

Online Program Development in an Era of Rapid Institutional Change (Part 1)



Aligning online offerings to the institutional mission is a critical and necessary step to ensuring that online offerings actually serve a need and differentiate themselves from those created by other institutions.

It seems as if every month another university or college announces its intentions to develop fully online degree programs. For some institutions, the move online is tied to shifts in enrollments, as declines in eligible high school graduates give way to a focus on the so-called non-traditional learner. For other institutions, the development of new online courses and programs is sutured to their desire to incorporate current technological innovations into the overall teaching and learning landscape of their campus. For still others, the disruptions produced by the rapid change in student demographics and enrollment management strategies have begged the question of how to better match student access with student success. It is not enough to simply open the door to higher education if institutions are not prepared to increase support for very diverse and fluid online student populations.

As institutions grapple with how to effectively build high-quality online educational programs, they must also reimagine the structure of their organizations. Should online degrees follow the model of outreach and extension, whereby courses and programs are developed through a parallel campus or college that rests within the larger university but operates outside the main campus? Do institutions build a service organization that manages student enrollments and support for online students distinct from the main campus while the programs and courses are delivered by the academic colleges that make up the university? Or, has a third model emerged, a model that muddies the distinctions between the so-called main campus and its outreach and extension efforts? In this last model, universities create

online programs that have the same admission standards and graduation requirements regardless of the modality of the program; they also use the same faculty and teach courses concurrently. This does not mean that there is no distinction in pricing or services in fully online and residential programs. Rather, it suggests that there is more blurring of teaching and learning as well as service and support across main campus and fully online programs.

Each model comes with its own challenges. Here I want to focus on the last model, as it is the one that we have adopted at the University of Arizona. The challenges associated with our campus' efforts in online education are not limited to our organizational model and many of our challenges resonate across the wider higher education environment today.

Asking and Answering the Most Important Question – Why Online?

Although most higher educational institutions have invested in some level of online education—be that through the flipping of classrooms, the integration of new active learning technologies into learning management systems, or through the creation and delivery of fully online courses—the move toward delivering fully online graduate and undergraduate education produces a number of unique challenges. The first challenge is why go there at all? What are the motivations for online education and does the institution have the investments, support infrastructure, and buy-in to build success? Many campuses struggle quite intensely over the latter, as some in higher education still believe online education is of lower quality, while others believe online education detracts from the community of scholars that can only be developed when faculty and students sit down in a room and learn together. Many faculty, staff and students for that matter, see online education as devaluing their institutional mission.

The question of why online must therefore be accompanied by another, perhaps more important, question, which is: how will the institution build online courses and programs that align with the intellectual and pedagogical values of the campus? Successful buy-in can only happen if the people who are being asked to build and deliver online courses and programs believe that the institution will not compromise on its educational commitments. At the University of Arizona, we made the conscious decision to integrate online teaching and learning into the overall enrollment management strategy of the campus. This means that campus policies are the same for all students, regardless of whether or not they enter the institution through the main campus or its fully online campus. Students are given a pathway to transfer between campuses, as all programs have the same graduation requirements regardless of modality. Starting here sends a signal to the campus that the evaluation of quality is maintained even as the method of teaching and learning differ.

Does this mean there are no skeptics at the University of Arizona? Of course not. But, by beginning with the basic assumption that we are delivering the same UA degree regardless of program modality, we can create a baseline around which one can begin to imagine how and why online education can and does fit into the overall mission and vision of the institution.

This is the first of a two-part series by Vincent Del Casino discussing the key elements of launching a new online strategy at the University of Arizona. The next installment will discuss the importance of creating a strong internal infrastructure to support online offerings.

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