

Northern Kentucky University

Report and Recommendations of the Online and Learning Technology Task Force

Some Assembly Required: A Proposal for the Creation of a Unified Structure for the Support, Facilitation, and Growth of Online Learning and Learning Technologies at NKU

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Task Force Members: Arne Almquist (chair), Rebecca Bailey, Vicki Berling, Megan Downing, Neil Duchac, Sam Goh, John Huss, Jennifer Mart-Rice, Kenneth Rhee, Doris Shaw, Michelle Teschendorf, Threasa Wesley, Jeffrey Chesnut

Faculty cannot be expected to know intuitively how to design and deliver an effective online course (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, 23).

Unlike what has been traditionally required from faculty in academia, distance learning necessitates that online faculty master a number of roles and acquire a specific set of competencies. In order to equip themselves with these skills and competencies it is vital that faculty embrace distance learning and perceive it as an equal, if not superior, method of delivering education. (Al-Salman, 2011, 12).

Introduction

NKU, along with much of higher education, finds itself in the midst of stable or declining enrollments. With a heavy reliance on tuition revenue, we have seen a corresponding decrease in income. As has been pointed out by President Mearns, it is critical that we take advantage of appropriate opportunities to grow enrollment, improve retention, and extend our market beyond the Northern Kentucky/Cincinnati Region.

By the same token, we are committed to putting our students first, providing a quality educational experience for *all* students, regardless of delivery method. If we are successful in this, we will also positively affect enrollment and retention.

Growth of online education has long been a stated goal of the university. Lack of a coordinated effort and insufficient resources have limited our success. Four basic functions are needed to support a vigorous online program: coordination and facilitation of online programs, technology support, faculty development, and student support and training. While various support units have been created to meet these needs, lack of structure and commitment have led to uneven results.

Faculty development, for example, was addressed by the creation of the Faculty Development Center in 2002, was housed collaboratively with IT's Instructional Technology Development Center (ITDC) in a specially renovated area in Steely Library. The area was named the Faculty Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, which housed Faculty Development and the ITDC renamed as Educational Technology & Training (ET2). Following a reorganization, IT's ET2 was removed from the IT structure and merged with Faculty Development to become the Professional Organizational Development center (POD). This unit ultimately ceased to exist due to budget cuts. IT reestablished faculty Blackboard training and support, and the Center for Innovation and Technology in Education (CITE) ultimately emerged from those efforts. The ever-mutating faculty development efforts represent approaches that have not been carried through or sustained. Faculty development is currently provided by TEEC, a volunteer effort under the Faculty Senate (which has done excellent work with few resources). As suggested by the quotations at the head of this paper, this is a critical gap that has limited our growth in the online arena and one that has also limited our ability to support faculty in the classroom.

Technology support, along with assistance in instructional design, is provided by CITE, a unit of IT. CITE supports the Learning Management System (LMS), and also assists faculty and students in the use of learning technology. While it has done an excellent job, the lack of a strong complementary unit devoted to pedagogical practice has limited its effectiveness.

Educational Outreach provides overall support and coordination for NKU's online learning effort, as well as oversight of adult education and the Grant County Center. This unit brings significant resources to the table and has accomplished much over the past several years, but could do more with stronger strategic ties to other parts of the online support infrastructure.

In short, while the individual pieces exist and some excellent work is being done, what NKU currently lacks is a robust, coordinated effort that can strategically address the issues involved in improving the quality of our online efforts and increasing their size and reach. Such a group would bring together services to coordinate, promote, and grow our online programs, faculty development and assistance, and technology support and training for both faculty *and* students. An aligned group of service units would allow us to focus our resources, partnering internally and with other entities – both on and off campus – to enable NKU to more fully exploit opportunities. This, in turn, should lead to better outcomes for students, increased faculty satisfaction, and growth in university revenues.

