Quality and Scaling in Online Degree Programs

By Kenneth E. Hartman & Kristen Betts

In their fifth annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education, the Sloan Consortium reported that nearly 60% of nearly 4500 institutions surveyed believe that online learning was critical to the long-term strategy for their institution (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Yet, a closer examination of the author's findings show that much of the expected future growth in online learning will most likely come from "those institutions that are currently the most engaged" in online learning, with approximately one-third of higher education institutions accounting for three-quarters of all online enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

In other words, and according to the Sloan Consortium, those institutions who are already offering online degree programs will need to find ways to offer new online programs and to grow existing ones.

For many of the for-profit institutions offering online programs, the task of adding new programs and/or scaling existing programs is just a matter of time and money. They have designed a system whereby new online programs are approved in a short-period by senior management based on a marketing and cost-analysis metric, and a standardized set of courses are developed and delivered in a uniformed manner by mostly adjunct instructors. Scaling, under this model, is relatively efficient and cost effective.

Non-profit (public and private) institutions, on the other hand, have

> *Non-profits must maintain the highest level of academic quality, while teaching the maximum number of online students.*

historically operated under a different model of offering online programs. Typically, their model is very decentralized, often down to the academic department-level, and relies on individual instructors to develop online courses that meet their standard of academic excellence and their style of delivery. On top of this, some non-profit institutions have other issues (i.e., faculty senates, intellectual property, accreditation, tenure, and other "academic freedom" issues) which often leads to a less efficient and less cost effective online "bouquet business", whereby scaling becomes a *MAJOR* challenge.

Implementing procedures for quality

If the non-profits want to insure that online learning is critical to the long-term strategy of their institution, they must implement those procedures and methods which enable them to maintain the highest level of academic quality, while teaching the maximum number of online students. This can and is being successfully done by number non-profit institutions, including Drexel University's School of Education (SoE).

Drexel's SoE has gone from no online degree programs in 2003-04 to over 10 fully online degrees in 2007-2008. During that period, tuition revenue has grown from less than $2 million in FY03 to nearly $10 million dollars in FY08. The number of fully online students (paying over $625 per quarter credit) has grown from fewer than 150 in AY03-04 to nearly 600 in AY07-08.

One of the fastest growing programs in Drexel's SoE, also the first program offered fully online in the SoE, is the Master of Science in Higher Education (MSHE) Program. The online MSHE Program was launched in fall 2005 with its first cohort of 26 students. In fall 2008, the MSHE Program enrolled 178 students with projections to matriculate approximately 200 students in spring 2009. MSHE students are located in over 30

DISTANCE education
Report

Cover...from page 1

states and five countries. The three-year overall retention rate is 83% and 4% of the students who have withdrawn enrolled in other Drexel University degree programs.

The program's rapid growth can be attributed to several key elements; including, a uniform templates for all MSHE courses in Blackboard and syllabi for easy navigation from quarter to quarter; an engaging and outcomes-based curriculum; clear teaching standards and expectations; structured and regular student-faculty interaction through instruction and programming (e.g., student orientation, quarterly events, etc.); and a multidimensional method for measuring the quality and effectiveness of the program. The MSHE Program has also developed and integrated a First-Year Online Graduate Experience Program to engage and connect newly matriculated students to Drexel University in their first two quarters of enrollment.

Likewise, University of Illinois at Springfield has been able to grow and scale its online undergraduate degree in business administration, from its inception with 35 students in Fall 2006 to 127 students in Spring 2009, while maintaining the high quality standards set forth by its accrediting organization (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). Ray Schroeder, Director of Technology-Enhanced Learning, University of Illinois at Springfield, credits his institution's successful scaling efforts to high quality courses that encourage student engagement, and a network of "program coordinators" who maintain close contact with students throughout their academic career at UIS. The coordinators interact often with students to answer questions, provide helpful advice, and ensure they are making successful progress in the online program.

