Online Education Growing Pains

Taking Distance Education to the Next Level

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About this Document

This document provides recommendations and other considerations for higher education as institutions plan and prepare for change and growth within their distance education activities. Areas of focus will include:

1) Identifying current status, including resources, efficiencies, and deficiencies
2) Identifying opportunities
3) Preparing for growth and change
4) Support for stakeholders (administration, faculty, staff, etc.)
5) Communication within an organization
Online Education Growing Pains

Online education strives to accomplish many things. It offers flexibility for learners while also creating an environment that is academically robust and allows for interaction and collaboration on both local and global levels. Is your organization ready for the growth and change that accompanies the introduction of online education?

Identifying Current Status

The first step in understanding how ready your institution is for integrating online education is identifying the current status of your online activities. Through this evaluation, you’ll be able to fully appreciate the decisions, resources, and activities that brought you to your current point and identify what you require to move forward.

Resources

When planning to take your distance education efforts to the next level, identifying and making the case for required resources is essential to growth and success. Resources can be tangible items that assist in the development or facilitation of online learning—for example, technology or documentation. Additional resources—such as staff, faculty, policy, and opportunities for training—can also contribute significantly to the success of a distance education program. Identifying the current resources available to your institution for distance education is a critical step in planning for the future and growth of your online efforts.

Efficiency of Your Online Efforts

Identifying what is effective and efficient in your current efforts is another crucial component. Instead of relying on established systems and processes as the “status quo,” it is important to reconsider and reevaluate what enables students, faculty, and administrators to do their best work. If your online program’s approach exemplifies the old saying “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,” this may be a perfect opportunity to identify aspects of that program that could be improved.

Asking a few simple questions can help you to quickly identify what is working:

1. What are you really good at within your online learning program?
2. What is the most successful thing that has been accomplished as a result of your online efforts?
3. What are faculty who teach online most impressed by?
4. What do students who take classes online at your institution really enjoy about it?

In answering these questions, your institution can develop a better understanding of and appreciation for the strengths associated with their distance education offerings.

**Deficiencies of Your Online Efforts**

Every great effort has its challenges and going through a process like this allows for reflection on areas that require additional attention. Education and technology continue to evolve at a rapid pace—the key is to recognize, adapt, and improve upon things that are not working so that real change can take place.

Asking some additional questions will help identify these areas and lead to discussions that will drive real change:

1. What areas need some attention within your online learning program?
2. If you could go back and re-do something in your online efforts that didn’t go as planned, what would it be?
3. What do faculty who teach online at your institution find most challenging?
4. What are students who take classes online at your institution frustrated with?

By dedicating time to thoughtful reflection and analysis, your institution can begin to fully appreciate how areas of concern within your distance education program might lead to opportunities for improvement.

**Identifying Opportunities**

The next strategic step in taking your online efforts to the next level is actively seeking opportunities for growth and change. Opportunity is the key to strategic development and can be viewed in a few different ways. Opportunity can be associated with meeting a need—such as new programs of study geared toward a particular professional need—or it can be based on a circumstance or specific “time-related” situation. However opportunity presents itself to your online efforts, it is imperative to recognize where opportunity is available and understand how to proceed.
There are a few things to consider when seeking out or identifying new or changed opportunities.

**What has already changed?**

When an opportunity presents itself, it typically stems from a level of change within the organization. Change can have both positive and negative effects, but if it’s properly identified and managed, it can certainly provide an institution with a chance to improve. Changes that can lead to opportunity within online learning include:

- **Personnel**
- **Budgets/funding**
- **Technology**

Begin by identifying what has changed within your organization. Can opportunities for growth or development in your online efforts be leveraged as a result of those changes?

**What opportunities are present?**

After examining your organization to identify what has changed, identifying opportunities that have emerged is the next crucial step. As stated above, change drives opportunity. Let’s discuss a few examples of how this can be accomplished.

- **Personnel:**
  The effectiveness with which your online efforts run is heavily tied to the individuals leading those efforts. Whether administrative (President, VPAA, Provost, Deans), distance education staff (directors, IT, instructional designers), or faculty members, the activities surrounding online education are driven by people. When a change in personnel takes place, this may open the door for change or growth. Additionally, when those positions are filled, individuals with new experiences will bring a change of perspective to your online activities.