The proposal which follows envisions the creation of a portfolio of units, covering four major areas of concern: Coordination/Facilitation, Faculty Development, Technology Support, and Student Support/Development. These groups would work together to identify needs and meet them in a coordinated manner. The approach would allow us to focus strategically in a way that has not previously been possible. It would also fill in two very important gaps: the support and professional development of our faculty, and the creation of more effective online learners.

To be successful, the effort will need to have sufficient financial and human resources. Existing resources will give us a start, but to be sustainable and to support growth of the online effort (and

resultant revenues) will require long-term growth in staffing and funding. Our proposal discusses this and suggests a way to grow the effort as NKU's online presence grows.

Finally, the need for faculty development in the application of learning technologies is as critical in the classroom as it is online and any center for teaching and learning should support good pedagogical practice regardless of instructional format. This was made clear by two of our guest speakers who run centers for teaching and learning support at their respective institutions. These centers integrate training, development, and technical support for all faculty, regardless of instructional platform. That approach supports excellence throughout the instructional mission, whether faculty teach online or in a physical classroom. It also has the potential to increase our online faculty as more instructors develop online experience.

The Proposal

Our proposal is based on the task force's discussion and research, presentations/discussions with experts from both on and off campus, and references back to the work of the previous online task force (2007). We organized the proposal into several sections which correspond to the key issues, as identified by the task force.

Structure

NKU has made several attempts at creating a support structure for online education. The resulting units have enabled us to make significant progress and the strength of our offerings to date are due to their efforts. They provide technical support, oversight of online programs, and faculty development. Unfortunately, the reporting structure is dispersed and a critical part of the effort, faculty development, exists only as a volunteer effort of the Faculty Senate. One other critical element, support of online learners, could be addressed more fully and effectively with a cohesive approach.

To bring our online education program to a higher level, we need to build a strong, coordinated structure encompassing four major support functions:

- Facilitation – This would include services that would facilitate and stimulate the creation and growth of courses and programs, such as conducting market research, alerting departments and colleges to promising opportunities, determining the need for new courses and programs, working with colleges/departments to facilitate and incubate the creation of new courses and programs, marketing and promoting our programs to build awareness among potential students, strategically managing the process of obtaining appropriate licensure and authorization, and developing and facilitating partnerships.
- Faculty Development – Successfully teaching in the online world requires more than simply transferring face-to-face techniques to an online course shell and is different than teaching in

a face-to-face environment. Services in this area would include faculty development in the area of online pedagogy, quality initiatives, and support for traditional faculty to make the transition to the online world. This last would help faculty to enrich their face-to-face courses while growing the overall number of online-ready faculty.

- Technology Support – This would include support of the Learning Management System, support and training in the use of advanced technologies, and instructional design services.
- Student Support – Services in this area would be geared toward building better online learners, and could include creation/management of orientation sessions, creation of tutorials, support and instruction in the effective use of online tools, specialized information literacy instruction, and efforts to build feelings of community among our online students.

Two units which support online education are currently in existence: Educational Outreach and CITE. Both units offer services that extend beyond online education. Educational Outreach provides oversight and support of adult learners, the PACE Program, and oversees the Grant County Center among other responsibilities. CITE is a part of the Academic Technology unit, which operates the Norse Tech Bar and provides distributed technology support.

The Provost has suggested that resources would be made available for the creation of a third unit: a Center for Teaching and Learning. Responsibilities may shift between the two existing units or be assigned to the new unit. For example, parts of the faculty support/development process take place in CITE and some in TEEC. Under the new structure, these tasks could be moved to the new Center for Teaching and Learning. Another addition to the mix would be library services, most notably, information literacy instruction and research assistance.

The support units would be co-located in Steely Library and report to the Associate Provost and Dean of the Library. By bringing the units together under the same management umbrella, efforts can be coordinated and directed in a strategic manner. Location in, and management by, the library would provide added synergies when combined with the adoption of elements of a learning commons in the library, which is planned for the near future.

By bringing the three units into close alignment, we hope to build synergies that will result in a significantly strengthened online education environment, as well as benefits to our face-to-face and hybrid offerings. This, in turn, will allow the university to further strengthen the support units to create a beneficial cycle of increased enrollment, quality, and university revenues.