Eduventures (2008) conducted phone interviews with multiple institutions to ascertain the extent to which institutional practices and accreditation requirements affected an institutions ability to scale its online degree programs and found that the recruitment and hiring of full-time faculty (a key factor in accreditation approval) was often the most difficult challenge. Eduventures also conducted a series of phone interviews with executive personnel at three major accrediting organizations (AACSB, ABET, and CCNE), and found that accrediting bodies "unanimously indicate that they view online programs no differently than on-campus programs."

Institutions seeking to grow their online courses and/or degree programs, while at the same time maintaining the quality achieved in its face-to-face courses, should consider the following:

- *Team Teaching:* Use senior/full-time faculty as "mentor instructors", whereby they design, moderate and evaluate the course, but multiple sections are taught by adjunct faculty

- *Faculty orientation:* all newly hired instructors should be required to attend (review faculty guidelines, policies, and expectations)

- *Instructor shadowing program:* newly hired faculty shadow faculty currently teaching in an online course for several weeks up to one quarter/semester prior to teaching online

- *Instructor mentoring program:* using senior/full-time faculty as "mentor instructors", whereby they design, moderate and evaluate the course, but multiple sections are taught by adjunct faculty

- *Professional development:* provide faculty with opportunities to participate online or on-campus in training relating to pedagogy, technology, assessment, etc.

Institutional Sharing of OpenCourseWare Across National Boundaries: A Case Study and Historical First in Higher Education

By Gary W. Matkin, Ph.D., dean of continuing education at the University of California, Irvine

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) and Fundacão Getulio Vargas (FGV), an institution of higher education and one of the largest providers of online distance education in Brazil, have cooperated in the co-development, sharing, and cross-publishing of OpenCourseWare (OCW)—offering perhaps the first successful exchanges of course material in the OCW movement. Incorporating several innovations, this partnership offers important lessons as the OCW movement seeks to expand its impact beyond individual users/self-learners to systems of institutional cooperation.

The Partnership.

UCI has had a decade-long partnership with FGV serving Brazilian executives who complete an FGV MBA program with a two-week capstone course in American business practices, conducted on the UCI campus. Recognizing a gap in its educational offering, FGV licensed UCI's online Certificate Program in Project Management, a program recognized by the Project Management Institute (PMI®) as covering the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). UCI gave FGV the online course material and FGV then translated it into Portuguese, and "localized" it for the Brazilian experience, replacing, for instance, case studies based on U.S. corporations with similar studies from Brazilian companies. The Brazilian version of UCI's courses is delivered to FGV students and instructed by Portuguese-speaking UCI-approved instructors.

Students receive UCI course credit, a UCI Certificate in Project Management, are qualified to sit for the PMI® examination to become a Project Management Professional (PMP®), and gain credit toward their FGV MBA degree.

This innovative partnership served

> *Translating and localizing course materials are significant undertakings and are achieved at considerable cost, sometimes exceeding the development costs of the original material.*

to inspire further experimentation. FGV noted UCI's growing presence in the OCW movement and agreed to cross-link two courses with UCI's OCW site: the translated version of UCI's "Introduction to Human Resources Management" and its own "Ethics" course. These courses have since been augmented on UCI's OCW site by two more FGV courses. As a result of the initial response to these courses, FGV decided to create its own OCW presence and joined the OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC). It launched a public relations campaign in Brazil to announce these OCW efforts and received an incredibly strong response. Brazil's most recognized newspaper, O Globo, featured the story about these "free" courses, driving a significant amount of Web traffic to both the UCI and FGV OCW Web sites. UCI supported FGV's campaign by launching its own public relations initiative in the U.S. and received over

20,000 visits to its OCW site in the first ten days after the media picked up the story, 16,000 of which were from Brazil and 4,000 of which were from the U.S. FGV has received over 173,000 visits to its courses since its launch in June of 2008.

