

Chapter 15

Vision and Strategy for Developing a Successful Online Degree Program on a Shoestring Budget

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are rich in history, culture, resources, and opportunities. This case study explains the thought processes of administrators and faculty at one HBCU as they respond to an institutional initiative to increase student enrollments during an economic downturn. Although online learning opportunities offer potential for increasing student enrollments and university income, this approach generates a series of complex questions within the College of Education where resources are limited. Questions relate to the need for, and potential impact of, online learning; related pressures and paradigms in higher education; technology and management concerns; and faculty perspectives and preparation. This chapter considers how to overcome barriers to revive and implement an online degree program with these issues in mind.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Dr. Elise Renae was the Department Chair of Educational Leadership at State University; and a Professor of Curriculum Design and Instructional Leadership, and Educational Leadership. She had nine years of curriculum design experience while on faculty, and five years administrative experience as Department Chair. She was proud of State University, a Carnegie classified, Doctoral/Research Intensive, public institution of higher learning. It was ranked among the top 100 producers of minority graduate and professional degrees in 2008-2009, and currently serves more than 8,000 traditional and non-traditional students. One of the largest of its kind in the Southern United States, the university is situated on a 188-acre, urban campus. As with many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), State University was established as a teaching institute for the purpose of educating Black Americans, although open to all students.

Elise felt obligated to support University initiatives while also developing competent faculty and student leaders for 21st Century, K-12 schools. Her department offered graduate preparation for students who would one day serve in key leadership positions in education. These academic programs encouraged scholarly research, theory advancement, and informed practice. Maintaining rigor was important but it seemed to come at a cost to Elise and to her faculty.

Like Elise, her faculty demonstrated strong support for the institution's values. Even so, they seemed consistently overwhelmed with heavy teaching loads, service obligations, and accelerating demands for scholarship during the tenure and promotion process. Faculty were vocal about heavy workloads as a barrier in the promotion and tenure process, and morale was weakening as student enrollment rates dropped.

The State University College of Education and Human Services, where Elise worked, was the institution's anchor college. In the economic downturn it became one of six colleges to be reorganized due to reduced student enrollments. The institution responded by reducing course sections, degree programs and the hiring of faculty and staff. Reductions and reorganizations were widespread across the United States, particularly at non-profit institutions like this one (Beasley, 2010).

Federal and State funding agencies were awarding fewer grants than in the past; so as a whole, the institution had fewer funds than in previous years, on which to operate. The burden shifted to students who paid far more tuition than any previous class. The College wanted to maintain academic rigor although faculty and staff had worked for five years without pay raises, and there was little relief in sight. More cuts were included in the 2010-2011 fiscal budget, as announced during the spring, College retreat. Creating meaningful change would prove quite a challenge for the administrators at State University, and "thinking outside the box" of traditional academic practices would prove important.

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