Goals

In 2007, NKU enrolled a total of 326 students in fully online programs. The goal for 2013 was set at 2,400-2,500 students. The actual total as of fall, 2013 was 1,210 students. While this was a four-fold increase over the enrollment figure in 2007, it was only half of the number projected for 2013 by the previous task force. In terms of programs, a goal of 12 fully online graduate programs was set for 2013. A total of eight fully online graduate programs were in place as of fall 2013. Graduate

enrollment is currently problematic at NKU. The additional fully online graduate programs planned for 2013 could have helped significantly in improving graduate enrollment, however, while progress was significant, we again fell short.

From the significant strides that were made with little support, less than optimal coordination, and lack of a long-term commitment, it is evident that with a newly coordinated effort and the addition of strong support for faculty and student development, we can build to a much higher level.

The task force discussed long and short-term objectives for growth of our online effort. In the long term, we would like to use online education to grow university enrollment by tapping new markets in the region, across the Commonwealth, and across the country. This has the potential of generating revenue to more quickly grow the support structure and provide resources to the colleges, leading to a sustainable system for the long term. We would do this through a number of vehicles:

- Encouraging more faculty to develop online teaching skills and by incentivizing the creation of new courses and easing additional faculty into the online environment.
- Working in partnership with the colleges and other campus entities to seek and exploit promising opportunities to develop new courses and programs.
- Seeking and building partnerships with entities outside of NKU. An example would be the library's *Bridging the Gap* projects which partnered NKU with state governments and other educational institutions to grow an online program.
- Increasing retention through better training, support, and inclusiveness among our online students.

In the shorter term, it will be critical to develop and strengthen our online education infrastructure:

- Searching for "low-hanging fruit" to quickly build online offerings and enrollment.
- Developing adequate resources to grow and sustain the support infrastructure. This would be accomplished by "bootstrapping," that is, leveraging existing funds and resources along with funds derived from the early growth in courses and programs.
- Creating a new faculty development center to increase faculty skills, assist faculty with their courses, and create opportunities for networking and sharing knowledge.

One of the recurring mistakes of the past was to create a support structure with few resources and then to apply it with little focus. With the current economic challenges, we will need to focus our assets fairly narrowly until we can build an income stream that will allow it to grow in scope. If we do this properly, all should benefit from sustainable and accelerating growth.

Administrative Commitment

In the 2007 report of the previous task force, administrative commitment was seen as a barrier to NKU's growth as a provider of online education. It was pointed out that administrators at various levels were less than enthusiastic concerning online instruction. The task force pointed out that, in

order to be successful, “all levels of the university administration from the President and the Provost to the deans and department chairs must agree to the importance of online courses and programs for the future of NKU. They must communicate this importance to those who report to them, support the endeavor in ways that are appropriate to their university responsibilities, and be champions for growing this initiative” (NKU Online Task Force, 2007).

Fortunately, the situation has improved as of 2015. On the whole, various administrators are more supportive of the growth of online education and two of our new deans managed the online operations at their previous institutions. Three of the Deans, the Deans of the colleges of Nursing and Health Professions, Business, and Education and Human Services, met with the task force and discussed their plans and support for online education. The strengths and weaknesses of their colleges in regard to online education were described and all three indicated strong support and a desire for growth in the online arena.

One area where the administration can be instrumental in the growth of online education at NKU is by encouraging and incentivizing faculty to make the leap to online instruction. Not all faculty will have the desire or ability to function in the online environment and the task force does not believe that they should be forced to teach in that format. However, many of those who may be reluctant due to lack of technology expertise, online pedagogical skills, or available time, could make the transition with the proper incentives. These are discussed further in the section entitled “Faculty Development and Commitment.”