The story of this experiment doesn't end with these impressive statistics. Non-matriculated students began asking FGV how they could take the courses, resulting in FGV's deciding to amend its open "Ethics" course to include some self tests and exercises to measure at least some degree of learning. Those who registered for the course (still without paying any fee) and passed the tests were able to print out a non-credit certificate of completion. Over 18,000 students have received the certificate of completion since the courses were made available in the final quarter of 2008.

Innovations and Benefits.

Embedded in this simple story are a number of "firsts."

1. This partnership was one of equal contributions right from the beginning. UCI provided FGV original content for its Project Management Certificate Program and later introduced it to the OCW world. FGV provided the translation and localization of the original content—at production values that, in many ways, exceeded those of UCI's original material. FGV shared with UCI its original material, which was posted on the UCI site, so there was clearly a reciprocal nature to the relationship.

2. It is clear that translating and localizing course materials are significant

New Ideas for Online Orientation

At one time, the Center for Distance Learning (CDL) at Empire State College had a good online orientation. The orientation offered students an introduction to the CDL, college staff, policies, the course management system, and other students, and it served as a stand-alone resource.

But the CDL wanted to improve its offerings to include more interactive tools, with the ability to confirm and track student completion of orientation, utilize the Datatel records management system to connect orientation to the mentor/advisor assignment process, include real pictures of Empire State College buildings and people, and link out to helpful resources.

So, coinciding with the move to the Angle course management system in January 2007, the CDL saw the opportunity to upgrade its online orientation. Now, orientation is required of all online students and is connected to the admissions process, the computer usage policy agreement, the student technology tutorial, and the mentor/advisor assignment process. The system offers more opportunities to engage the students, and the upgrade created a "warmer" look and feel to the orientation and its content.

Karen LaBarge, coordinator of student services for the CDL, and Donna Carey, assistant to the dean at the CDL, collaborated on a presentation on the upgrade they gave at a recent Sloan-C International Conference on Online Learning. LaBarge recently sat down with DER to discuss the expansion of Empire State College's online orientation.

DER: What were some of the factors that led to your desire to "upgrade" your orientation?

Karen LaBarge: Student Services

facilitates the online orientation at the Center for Distance Learning (CDL). We were looking for ways to draw stronger connections between the students and the college upon application to CDL, as well as incorporate academic resources that would support student success throughout their college career. When we moved to the Angel course management system in 2007, and added a Director of Academic Support

---

The system offers more opportunities to engage the students, and the upgrade created a "warmer" look and feel to the orientation and its content.

---

the same year, we saw the opportunity to make use of the technology that was available to us, as well as take some proactive measures to increase student engagement.

DER: What are some of the benefits of requiring orientation for your online students? Is it required only for online students, or do traditional students use part of your new orientation?

KL: One of the major benefits is that we can now ensure that students are informed about the college and its policies, as well as where to find this information when needed. Previously, we could only encourage students to do the orientation, and hope for the best. But when we were able to use the technology to our advantage, we were able to link the orientation to things that would help not only our student success rate, but our internal processes, as well.

Donna Carey, Assistant to the Dean at CDL (and co-presenter of this workshop at the Sloan Conference), took the lead on adding the Computer Usage Policy and Student Tech. Tutorial to the required segments of the orientation. She also made the orientation a required piece of the admissions process.

DER: How does orientation relate to the admissions process?

KL: Our orientation is now an integral part of our admissions process—a student cannot complete the admissions process without completing orientation; this was not the case in the past. Students need to complete the orientation before they are assigned a mentor/advisor and are eligible to enroll in courses.

Students are placed in Retention/Group Space upon completion of orientation, and before officially completing the admissions process. Here, students can connect with both new and returning students, as well as college staff (mentors/advisors, faculty, professional staff and alumni) to get questions answered, and for support and encouragement.

DER: Do you have quantitative or anecdotal evidence that would suggest that retention is positively impacted by orientation efforts?

