

Chapter 10

Developing a Quality Distance Learning Program in a Comprehensive Community College

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges offer a variety of distance learning opportunities and continue to invest in technologies that better serve their students. This case study focuses on the experiences of Big State Community College and its progression from a few faculty teaching online courses to a distance learning program that supports greater than 25% of institutional enrollments. It explores the challenges of ensuring that Big State Community College's evolving distance learning program promotes student success and is of a quality that reflects positively on the institution.

BACKGROUND

Distance learning continues to evolve as an instructional delivery system in postsecondary education. In a study conducted by the Instructional Technology Council in 2008 of community colleges within its membership, enrollments in distance

education in 2007 had grown 11.3% from 2006, while traditional campus enrollments saw less than a 2% growth (ITC, 2008). Colleges are experiencing changes in patterns of students enrollments, with some seeing 25% of their students enrolled in distance learning courses. This increase in growth has occurred since online courses became a viable instructional reality in early 2000.

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Community colleges are comprehensive organizations with traditional academic cultures. Within their cultures, academic institutions are not prepared for distance education, which has radically changed higher education (Behr, 1999). Integrating a mode of instruction that was very different from traditional methods, without incorporating it into the college's mission and strategic plan led to uncertainty of its importance. Distance learning programs can help institutions meet their educational goals. "Implementing such a program affects all aspects of the traditional system and requires time, people, funding, and careful planning by the people and community it will serve" (Stumpf, McCrimon, & David, 2005, 359-360).

Important to the establishment of successful and quality distance learning programs at community colleges is their Institutional Research offices. The roles these offices serve include collecting, analyzing and reporting data from multiple stakeholders within the institution and externally, as well as they are instrumental to institutional effectiveness. The information they provide enables key administrators to make data-driven decisions in institutional planning and policy development. Recognizing that distance learning does affect how students are identified, faculty workload is calculated and reported, contact hours are generated and reported, and student participation patterns, the importance of the roles of institutional researchers cannot be underestimated.

This case study focuses on the experiences of Big State Community College and its progression from a few faculty teaching online courses to a distance learning program that supports greater than 25% of institutional enrollments. It will explore the challenges of ensuring that Big State Community College's evolving distance learning program promotes student success and is of a quality that reflects positively on the institution. A comparison to the five pillars of quality of distance learning programs established by the Sloan Consortium will be discussed, as well as how institutional research offices can contribute to

improved decision-making through the collection, assessment and reporting of distance learning data to institutional decision makers.

Community colleges offer a variety of distance learning opportunities and continue to invest in technologies that better serve their students. Distance learning is defined as instruction that occurs where either time or geographical location or both, separate the instructor and students (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). Curran (2008) provided further distinction to the definition by adding that student and faculty interactions and communications occur through Internet-based technologies. A 2008 study conducted by the Instructional Technology Council found that:

The student demand for distance education courses at community colleges continues to grow. The rate of growth for distance education (an 11 percent increase for 2006-2007) far outpaced the growth rate for traditional enrollments. Seventy percent of the respondents reported that student demand exceeds current class offerings. The percentages for enrollment growth and student demand have remained consistent during the past four years of survey data. (ITC, 2008, p. 9)

Big State Community College is a large, rural-serving comprehensive community college located in the southwestern portion of the state of Texas. In 2010, student enrollments grew to over 10,000. Their service area is geographically dispersed and predominantly rural. Big State Community College has a large percentage of full time faculty.

Big State Community College has been in the distance learning business for over a decade. Up until late 2006, distance learning operated in silos across the institution, with minimal oversight, training and support available to faculty and students. This resulted in inconsistent experiences for students enrolled and frustrated faculty. Distance learning began to be recognized as a form of legitimate instruction, and the administration

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