Administrators can also facilitate the growth of online education by investing new revenues from online courses and programs in the further growth of the online enterprise. One potential source of funding is through an increase in our online course fee. We currently charge \$30/SCH for undergraduate courses and \$35/SCH for graduate courses. In contrast, Western Kentucky University charges \$75/SCH and \$100/SCH for graduate and undergraduate online courses respectively. We suggest that if we adopt an increased fee, the additional funds be assigned to the online support structure.

Faculty Development and Commitment

A long-term issue has been a continuing reluctance on the part of some faculty to participate in online instruction. The task force feels that there are two groups of faculty who are reluctant to make the leap: those uninvolved who are opposed and those who are under-involved but need further encouragement.

The Quality team deals later in this report with approaches to help faculty to develop appropriate teaching skills and the use of experts to create course sites. We feel that additional steps need to be taken to grow the number of faculty who will want to be fully engaged in online instruction. Note that we concentrate on incentives. We feel that it is counterproductive to attempt to force unwilling faculty to teach online. Rather, steps can be taken to provide instruction to help such faculty to make

more effective use of technology in their face-to-face classes, which, in turn, may ease them into the online environment. If not, in the interests of quality, it is better to focus on those who are more accepting of the online format.

Recommendations

For those who are engaged but need additional incentives:

- **Provide release time for course creation:** We heard multiple times that time was a bigger concern than compensation as a factor in stimulating online course creation. One idea would be to count course creation as “teaching time” during the semester before the course rolls out. For example, if a normal course load for a given department was 9 hours, a faculty member could teach either online or face-to-face for 6 hours and then create a new online course while receiving “credit” for an additional 3 hours to bring the faculty member up to full load.
- **Financial compensation to create and update courses:** The two external online education people who we spoke with emphasized the roles of their operations as incubators of online programs and courses. This was accomplished through the use of online fee income to pay faculty for the development of courses. Both mentioned that they also paid faculty a small fee on a periodic basis to keep their courses up to date. Once a course generates sufficient enrollment, the appropriate department would take on the cost of ongoing updates.
- **Ownership/IP concerns:** We need to ensure that we have clear IP guidelines so that faculty understand who owns courses. The University of North Texas is moving away from a royalty system to the one-time development payment and periodic payments for updating. This is a good potential model for us to examine.
- **Address RPT concerns:** As the second quote at the head of this document states, “it is vital that faculty embrace distance learning and perceive of it as an equal, if not superior, method of delivering education.” Members of the task force related instances in which they, or other faculty, were advised that they teach at least some courses face-to-face because RPT committees would look down on those who only taught online. This leads to a feeling that online instruction is somehow inferior to face-to-face teaching. It is important to change this perception by clarifying RPT guidelines.
- **Create a “virtual professor” role:** Currently, it is our understanding that all faculty must have on-campus office hours and must physically participate in various faculty activities. Physical office hours for those whose teaching is completely online is probably counterproductive since their students would be more apt to interact with the professor online.
- **Use hybrid courses and virtual meeting attendance as levers to make people more comfortable in the online environment.** Increasing remote participation through virtual meeting technologies could provide an incentive which would entice additional faculty into an increasingly online role.
- **Devise ways to bring faculty together to share experiences and best practices:** This could be part of a continuing role for TEEC.

Quality Matters!

Quality matters in online teaching. When we discuss quality we are not talking about rigor or content knowledge but pedagogical design or delivery format that impacts student engagement and experience in an online course. Ultimately, the degree to which students engage with and experience the course will impact their learning and performance in the course. We believe the attention paid to quality is even more crucial or critical in online teaching since learning takes place remotely and often, asynchronously. In a face-to-face course, faculty may have the opportunity to adjust their teaching style or in-class activities based on students' real-time feedback or faculty's situational awareness, but such practices might not be feasible in online teaching. Therefore, course design and delivery in the online format play essential roles and we cannot treat them in the same way as we do in the face-to-face format.

