
Growth Management in Distance Education: How to Expand Your Distance Offerings

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Abstract

As distance learning has proven to be a viable and effective means of delivering instruction, the focus for many institutions has shifted from program establishment to program growth. The unexpected demand for and rapid success in new distance programs has presented challenges in terms of providing student support, faculty training, and course quality. In order to expand distance offerings while maintaining quality, institutions must often develop new scalable models for every aspect of their distance support function.

Introduction

Distance education has become one of the fastest growing phenomenons in higher education. With the availability of new technologies and changing learner needs, traditional universities are successfully delivering instruction to students at remote locations who would otherwise be unable to complete their studies. The success has not come without drawbacks, however. Many universities are faced with a demand for their distance programs, which overwhelms the existing campus infrastructure. Consequently, many of these institutions fail to expand their distance program, or find themselves relying on external, commercial companies to develop their distance courses.

Administrative Challenges

Perhaps the most immediate concern of the expansion of distance education is administration. As a distance program grows while staffing remains stable, vital functions such as registration and materials distribution become unmanageable. The key is to make all operations scaleable and as automated as possible. For example, a distance program, which currently has 100 students, should design its registration process to potentially meet the needs of 5000 or more.

The State University of West Georgia has seen its distance enrollment double every year since 1995, so that there were more than 1,000 distance students by Fall 1998. Previously, a handbook for distance students was mailed to every registered distance student in the weeks before their courses were to begin. This labor-intensive, expensive procedure was replaced in Fall 1998. Now, the handbooks are all distributed to the school bookstore, where students may order them and buy them along with their other books. Also, when the university began using WebCT to offer online courses, student assistants were assigned to each course to help students learn the

fundamentals of the new software. While this approach worked well when the university had three online courses, it did not two quarters later when thirty classes were fully or partially online. The scalable solution was to provide an online tutorial for students. This was supplemented with a telephone help-line.

Finally, if you are serious about distance education, you must be serious about student access. Beginning Fall 2000, the State University of West Georgia will require students to have access to a computer with internet capabilities and the minimum technical requirements needed to successfully interact in online courses.

Faculty Support

Another important issue is that of faculty involvement and support. In trying to win the support of faculty, the distance staff at the State University of West Georgia initially implemented WebCt with a promise to provide full course development support to all interested faculty. When the number of faculty offering online courses grew at a much faster rate than did the distance staff, a new approach was implemented. Course development was provided only during an instructor's first time teaching online. In subsequent semesters, support staff was available for one-on-one training with the understanding that faculty would actually do the development work themselves. Although this meant an increased workload for faculty, many instructors have reported greater satisfaction in delivering their online courses when they did much of the development work themselves. Similarly, think carefully before you outsource- it may be a quick fix but not the best solution. Our experience has shown that teachers are most effective in online instruction when they understand the dynamics.

The notion that many faculty ultimately want to be involved in the technical aspects of course development is support by Betts (1998), who found surveyed 532 faculty at George Washington University. Two of the top three factors identified as motivating faculty to participate in distance teaching were the opportunity to develop new ideas and the personal motivation to use technology. When faculty are provided with complete training and fundamental support, distance programs are less hampered by the reality of a limited support staff.

Course Quality

A final consideration in the expansion of distance programs is quality. While distance education may appear to be a cost-saving measure for financially-strapped institutions, issues such as class size and the use of teaching assistants must be carefully considered in order to maintain the learning quality of the traditional class. Although it many appear that one can add hundreds of distance students to a class without adding the costs of walls, chairs, and other facilities, the reality is that interaction in a distance course actually increases. Because of the written nature of email and bulletin boards, internet courses can be very time consuming. Wilson (1998) surveyed 17 instructors offering full Internet course through the Southern Regional Electronic Campus. The top concern of the respondents regarding distance learning was workload, with faculty reporting a mean internet course development time of 155 hours.

Furthermore, an instructor will still have to grade an increased number of papers in a larger class. Even when teaching assistants are hired to grade papers and provide tutoring, distance courses with larger enrollments are in danger of being viewed as glorified correspondence courses. In order for faculty and students to accept distance learning as legitimate, interaction between the instructor and students must be a constant (Van Nuys, 1995). Thus, allowing distance program growth to occur by uncapping enrollment limits associated with internet and other distance

courses may not be a viable option for institutions, which want to remain student-focused. While overall institution enrollments will probably be increased as a result of distance learning programs, the better ones will hire additional faculty to deliver instruction to these students.

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