



# UPCEA

## HALLMARKS OF EXCELLENCE

### IN ONLINE LEADERSHIP

Endorsed by:





# UPCEA

## HALLMARKS OF EXCELLENCE IN ONLINE LEADERSHIP

### Executive Summary

**T**his is still an early phase in the evolution of online learning. Individuals and structures are emerging to execute their institution's efforts to extend the reach of higher education, provide new opportunities for student learning, integrate technology and teaching, and augment the precarious finances of the contemporary university. As online distance learning matures, public expectations for quality education, and faculty expectations for support, are rising as well.

Online education is evolving from amateur experimentation to a mainstream professional entity on campus—from a dubious and sporadic place on the academic periphery to the forefront of the educational enterprise. We now need to establish the full array of professional skills and services so university leaders, faculty, students, and the public at large will embrace online education as integral to academe.

Universities are exploring different organizational models and tapping individuals to help lead as catalysts for change. At the beginning of 2014, UPCEA launched a process to spell out those Hallmarks of Excellence that will ultimately characterize entities on America's campuses dedicated to online learning. At this critical inflection point, our goal was to identify the

range of what will constitute successful online leadership—not merely what many might be doing now, but those standards, aspirations, and principles essential far into the foreseeable, and not so foreseeable, future. If we did our job properly, few if any will feel sanguine that their institutions have already reached a sustainable, comprehensive state of excellence. Rather than taking a snapshot of current practices, these Hallmarks suggest those truly daunting

aspirations necessary to make online education worthy of the highest ideals of higher learning.

These Hallmarks of Excellence are an attempt to infuse idealism into a budding, dynamic profession—to help first-generation leaders in this field so online education can assume its rightful place in what makes universities excellent, respected, and essential to their communities.



# We identify seven facets of leadership and organizational development in this young domain:



## 1 Advocacy and Leadership Within the University.

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Recognizing that online education, by its very nature, will be an integrated and extensive facet of its university, those charged with leading an enterprise must build internal alliances, and reflect the larger goals, values, and strategies of their institutions.

## 2 Entrepreneurial Initiatives.

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8-13

Recognizing that online education is inevitably about innovation, experimentation, risk, and imagination, emerging leaders must have the skills and creativity to facilitate responsible change.

## 3 Faculty Support.

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14-17

Recognizing that online education is not a solitary instructional process, but one that requires extensive support and resources, leaders must envelop their faculty with the tools they need to create education equal to, if not exceeding, that of the traditional classroom.

## 4 Student Support.

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Recognizing that online students demand a learning experience at least comparable to that on-campus, leaders must be ongoing advocates for students earning their degrees remotely from their institutions.

## 5 Digital Technology.

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Recognizing that technology creates both opportunities and anxieties, leaders must provide an environment that is current, dependable, and rich in the creative use of tools to enhance learning, interaction, and program integrity.

## 6 External Advocacy and Leadership Beyond the University.

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Recognizing that online enterprises must represent their institutions to an often skeptical public, leaders must be an authoritative voice to regulators, accreditors, alumni, members of the business community, and many others.

## 7 Professionalism.

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Recognizing that emerging entities need policies and practices that demonstrate the integrity of a profession still establishing itself, those leading the growth of online learning must exemplify the highest ideals and contribute to a growing professional community on a national scale.

Online education is now critical for the future of America's universities. These institutions can no longer establish a presence in this arena without a concerted institutional strategy and structure to accomplish this now major undertaking. These Hallmarks of Excellence are an attempt to articulate those features and principles that will create opportunities for students that far exceed anything already achieved in higher education, take pedagogy to a new level, and demonstrate the capacity of universities to be an even more vital force in our society.

# Excellent Practice: Advocacy and Leadership Within the University

## Goal:

As in any complex system, a university is comprised of multiple stakeholders and entities that work in concert with each other to fulfill the institutional mission and goals. Serving students who study at a distance means that student and faculty support systems, technology services, policies, resource strategies, and assessment and evaluation tools need to be developed and implemented to provide the fundamental infrastructure that generates student success. As most institutions now use technology to teach and blend instruction at both the course and program levels, campus systems and policies must evolve to serve students both on campus and at a distance. This does not occur organically. Without champions to maintain focus on these multiple stakeholders, the tenuous relationship between on-campus and online education can become disjointed, unstable, and siloed. At worst, critical parts of the infrastructure will not be prepared or cooperative. As a strategy is developed to maximize the use of technology-infused distance education programs, it is key to establish specific leadership and tactics to ensure that the strategy is effective, sustainable, and well understood by the university community.