There are a number of issues that might impact the quality of online teaching. Lack of faculty training and development might contribute to the poor design and delivery of online courses, for faculty might not recognize the pedagogical difference between face-to-face and online courses. Lack of resources such as instructional designers or pedagogical expertise in online teaching can also impact the course quality. Lack of policy on quality assurance or its implementation might result in poorly designed and delivered online courses, which impact students' learning and ultimately the reputation of the university. As one task force member stated repeatedly, "the online student's impression of NKU as a quality academic institution is only as good as that person's most recent course." The lack of policy or proper implementation on monitoring of students' participation and test-taking can also impact students' learning in future courses if an online course is a prerequisite to those courses and also tarnish the ethical reputation of the university.

The following recommendations are proposed as a way to improve our online teaching and ensure best students' learning experience in online courses.

Recommendations

Develop integrated service focusing upon online teaching and technology for enhancing teaching within the new Center for Teaching and Learning. While many of the resources, services and staff expertise in pedagogy planned to be part of this new Center will be equally applicable to face-to-face teaching situations, there is also a need for specialized resources that are focused upon the opportunities presented by online teaching, whether in a fully online course or in a blended course. Some of these specialized resources for supporting online teaching could include:

Instructional Designers, LMS trainers, and online pedagogical experts providing both group training sessions related to instructional technology and online pedagogy, as well as individual collaboration with faculty for building technology-based instructional tools within their courses. Training sessions should focus on basic end-user manipulation of standard tools in the LMS and related systems, best practices in online pedagogy, and awareness of additional technological

options that could be created for teaching. The actual creation of specialized technological tools should be provided by the Instructional Designers through consultations with course instructors. These experts in technological innovations for teaching will be better able to advance the overall presentation richness of our online courses than if each course instructor is expected to identify and learn to take advantage of ever-changing technology. (Bawane and Spector recommend the following ranking of areas of expertise for successful course instructors: “pedagogical, professional, evaluator, social, and finally a technologist”

To support this philosophical approach to the supported development of technological teaching tools, and the desired increase in the amount of online course offerings, the number of positions devoted to instructional design should be increased. Various options to increase these positions should be considered, perhaps including:

- New positions.
- Temporary fellowship positions for new professionals in this field.
- Hiring of instructional designers who have both technology and pedagogical expertise.
- Increased use of master student employees and/or graduate assistants to provide foundational trainings, consultations, and implementation of tool development planned by the instructional designers.
- Providing opportunities to on-campus faculty and staff that have developed expertise in either innovative use of technology or innovative online teaching methods to share their expertise through a variety of programs. Depending upon the depth of the support these non-Center faculty and staff provide, supplemental honorariums could be paid.
- Possible streamlining of personnel needed for end-user training with a shift in emphasis from training instructors to develop their own course tools to providing services to develop course tools for instructors.

Promotion of campus-wide standards for quality of online courses. The pedagogical and instructional design experts in this Center could:

- Recommend one or more national standards our University would aspire to follow.
- Encourage faculty to use these standards to do self-assessment of their own courses in preparation for consultations with instructional designers and/or online pedagogical experts.
- Facilitate University-wide recognition of instructors of online courses that receive high ratings through a combination of national standards review by the Center personnel (review done based upon request of the faculty member), student evaluations, and any supporting peer review feedback.

Each faculty member who is listed as an instructor in a LMS course shell will be required to complete the Center’s online tutorial with assessment, covering core/essential use of the University’s LMS. Course shells would not be released for the instructor to build course materials until the tutorial had been successfully completed. Once the faculty member has successfully completed the tutorial, s/he would not be required in succeeding semester to again complete the

tutorial until a new version of the LMS is adopted by the University. When a new version of the LMS is adopted, every faculty member with a course LMS shell would be required to take a new LMS tutorial.

In addition to the creation of a faculty center for learning and teaching that would focus on offering training and development of faculty on a consistent and continual basis, we recommend that a start-up course be created and offered to all faculty who would like to teach an online course for the first time. In addition, Blackboard or an equivalent learning system course shell be created by instructors designer and offered as a basic building block for all faculty teaching online courses in the future.