KAL: Anecdotally, we have had a great deal of participation by students in the retention/group space. There seems to be a greater sense of, "Oh, even though this is online, there are real people there to help me." I think it has helped to minimize the fears that our students (who are primarily adults) have when returning to or starting college. Something that has also helped signifi-

The Power of Residency in an Online Program

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

Most online programs tout the ability of students to complete their studies without ever setting foot on campus. But for many of the online programs at Seton Hall University's SetonWorldWide Online division, coming to campus for a residency is the order of the day.

James Howard is the program director for the SetonWorldWide Online Graduate Certificate in Healthcare Administration. He explains that the residencies in this program and in the online human resources program targeted to law enforcement officers offer much in the way of skill-building and relationship development that cannot occur any way but face-to-face.

The residency works particularly well with these programs as they operate on the cohort system, with each group admitted and expected to work their way through the program together. Howard notes that the cohorts in these programs are considered "learning teams," and they are comprised of a very diverse group of professionals in a given field. Since they will be spending the next two years working together online, the foundation of their relationship is of critical importance. Building these relationships begins with the orientation residency.

Building a Residency

Howard explains that the typical online program for SetonWorldWide involves two to three residencies, typically one as an orientation, one at the midpoint, and one at which the students can present their final capstone research and attend graduation. These residencies are scheduled for Friday through Sunday. Students attend regardless of their current location,

coming in from across the U.S. (including Alaska), the Caribbean, and Saudi Arabia.

The orientation residency is possibly the most important residency of those that take place. Howard notes that most of the professionals in the programs are very busy in their daily lives; "they have families and jobs that

---

A certain esprit de corps develops, and students will check in with one another if someone goes silent for a period of days. This makes the second residency a very special one.

---

keep them tasked to the max," he says. Typically, the students will all be strangers to one another, unless there are a couple of students who know one another from work. Therefore, introductions and the formation of relationships are of paramount importance.

The residencies are typically held at a hotel near the nearest airport, since the campus does not always have adequate housing and meeting space to host an entire program cohort. Students are bussed to the campus for an online and technology orientation, but otherwise most events are held at the hosting hotel.

The orientation begins Friday at noon with a reception to allow students and faculty to make their initial introductions. This day also includes time to meet with the bursar and other campus representatives to arrange for payment, financial aid, and the like. The day concludes with a dinner that allows the conversations with peers and faculty to

continue. "They need to leave understanding that they are not in this alone," says Howard.

Saturday is the major skill-building day. Howard notes that a librarian comes in to give a talk on online research, a skill that is often new to the students. "Their idea of research is spending the weekend in the library with the card catalog," he says. The librarian can introduce the students to the many online research options that are available.

This day also includes the on-campus technology orientation. Howard explains that this technology orientation instructs the students on what technology they will need to complete courses successfully and also shows them the first course they will take so they can get comfortable with the appearance and with navigating. They are asked to do some online research and make a posting to the course site, just so they leave the orientation with a high degree of familiarity with the online environment in which they will be working.

The orientation has changed over the years as students' skills have changed. Those who don't already have these baseline competencies develop them rapidly. "It is amazing how quickly they pick things up when they are working in a team," he says.

The students leave the orientation residency and return home to begin their work, and they are generally in contact with one another every day. Howard explains that these programs typically require the student to spend 20 to 25 hours every week working on coursework, and it becomes routine to come home from work every day and immediately check in to contribute to a discussion or receive messages. Howard

cantly is that our staff (namely, Paul Christiana) has made a conscious effort to follow-up with students who have not completed the orientation, and make sure that they do not fall through the cracks. We also have a special e-mail account and "Ask a Question" area dedicated to addressing student questions while they navigate the orientation—this way, if a student gets stuck, there is a lesser chance that they will give up. The academic support area has been hosting question and answer sessions on various academic topics (using Elluminate) in the group space, and they report a high participation rate. Our sense is that more students are completing the orientation and continuing on through enrollment. We hope to have some quantitative date as the groups move further along

in their programs. We believe that meeting the students early on, offering support and contacts, and continuing to offer academic resources as they move forward will have a positive impact on retention.

