment. More extensive use of computer networks for basic communications and more reliance on electronic teaching modules such as virtual tours of businesses, taped guest speakers and online projects will be stressed.

Throughout the new curriculum, personalization of learning goals, course procedures and specific assignments will help build interest among students. As a watch-out, such efforts can place an additional burden on instructors to be certain that all students in a given course are evaluated equitably. Nevertheless, personalization of courses to meet student needs has the potential of also improving students' desire to learn, plus eliminating a portion of the isolation felt by some students when studying "on their own" in an online environment.

CONCLUSIONS

To the extent that the ongoing changes relevant to online education are well understood, the multifaceted task of developing a solid distance education program at the undergraduate level becomes clearer. On the branch campuses of Miami University, the new online program in Business Technology is progressing through the University's approval process. The initial focus of the program will be on a revised Marketing program with an anticipated rollout date of Fall 2003. A new program offering in E-Business will follow shortly thereafter, depending on the availability of resources.

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