How effective is your online learning program?

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Many students struggle to balance family and work obligations with their college studies. Making courses or programs available to them online gives them more flexibility to find time for their studies and increases their likelihood of completion. The online model also helps students build stronger digital skills that are important in today’s workforce.

But delivering quality instruction online is much more complex than simply posting syllabi and PowerPoint presentations in a learning management system. It requires instructional designers with the right skill sets and capacity to work closely with well-prepared subject matter experts. Working together through an established and tested process, these individuals create rigorous and academically sound interactive courses. It also takes data-driven market assessments to identify the programs that are in demand, curriculum-mapping expertise to design or redesign those programs, and ongoing analytics to measure program effectiveness.

Here are some top-level considerations to measure whether your institution is offering quality online instruction and capturing untapped revenue streams.

Start with a plan

Creating and evolving quality online curriculum requires a holistic and strategic academic plan. It should be built around current and projected enrollments, program strengths, and emerging market opportunities. Metrics for gauging performance and success should be clearly defined. In many institutions, online courses are selected in an ad hoc manner, based on a perceived need or convenience.

A smarter approach to economically sustainable online courses is to focus on courses with large enrollments that lead to further student progression. For example, entry level math and freshman English are often gateway courses. Offering them as either completely online or blended courses makes them accessible to students who have time and place constraints, and need these courses to progress.

Other high-enrollment courses, even if they are not gateway classes, can also lend themselves well to the online environment. Many students like the flexibility of taking an online course, and some are more comfortable collaborating online than they are in the classroom. Providing online options is another way to make your college more student-centric. It also helps serve a larger enrollment than can fit in the physical classrooms.

Moreover, consider the overall path to completion. Ad hoc and one-off online course development can leave students who have limited availability with a hefty tuition bill, but no outcome. Offering an entire program online gives students the opportunity to earn a degree, certificate, or other career-enhancing credential.

Your strategic academic plan should also capture new market opportunities. Your marketing and admissions departments know your traditional geographic pipeline well. But is anyone on staff looking at emerging markets that could be served when the barriers of time and place are removed? Identifying growth opportunities that synch with your curriculum strengths, and weighing them against the competition, requires time and experience.

Weigh the capabilities of your instructional designers

Building online courses and programs is time consuming, and not every institution has staff with the resources or appropriate skill set. The industry benchmark is that one full-time instructional designer should produce between five and 10 new courses per year. Most institutions produce far less than that because staff is diverted away from course-development efforts, making them less efficient and unable to employ best practices.
The content in your online courses should be as engaging and challenging as those taught in your traditional classrooms, while taking advantage of the strengths of academic technologies. Learning outcomes should drive the content. To get there, your faculty and instructional designers need to work together closely and with defined roles. As experts in their field, faculty should not get bogged down in the technology, but provide rich and engaging content. A good designer needs strong knowledge of existing and emerging technology tools like learning objects and game-based learning, and use them strategically to support the desired course outcome. Instructional designers should also incorporate tools for collaboration like Twitter feeds, chat rooms for group discussions, and video chat with instructors. Lastly, designers need to understand how to adapt content to work well on all the mobile devices used by your students.

Experienced instructional designers also understand that all your online courses should have a consistent look and navigation. This makes it easier for students as they move from one course to another. The online course environment should reflect the college's brand and also include links to support services at the college, such as library services, tutoring, proctoring services, and the help desk.

**Measure the effectiveness of your programs**

Established goals let you measure the effectiveness of your online instruction and make improvements.

Frequent reviews of the metrics captured in your learning management system will offer visibility into student, faculty, and course performance. These include the number of times a student has logged in, where they spent time, and the overall engagement level of a course. Student surveys and course evaluations should be a regular feature in each course. Your instructional designers should study the feedback often and work with faculty to make improvements. A good benchmark for a thorough review of online courses and programs is at least every other year. Metrics should drive the priority of course reviews. However, the reality is that most colleges rarely revisit their online courses after they are first created.

Likewise, your administrators need to regularly revisit the strategic plan for online learning. You should have a strong understanding of enrollments, revenues, and outcomes for each course and program and how they measure up to established goals. Revenues should be reinvested into your online instruction. New market opportunities need to be identified and considered.

The growing demand for online instruction gives institutions a strong opportunity to serve more students and increase enrollment. However, a highly attended, academically sound, online course requires a strategic academic plan, the right resources, and regular assessment and efforts toward improvement.