Thomas Edison State College and Colorado State University: Using Cutting-Edge Technology to Enhance CE Unit Success

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Edison State College (TESC) and Colorado State University (CSU) offer significant contrasts in institutional culture, student demographics, faculty and institutional priorities and approaches to distance education course development and delivery. This article offers case studies showing that widely disparate program design and delivery approaches can be successful for both the student and the institution.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Thomas Edison State College
TESC is New Jersey's only college exclusively for adults, established in 1972 as a degree-completion institution offering adults the opportunity

to transfer credits earned elsewhere to the institution and to participate in a prior learning assessment (PLA) program to earn credit for learning in nontraditional settings such as the workplace or life experience. It serves a well-defined working-adult demographic whose average age is between 35 and 39. Students, who balance work, home life, and academic endeavors, must be self-paced and self-directed with an intrinsic desire to learn in order to succeed. Since most TESC students are adults who are bringing their own experiences to the classroom, they are encouraged to build upon their expertise and to conceptualize solutions to academic problems based upon experience and workplace learning and training—an approach with distinct heutagogical overtones that strongly encourages student autonomy. TESC offers flexible learning methods that include online courses and PLA as well as credit transfer and credit-bearing exams in its degree programs and certificates in more than 100 areas of study.

Colorado State University OnlinePlus

CSU's continuing education unit, OnlinePlus, conducts distance and online programs on behalf of the university, which is a land-grant, Research 1 institution with more than 24,000 students in residence. OnlinePlus is legally defined as an enterprise under state law and is attached to the university in a business relationship somewhat similar to a university bookstore. OnlinePlus operates as a business and is entirely self-funded. It is forecast to generate more than $30 million in gross revenue for the university in fiscal year 2011-12. Because of its enterprise relationship with the university, OnlinePlus has no academic role, but is primarily oriented to marketing and enrollment "sales" in continuing education and distance programs. Typical distance student ages begin at about 30. OnlinePlus offers more than 25 graduate distance degrees, including a PhD in Higher Education Leadership, four undergraduate degree programs, and a number of non-credit distance programs and certifications.

COURSE DESIGN

TESC

TESC uses a customized instructional-design philosophy, based on a constructivist approach to learning with elements to help students learn how to learn and to improve their learning capacity. Our instructional design process follows the well-known and widely used ADDIE technique:

- Assess and analyze needs.
- Design instruction and presentations.

- Develop materials.
- Implement activities and courses.
- Evaluate participant progress and effectiveness of the course materials.

The TESC course design process embraces a design-driven, project-based model, rather than a faculty-driven model. This is an outcome of the academic structure of the institution, which does not employ faculty in any capacity on a full-time, part-time, or adjunct basis. Instead, TESC contracts with well-qualified faculty from other accredited and recognized institutions on a consultancy basis. To underline the distinction between a faculty-driven model and our consultant-based model, TESC refers to faculty as "mentors." This nomenclature also defines their roles in TESC courses, where they facilitate learning rather than teach content, while at the same time defining TESC courses as self-study courses. Any qualified mentor can facilitate a course since it is the instructional design team that creates the courses in collaboration with appropriate subject-matter experts.

Even though all TESC courses are online, their structure as self-paced courses allows them to be neither fully synchronous nor fully asynchronous. Most of the course activities occur asynchronously or even offline. This includes reading and written assignments, Internet-based activities, and posting discussion board items. Participation in some group activities may require synchronous engagement.

The TESC course design process is unique to the institution. Whereas the typical online course delivery schema is built around a learning management system (LMS) as the focal point of the process, TESC has developed an LMS-agnostic approach. The TESC model is based on a content management system (CMS) that allows for every step of the process to be clear and transparent for multiple parties (designers and content experts), who are even able to work synchronously on the same course, if desired. This approach encourages collaboration and maintains a permanent record of all course design activities. Content created within the CMS (as opposed to an LMS) can be delivered in a variety of formats out of the central content repository.

The TESC course design process occurs in two phases. In phase one, a subject-matter expert and an instructional designer jointly put together a basic course outline (BCO). The BCO provides a course shell containing the course title, code, credits, institutional and programmatic outcomes, the indicated Bloom's taxonomy level, course description, objectives, topics,

materials, modular structure, and grading and evaluation structure. The BCO is submitted to the dean's curriculum committee and serves as the blueprint for the instructional designer. That instructional designer creates a course space in the content system, mimicking what one would typically find in an LMS. The designer uses templates within the CMS (Google Docs and Sites) to flesh out the entire course. The subject matter expert creates and provides the content and learning activities, which the designer then uses to build the course as standardized, self-study course that can be administered by any suitable qualified mentor.

- Perhaps the greatest single advantage of this approach is that TESC is able to leverage the content in a wide variety of ways, thus delivering the content in many different formats including the following:
- The password-protected LMS edition (in our case, Moodlerooms).
- Downloadable apps compatible with Apple OS and Android, that will run on tablets and smartphones.
- .Epub or .mobi files that are compatible with Kindle and Nook.
- Portable editions that are stored on USB thumb drives.
- An offline edition that will run on a laptop, desktop, or a tablet. This edition is especially geared to students who regularly use laptops without Internet connection.