A recommendation for creating a standardized policy or procedures for monitoring students' participation and test-taking in class. This might require not only the creation of new policy but also an investment in resources, in terms of technology and facilities, that would allow the policy to be effectively executed. The urgency for this recommendation might increase due to the requirement imposed by our accreditation bodies (e.g., SACS, etc.).

Quality assurance of online learning courses is essential in order to protect and advance the reputation of the University in attracting students, faculty members, and collaboratives with local industry and business; to assure that student credentials are recognized by prospective employers and are relevant to today's work force; and to identify high priority areas where resources, training, and technical support would be beneficial to course instructors. According to Chao, Saj, and Tessier (2006), institutions cannot maintain a competitive edge solely on the novelty of the online delivery format. The product itself must be of high quality and provide students with a comparable, if not better, learning experience than they receive by attending classes on campus. Zygouris-Coe, Swan, and Ireland (2009) found that a well-structured quality-assurance policy for monitoring online faculty was reported to be worthwhile and had a positive impact on the instructors' performance in the online classroom. **To this end, it is recommended that a quality assurance strategy for new courses as well as on-going online courses, be put in place that consists of a systematic and consistent formative methodology to measure and ensure quality.**

The elements to explore are:

Implement a campus-wide course design checklist or rubric to ensure that all online courses across the University meet minimum expectations, requirements, and standards. The purpose is to ensure that courses address quality in the areas of: editorial soundness, use of media, appearance, functionality/ web design (user interface, accessibility, support), and pedagogy guided by best practices and current research in teaching and learning. It is imperative that online courses display an intentional connectedness among learning outcomes, course activities, teaching strategies, and the use of appropriate media and technology. The rubric will be utilized for:

- New courses: Initiation courses will be developed in correspondence with the strategic goals of the Department, College, and University and in collaboration with an instructional designer. The rubric will be employed before the course can be taught.

- **Periodic Review of Existing Courses:** A quality assurance team from the Center for Teaching and Learning will select a certain percentage of online courses annually to undergo a quality check. This process is intended to be non-punitive and executed solely to ensure that courses representing Northern Kentucky University are meeting minimum standards. The review will provide an opportunity for designers to assist faculty with any course components that are found to be below University expectations.

One or more of the following assessment measures---or variations thereof--- is recommended:

- **Quality Matters Course Rubric:** Based on research-supported and published best practices, the QM Rubric is a set of standards by which to evaluate the design of online and blended courses. The rubric is complete with annotations that explain the application of the standards and the relationship between them. A scoring system and set of online tools facilitate the evaluation by a team of reviewers. While Quality Matters provides a standard and process for assessing online course design, it does not provide information to the institution about quality teaching in online environments nor the organizational infrastructure that is in place to support the course delivery process.
- **SREB Standards for Online Teaching:** The SREB Standards for Online Teaching groups a series of standards in three different areas: academic preparation; content knowledge, skills, and temperament for instructional technology; and online teaching and learning methodology, management, knowledge, skills and delivery. Within these areas are 11 standard statements with behavioral indicators that can be used to assist faculty with thinking and assessing their instructional practices within the online environment.
- **Sloan-C Effective Practices--Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Education Programs (Sloan Consortium):** The Quality Scorecard was conceived through a six-round Delphi study led by Kaye Shelton, Ph.D., Dean of Online Education at Dallas Baptist University, with 43 seasoned administrators of online education programs who agreed upon 70 quality indicators that administrators should examine within their programs to evaluate quality. The 70 weighted indicators of the Scorecard measure quality across nine categories: institutional support; technology support; course development and instructional design; course structure; teaching and learning; social and student engagement; faculty support; student support; and evaluation and assessment.

The same rigor and standards apply to courses in any delivery format. **Thus, online courses should undergo the same quality evaluation as face-to-face classes within a given department, whether this is in the form of chair review, peer review, or both.** It is highly recommended that online instructors submit to some level of peer review.

- **Comparative Outcomes Assessment.** Can include course-discipline-department specific comparisons of grade distributions and student success rates among delivery methods, with special attention paid to reasons given for student withdrawal from course across modes of instruction. A variation of the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey could be implemented.

