

Chapter 13

An Online Initiative Goes Viral

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB) growth initiative to increase access and enrollment in part through online education prompted its School of Business (BUS) to examine its current approach to this mode of instruction. The faculty-led Undergraduate Curriculum Committee in the school encouraged a more strategic approach than was previously employed. Desire to remain competitive in the higher education arena made administration eager to woo new students and better serve current ones. The BUS is keenly aware that students increasingly demand flexibility in attending classes and are willing to shop around for it. This case describes the implementation of online instruction at UAB School of Business yielding a five-fold increase in online courses in just three years with much larger gains in credit hour production than their traditional programs realized. Moreover, the case describes major accomplishments, challenges encountered, lessons learned, and solutions from instructional design and project management perspectives.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (UA) established an extension center in Birmingham in 1936 to serve the needs of the booming metropolis, which became an autonomous university in 1969—UAB. The institution earned accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and joined UA and the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) to form the University of Alabama System that same year (About UAB, n.d.).

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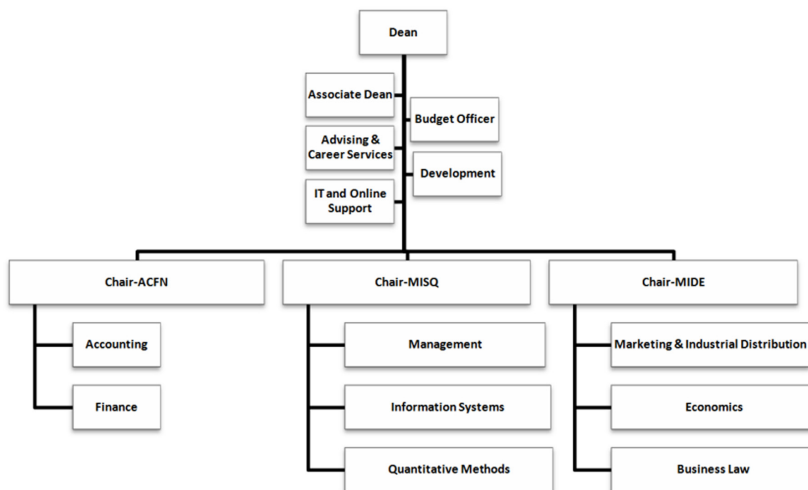
In the forty three years since, UAB has emerged as a world-renowned major research university and health system. It is “Alabama’s largest single-site employer with an annual economic impact exceeding \$5 billion” (About UAB, n.d., para. 6). The School of Business (BUS) was established at UAB in 1971.

Sixty full-time faculty and 38 administrative and support staff contribute to the academic and daily operations of the school’s three academic departments—Accounting and Finance (ACFN), Management, Information Systems, and Quantitative Methods (MISQ), Marketing, Industrial Distribution, and Economics (MIDE)—and the dean’s office. Administration includes the dean, associate dean, budget officer, three department chairs, and support staff. Governance is shared among administration and faculty. See the BUS organizational chart (Figure 1).

Currently, there are 1,799 undergraduate students completing undergraduate degrees in the following programs: Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Industrial Distribution, Economics, Management, and Information Systems, and 357 graduate students earning master’s degrees in Business Administration, Information Systems, and Accounting (Jack, 2012). The first online program—Bachelor in Accounting and Bridge program—launched summer 2012, followed by the Master of Accounting which launched fall 2012. The Bachelor of Science in Information Systems and Master of Science in Management Information Systems launch fall 2013.

Like the private sector, public entities did not escape the economic downturn of 2007-2008 unscathed. Educational institutions suffered losses from proration, and UAB was no different. Since tuition increases could offset these deficits in revenue only in part, placing the proverbial “seats in the seats” became ever critical.

Figure 1. UAB School of Business organizational chart (adapted from the UAB School of Business school-wide meeting, November 9, 2012. Used with permission.)



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