DER: How are students responding to this orientation program?

KL: Students are responding well to the revised orientation, especially to the academic support tools and the group space. We have heard fewer complaints and questions about the content and format of the orientation, which means fewer Student Services issues, and happier students.

DER: If cost, logistics, and overhead were not factors, what would your ideal online orientation look like? How much of this do you think is possible in the real world?

KL: While the orientation has been improved and has been working well, it is still quite text-heavy, and the information can be overwhelming to students. Beyond moving to more animation and audio, I would really like to look into Selective Release of the orientation tasks. Currently, students can complete the orientation in one day, usually within a couple of hours. I like the idea of slowing down the pace a bit so that they have a better chance of absorbing all of the information—possibly make the orientation similar to a course. I would also like to see the orientation become more interactive by adding a Second Life activity to the orientation itself, or to the group space. There is a very good possibility that we could implement both ideas in the future. ●

---

says that there is a certain esprit de corps that develops, and students will check in with one another if someone goes silent for a period of days. This makes the second residency a very special one.

"We don't see them for a year, and it is like homecoming," he says. "You can see the closeness of their relationships; you can see the intellectual growth over the course of the year." At this orientation, the students receive information about the year-end literature review capstone project that they will present at the third residency, which is also graduation. Graduation is held with the campus-based students; "we make no distinction between online and campus students," Howard says.

The Advantages of Residency

Howard sees many advantages to requiring students to return to campus for the residencies. First is bonding, with the "face-to-face connections with faculty" and other students. He also notes that the relationships the students form with one another will form the basis of a professional networking relationship.

"It is good to have a tie to bricks and mortar," Howard says. By requiring the students to return periodically to campus, the faculty can "imbue them with the objectives of the university [and] see the rigor of their contributions," Howard says. By keeping the students linked to the university, it is also easier to keep the cohort on track to graduation.

This culture of support also allows the programs to require a great deal of

effort from the students. "We don't hold hands; the academic requirements are more rigorous than most on-ground programs," he says. And the residencies have proven so valuable that some of the programs have expanded them to cover three days to up to one week each.

These residencies have grown so valuable that students are loathe to miss them, and the university allows few exceptions. He tells of one student who came from central Alaska, taking a bush plane for five hours just to catch a commercial flight to take her to New Jersey.

Overall, the residency requirements have proven to be a value-added part of the online programs, and one that sets them apart. "It is great to have a relationship where they see us as a four-wall institution," concludes Howard. ●

undertakings and are achieved at considerable cost, sometimes exceeding the development costs of the original material. Thus, at least some of the assumptions about the ease and cost-effectiveness of sharing OCW need to be examined. Also, it is clear that translation and localization are absolutely critical to the institutional use of OCW—the receiving institution needs to "own" the product before it can be used effectively and with impact on its own students and teachers.

3. The republishing and sharing of OCW content on multiple Web sites, particularly when supported by public relations and media exposure, can have significant benefits. The individual "brands" can be preserved as the sharing occurs and the parties can also publicly celebrate their collaboration.

4. Finally, it is clear from the FGV experience that with the printed certificate of completion, users of OCW will respond to even simple incentives to engage with the material in meaningful ways.

Lessons Learned.

Besides discovering the benefits of this set of experiments and the developing relationship between UCI and FGV, this experience offers other lessons.

1. Developing the institutional relationship took time and effort. This OCW effort was more than one year in the making and was built on a relationship that had existed for more than ten years.

2. Differing educational conventions need to be addressed. For instance, Brazilian students responded positively to content delivered online using, in just one example, an animated Sigmund Freud character to discuss issues in human resources. This convention isn't typical in U.S. academia.

3. The adoption of open content licenses such as the Creative Commons license is not well understood or accepted in some countries, at least not yet.

4. Passing materials between different technological platforms can be difficult, often requiring some kind of exchange of technology.