- **University-wide recognition of high quality courses.** Stellar courses that receive high evaluations will be recognized with a supplemental honorarium or professional development monies as incentive for developing and maintaining high quality online courses
- **Instructor self-assessment.** This self-review is intended for use by the online instructor to provide an opportunity for reflection on structural and pedagogical components of a course. It is not intended to be submitted, accounted for, or used in an administrative procedure.

So, by employing a standardized and consistent measurement tool for evaluating online courses both in the beginning and then on a periodic basis; tying that instrument to national or published standards for online quality; ensuring that online courses are evaluated in the same manner as their face-to-face counterparts; comparing online course outcomes and student satisfaction with those generated in f2f courses; recognizing high quality courses across the University; and providing a means for instructor self- assessment, we would have a comprehensive "package" in place for assessing the quality of NKU online course offerings, both at their inception and on a continuing basis.

Facilitating Student Success

Learner support is a crucial component of the online learning experience. Support for students in the online learning environment should encompass the scope of the university experience. Online learners' tuition and fees pay for university services, yet an option for online learners to leverage those services is not always available. Although progress has been made in recent years, strengthening the student support framework for online students would not only foster student satisfaction and success for degree completion but could be marketed as key benefit of online learning at NKU.

In a case based study, Stewart and colleagues (2013) recognized a need for student support in all areas of the student experience at the "course, department/college, and university levels," ranging from admissions and registration through graduation and career services (p. 1). Blackboard, Inc. surveyed 196 institutions and conducted a series of focus groups and interviews in 2010 to examine the impact of student services in online education at these institutions (Blackboard, 2011). Their data reveal that, although these services may take on a "different shape" than the same services in the face-to-face environment, "when deployed correctly, effective services are crucial to creating and maintaining successful online learning experiences" (p. 2). Lowe (2005) underscores the value of relational and academic support in its impact on student persistence and completion among adult distance learners.

Recommendations

We recommend that a cohesive portfolio of student resources and services be readily available for online learners from admission through post-graduation. Efforts have been made to serve the online learner population and some resource areas are strong in their capacity to support online learners (e.g., library services), but often this information is inadequately communicated to the learner. In other areas, dedicated online support may be insufficient or inconsistent. Some areas struggle in their efforts to expand their services to the online learner population due to limited resources. Others may simply lack an awareness of the need to support (or the possibility of supporting) the growing online learner population with their resource area.

An extensive review should be conducted of all university services to assess NKU's current support practices for online learners. The purpose of this review would be twofold: (a) to build a comprehensive index of resources for online students and (b) to identify any areas that need improvement and/or support in building their capacity to provide university services for the online student population including, but not limited to, the following university service areas:

- Admissions & Orientation
 - o Admissions counselors informed in online learning at the university
 - o General university orientation to university and services
 - all new and transfer online learners to the university
 - o Online orientation module for online learning success
 - All new and transfer online students and all major changes from traditional to online learning
 - o Online orientation LMS tutorial (i.e., Blackboard 101 for students)
 - All new and transfer online students and all major changes from traditional to online learning
- Registrar Services
 - o Registration
 - o Graduation application (full process)
 - o Personal Information Updates
- Financial Support
 - o Office of Financial Assistance
 - o Scholarships and awards
 - o Financial literacy training
- Academic support
 - o Academic advising
 - o Tutoring academic advising
- Library Services
 - o Ensure students are informed of how to use the plethora of services available to them
 - o Integrate information literacy instruction more tightly into online support and instruction

- Technical training & support
 - o Preparation tutorials
 - o Early access to LMS for preparation and familiarity
 - o 24/7 help desk with remote access
- Student Support Services
 - o Student Success and retention
 - o Testing services
 - o Disability services
 - o Health & wellness and Counseling and Psychological services)
 - o Career Services
- Student Life
 - o Student organizations
 - o Student Government representation
 - o Alumni Association

By ensuring that a dependable portfolio of inclusive student services is available for online learners from admission through degree completion and beyond, we can enhance the reputation of online learning at NKU, strengthen the online learning experience for NKU students, and foster lasting connections with NKU online alumni.