CSU

Because of CSU's tradition of strong faculty governance, faculty members have final authority over the course design and content of their courses as well as ownership of the intellectual property in both campus and distance courses (unless a distance course is created as part of a contract for hire). As a result, although faculty are encouraged to use the campus' Institute for Teaching and Learning (TILT) for help with instructional design, graphics, and layout of online courses, they are not obliged to do so. The CSU process is entirely faculty driven, operating under the traditional model in which tenure-track faculty are the backbone of the university and have the full content control typical of a research university. This often causes interesting tensions when course design is less than optimal, but over time faculty members who are learning on the job to teach at a distance typically improve their courses in response to student requests and needs.

In contrast to the TESC model, almost all CSU classes are intentionally fully asynchronous in order to serve students distributed across many time zones nationally and internationally. A few classes contain synchronous elements, and one degree program operates synchronously, but in each case the synchronous elements are recorded for viewing later by students who cannot participate synchronously. In every case, an asynchronous option for content access is provided. A handful of hybrid courses require attendance at one or two workshops on campus per semester, usually scheduled as long weekends to minimize inconvenience to students.

As a second point of difference from TESC, CSU uses the LMS as the focal point. The LMS (Blackboard) is the password-protected access and delivery site for all course and media materials that faculty use. The LMS is the only online site where the university's enrollment system is set up to grant access to course materials, so using it as a password-protected access point is important to address copyright and intellectual property issues.

CSU faculty members are responsible for requesting a Blackboard course shell each semester. Once that shell exists, the instructor can either build a new course in it or upload content from a previous course shell. The enrollment system (Banner) provides student access to specific course sections, and distance students are enrolled in different sections than campus students. Since distance courses are typically offered the same semester as the campus course, most courses have two LMS sections, one for campus and a separate one for distance. By request to the LMS administrator, these sections are usually combined into a single merged section so that campus and distance students can interact and the instructor does not have to interact with and teach each of the sections separately.

The campus provides instructional design support for faculty on an elective basis; some faculty use it, some do not. As mentioned earlier, the Institute for Teaching and Learning (TILT) provides help with instructional design, graphics and layout of online courses. When OnlinePlus works with faculty to add a distance section of a course, every effort is made to route the course development through TILT.

The most common problems arising from bypassing the TILT center are observed with research-oriented faculty members who use lecture capture in class; some of them are new to distance education and are not aware of the need to create a fully-featured online course that uses lecture capture effectively. This creates a challenge to back-fill the missing content, which is normally done by a combination of the course teaching assistant

and the CE program director who manages the department's courses. On a few occasions the faculty teaching assignment is not made until shortly before the semester begins and faculty have no time to prepare online course materials. A similar back-fill process is needed to help the faculty member provide an acceptable set of course materials. In this case, continuing education often collaborates with the teaching assistant for the class and works in the background to upload content from previous semesters into the course shell and modify it as needed.

CONTENT OWNERSHIP, TENURE, AND FACULTY PRIORITIES

TESC

Since Thomas Edison State College contracts with well-qualified faculty from other institutions who work on a contractual basis as independent consultants, they are bound by a contractual stipulation that they are performing work for hire. What this means is that the college owns the course. In this model, issues of tenure and faculty governance are irrelevant because the subject-matter expert has a contractual relationship to perform a specified work for hire. The nature of contracts entered into between the institution and mentors has evolved over time and has been refined with the help of legal counsel and an autonomous Academic Council composed of faculty from other accredited institutions.

Contracts are continually under scrutiny and revision to ensure they meet the need of both mentors and the institution. From the outset, however, work has always been defined as work for hire, and intellectual ownership of created content has always been vested in the institution. Content created by mentors is usually, but not solely restricted to assignments, exams, and lecture notes that accompany prescribed textbooks. However, mentors who wish to use such content in their own institutions can apply for permission to use it royalty-free. Such permission is seldom refused. An advantage of this model is that content created by mentors can be subject to scrutiny to determine academic integrity and rigor.

CSU

CSU, on the other hand, has a traditional model with university-employed tenure-track faculty members teaching most courses. Given the university's land-grant mission and large resident student population, research and instruction serving campus and resident programs are the highest priorities for faculty. Intellectual property policies are molded around models based

in that history of research-based resident instruction. As noted earlier, CSU faculty own the intellectual property for both campus and distance courses unless a course is created as part of a contract for hire, which is only true in a small number of distance courses. Faculty members own and control the content and teaching methodology as long as they adhere to the original course description and syllabus approved by the university. In the cases where a course was/is created as a work for hire, content control rests with the academic department, and faculty members teaching the course make updates to it. When adjunct faculty are used, those instructors are vetted and approved by the academic department, and the teaching assignment is made by the department, not by OnlinePlus.

Administratively, many institutions would prefer the TESC arrangement because it gives them control over the contents of a course and allows flexibility in hiring and firing mentors to provide support to students in a class. Pedagogically, the focus is on the student and the content, not the instructor. From the point of view of the course "mentor," there is no risk of investing time in putting a course together and having it cancelled at the last minute.

However, the reality is that in most cases the traditional model prevails because it fits the culture and practices of the institution. The advantages of this model are that it maintains full credibility of the distance courses in a traditional university environment, faculty have a stake in the academic integrity and success of any course they create, and if faculty members teach online versions of an on-campus course they are teaching in the same semester, the distance section is normally taught as an overload and paid via supplemental pay. This additional pay provides an incentive for faculty to become involved in distance education.

FINAL COMMENTS

The dramatic contrasts between these two successful distance education programs help to illustrate that there is no single way to conduct these programs, and indeed, there may not be a model or best way. However, with planning, consistent interactions with faculty, and with adequate staffing and support, there is more than one way to make distance programs successful.