- **Budgets/Funding:**
  Money influences many things. Online education is no different. Increases and decreases to funding can create opportunities for growth and change in a variety of ways. A decrease in funding will force your institution to find efficiencies in its practices and identify ways to do more with less. It may also force you to develop creative solutions and focus on inexpensive but vital elements to a strong online learning program, such as policy, procedure, and faculty engagement. While an increase in funding allows for the exploration of new technologies, equipment, and resources that can enhance your
current efforts, it also provides a chance to identify the real needs of the institution and plan accordingly for growth and change.

- **Technology:**
  A change in technology almost always creates opportunities within an institution. Typically, a change in technology is implemented in order to meet a need. The key to selecting the right technology for your institution is to fully understand the potential of the new technology and leverage its capabilities to help enhance online learning and reach organizational goals.

### Preparing for Growth and Change

#### Where is Your Organization Heading with Online Education?

The final step to improvement is having a vision for your online learning efforts and a collective understanding of the direction your institution will take to reach those goals. Collective understanding is a particularly crucial element at this stage. Institutions can sometimes have several leaders with differing agendas and plans for their online activities and very little communication around these efforts.

Creating an understanding of the current status of your online activities in collaboration with the key stakeholders—followed by a cohesive plan for growth and change—will allow for success across the entire organization. Institutions must have a solid understanding of where they have been in order to plan where they are going, especially when preparing for growth and change in online learning. Only after strengths, weaknesses, and a sense of direction have been established can effective planning for development occur.

#### Support from Stakeholders

Once a collective understanding of the current status of your online activities has been established, support from all associated stakeholders is essential for growth and change to take place. Clear communication and commitment to a unified direction of efforts must be made. From your online support staff, dedication to the agreed upon effort as a cohesive front is key to encouraging the entire institution to buy into the changes being implemented. Faculty—as stakeholders—must prepare to support these efforts and be willing to accept some responsibility for contributing to the proposed changes.
Communication of Next Steps

Direct, consistent, and open communication is another element that is essential to effectively take your online efforts to the next step. A level of transparency is important to all stakeholders. Creating a clear vision of the direction your online efforts will take and communicating that vision—along with the steps, timelines, implications, and benefits involved—can help create anticipation and support for your efforts. Creative means of communication are always a great consideration. They may include:

- Interviews/testimonials
- “Fact of the day/week” emails
- Group meetings
- Advertising

It is important to maintain communications and be receptive to feedback throughout the development of your online learning program. Too often, these efforts get communicated very heavily early on and then diminish once the process moves forward. This can have a negative impact on your program development—stakeholders may feel disengaged if they have not been informed of progress. Providing regular updates, highlighting successes within the program, and offering opportunities for stakeholders to provide feedback based on their experiences can help ensure that your efforts continue to evolve and grow with your institution’s needs.
Recommendations and Considerations

In order to propel your institution’s online learning efforts to the next level, some key steps need to be considered:

1) Identifying current status—including resources, efficiencies, and deficiencies of your online efforts
2) Identifying opportunities for growth and change
3) Preparing and planning for growth and change
4) Support of and for stakeholders (administration, faculty, staff, etc.)
5) Effective communication within your organization

By following these steps, gaining the support and commitment of your institution, and being receptive to new opportunities for growth and change in online learning, your institution can secure itself as one of the many forward-thinking organizations taking their distance education activities to the next level.

Additional Consulting

D2L employs a number of experts with extended experience leading academic programs. The D2L community of users includes experts in many fields related to the management and delivery of instructional programs and technologies. D2L stands ready to collaborate and coordinate with you on your advanced consulting needs, as well as research studies related to instruction.
About D2L

A global leader in EdTech, D2L is the creator of Brightspace, the world’s first integrated learning platform. The company partners with thought-leading organizations to improve learning through data-driven technology that helps deliver a personalized experience to every learner, regardless of geography or ability. D2L’s open and extensible platform is used by more than 1,100 clients and almost 15 million individual learners in higher education, K–12, healthcare, government, and the enterprise sector—including Fortune 1000 companies. The company has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.


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