5. Marketing and public relations are rarely confined geographically and, therefore, need to be coordinated across national boundaries. Since media exposure is so time-dependent, coordination can maximize exposure. For instance, FGV led the press initiative in launching the first part of the campaign in Brazil, followed by release of the information by UCI to the U.S. national news media.

6. Finally, OCW can drive awareness and exposure for fee-based business. The fee based programs of both UCI and FGV benefitted from the exposure brought by its OCW courses.

Conclusion

The OCW movement is gathering momentum and stories like the one told above are propelling it forward at

---

- ***Integrate engagement and community development opportunities into course development*** (e.g., discussion boards, group assignments, guest speakers, etc.)
- ***Integrate engagement and community development opportunities into programming*** (e.g., First-Year Online Experience Program, online speakers series, institutional events, etc.)
- ***Integrate student support services into courses and programming*** so students are familiar with available services

- ***Provide multiple communication formats*** for students to meet/connect with academic advisors (teleconferences, email, IM Chat, texting, VoIP conferencing, face-to-face, etc.) throughout their enrollment
- ***Conduct ongoing formative and summative evaluation***
- ***Conduct exit interviews*** with students who leave the program prior to graduating
- ***Develop a student and faculty database*** to monitor data and feedback collected through formative and summative evaluations

- ***Continue to identify instructional and programming strategies*** to support program branding and commitment to academic excellence
- ***Continue to identify strategies*** to engage and retain online students

Dr. Kenneth E. Hartman is the academic director for Drexel University Online (Drexel University). Dr. Kristen S. Betts is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Drexel University. ●

Study Shows Common Denominators for Successful Programs

While online learning has made great strides in higher education in the past few years, many institutions still find that achieving widespread adoption by faculty is difficult. They have also found it challenging to achieve faculty use that truly enhances the learning interaction between faculty and students as opposed to simply posting materials online. Some studies have reported dramatic growth of online courses, but what is really going on?

A recent study by the *Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness, Achieving Success in Internet–Supported Learning in Higher Education: Case Studies Illuminate Success Factors, Challenges, and Future Directions,* pulled from the experiences of 21 institutions across all Carnegie classifications to provide insights into best practices for achieving success in online learning. More importantly for higher education leaders, the study identified some potential root causes of success (or lack of success). These common denominators of success (see Table 1) provide a framework for understanding why some initiatives succeed while others do not—and what conditions can be created to make improvements.

(From *EDUCAUSE Quarterly,* Volume 28, Number 3, "Implementing Best Practices in Online Learning" by Rob Abel) ●

Table 1	
Ingredients for Success	
Characteristic	**Ranked Most Important**
Executive leadership and support	15%
Faculty and academic leadership commitment	15%
Student services	12%
Technology infrastructure	12%
Course/instructional quality	9%
Financial resources and plan	9%
Training	7%
Adaptive learn-as-you-go attitude	7%
Communication	5%
Marketing	4%
Other	4%

a more rapid pace. The international sharing of OCW will become common practice soon, in both formal and informal ways. For instance, UCI has just published all its OCW on the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) repository and is posting what it can on the Connexions and UNESCO Web sites. It is also seeking institutional partners around the world for the co-development, translation, and localization of OCW content. As other institutions see the advantages of this kind of sharing, OCW will pass from being a movement to being part of a world-wide process that becomes almost transparent as it is incorporated into the daily activities of instructors, students, and institutions.

For more information about UC Irvine's OCW initiative, visit http://ocw.uci.edu/. ●

Online Seminars: Call for proposals

Distance Education Report is accepting proposals for a series of one hour online seminars. Topics include any that would be of practical use to distance ed administrators, including faculty issues, budget, marketing, technology, pedagogy, instructional design and assessment.

We provide the marketing and technology. You provide the expertise.

Let us find a national audience for your knowledge. Generous honoraria paid.

Find out more about how our online seminars work at www.magnapubs.com/calendar/index-cat-type.html.

Fill out a simple proposal form at www.magnapubs.com/mos/proposal.html. ●