Marketing and Identifying Strategic Opportunities

Online learning has become increasingly prevalent in the landscape of higher education. A 2015 article by Learning House Inc. reveals that over two-thirds of universities now consider online education a critical element of their future planning. Given the intense competition in this domain, it is essential that a clear and cohesive online marketing strategy is developed and aligned with our institution's strategic focus on growth in online program and course delivery.

Recommendations

Suggested initial steps are:

Conduct a situation analysis in order to capture key market insights

- What environmental (e.g., labor trends) and competitive factors (e.g., corporate/online college partnerships like Starbucks paying for their employees to obtain online college degrees through Arizona State) might facilitate or impede success
- What market offerings, current and/or latent online education opportunities, would be most appealing and have the highest probability of being successful (note: start with low-hanging fruit while exploring new opportunities)

- What is the market potential of each offering and whom should be targeted

Develop processes and activities to shape NKU online market offerings

- While quality instruction and student learning are the core services to be offered, it is imperative that supporting services are embedded into offerings that help to enhance the overall student experience
- Processes include items like a mechanism for handling online student course and non-course related questions and concerns in a friendly, professional, and timely manner
- Activities include tasks like the exposure of students to customized orientation materials that help to foster success in NKU online courses and programs

Create processes and activities to communicate and deliver offerings

- Develop an online brand with distinctive components that are complementary to the NKU brand, yet uniquely speaks to the NKU online experience
- Explore variable pricing/fee structures for different offerings, licensing/other agreements with different states, and possible external business partnerships to help attract and maintain an online student population
- Formulate a promotional mix and budget in a targeted, strategic manner in order to attract and recruit the appropriate students for online programs and courses; and address the following questions-
 - How can NKU grab the attention of targeted audiences to make them want to learn more about online offerings?
 - What key messages are relevant and will increase interest in and desire for our online offerings? (note: current research suggest students prefer aspirational messaging tied to job opportunities in the marketplace)
 - What mechanisms need to be in place for students to make enrollment decisions and register for offerings in an efficient and timely manner? It is of the utmost importance that the university is responsive to all student inquiries. This will require coordinated efforts among all NKU touch points.
- Facilitate ongoing relationships with current and potential online communities
 - Online offerings allow for a multiplicity of student interactions where consistent and customized services to students over time and across multiple touch points can be a differentiator. Metrics should be developed to assess our abilities to meet student expectations and offer them services that are meaningful and relevant.
 - Develop an organizational structure and internal (faculty/staff/partner) marketing strategies to build a collaborative campus environment that fosters ongoing positive interactions and online learning experiences

- Implement relationship marketing strategies to promote student retention, encourage recruitment and enrollment of new students, and builds long-term relationships with all online students.

Marketing, at its core, is a set of processes and activities that helps to shape market offerings, communicates and delivers what is valued, facilitates connections with those targeted, captures market insights and performance, and creates long-term growth. It is recommended that any online marketing strategy give due consideration to the breadth and interdependence of all components listed above in a thoughtful manner.

Summary

The proposal outlined above will provide NKU with an effective tool in the highly competitive online market. It will enable us to more effectively seek and develop online opportunities. As an added benefit, it promises, through the new faculty center for teaching and learning, to strengthen faculty skills across the institution.

Perhaps most importantly, our vision addresses a side of the equation which is often missed at other institutions: the student. If we are successful, we will produce successful online learners who will function as full members of the NKU community. The benefits of an engaged and satisfied student body will accrue to the university's benefit for many years.

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Related Resources

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- [Notes: Authors propose Inclusive Student Services Process Model (ISSPM) ... “loosely on Miller and Prince’s (1976) student development process model” ... “framework for designing processes and programs to support students in both traditional and online courses” (p. 58).]
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