Several models are emerging to house online education efforts. Some universities are choosing faculty to oversee a largely decentralized effort, while others have set up large, formal entities that provide services across many academic programs. Many institutions are looking to existing resources—such as colleges of professional and continuing studies—to extend their expertise and reach to benefit other colleges within their university. These schools of professional and continuing education have been at the forefront of the adoption of innovative models of instruction and infrastructure to support the use of instructional technology. In response to market needs and student demands, these units often find themselves drawn closer to the core of their institution's broader campus strategy—potentially challenging and disrupting their independent mission, administration, and model for success. However, this closeness can also enable these units to emerge in a key leadership role within their universities.

The primary intent here is to outline ideals, strategies, and criteria that will allow the institution to leverage existing infrastructure and expertise to maximize student success through the use of technology. Universities are in the midst of an important evolutionary process—one that will likely be key to their future stature and success as they formulate structures that move them towards prominence in online education. The objective is to establish Hallmarks of Excellence that will help guide that process.

## Key Elements of Internal Advocacy:

- + Engage all stakeholders to articulate a vision of online learning consistent with the institution's mission, goals, and strategy
- + Advocate for a pedagogically driven approach in the use of technology
- + Establish a strategy and structure consistent with the goals of the institution and these Hallmarks of Excellence

- + Create consistent definitions, standards, and campus-wide consensus
- + Work to establish metrics that provide measurements of success and accountability
- + Identify leadership and a central resource for effective practices, internal and external analytics, and quality control
- + Promote the benefits for both on-campus and distance students
- + Facilitate in collaboration among administrative and academic units
- + Partner with financial management to develop a sustainable resource strategy
- + Establish a communication plan—both internal and external
- + Drive commitment to a comprehensive self-evaluation and a virtual cycle of ongoing improvement and innovation

## Why?

Online education is a delivery mode of instruction that provides access and scheduling flexibility. However, the requirements necessary to successfully implement a campus-wide effort are broader than simply acquiring technology tools and making them readily available. The institution must assess and modify policies, practices, and resource strategies for the successful effort to be fully realized. A comprehensive approach mandates that campus leadership engage with faculty and students to articulate the vision and subsequent policies and practices required to bring a distance education plan to fruition. In addition, a leadership role is needed to define strategic objectives and the corresponding resourcing necessary for success, as well as to persuade others to contribute to this effort.

## What?

An institutional-wide commitment to online education as a key strategy requires all pieces of the puzzle to fit together. Regardless of how discrete its administrative entity is, online education—by its very nature—operates in close coordination and cooperation with the institution as a whole. Rapidly evolving technologies, changes in student demographics and competitive environment, and economic factors necessitate a comprehensive, mission-driven plan that capitalizes on existing systems and expands where needed. The elements involved in developing this plan require leadership, determination, and a willingness to participate. Essential to the change management attributes associated with this strategic initiative, leadership needs to also educate stakeholders and advocate for online education to ensure full and comprehensive adoption.

## Who and How—Implementation:

### Engagement

Engage stakeholders to articulate a vision of online learning consistent with the institution's mission, goals, strengths, and strategy:

- + Establish a working group to articulate a vision representative of all stakeholders. This group should include individuals or units (academic and administrative) with experience and knowledge of online education.

- + Charge the group to align the vision with the mission of the institution.
- + Present the vision broadly across the institution—providing ample opportunity for feedback and input.

Advocate for a pedagogically driven approach in the use of technology:

- + Promote and maintain a focus on the academic goal of online learning. Technology tools should be the solution, not the driver. This necessitates a comprehensive awareness of appropriate learning theory applicable to the curriculum.
- + Ensure that faculty leaders are included in the governance structure of the campus-wide online learning initiative. This becomes critical to overcome issues of quality assurance and faculty adaptation to the new strategy.
- + Reach out to advocates within the institution's academic departments and centers of teaching and learning.

## Strategy

Establish goals and strategy based on the stated vision and institutional factors:

- + Develop long-range goals and a strategy driven by analysis of existing academic strengths, infrastructure, programs, resources, and areas that need enhancement and development.
- + Establish or adhere to an academic governance structure that provides academic credibility and guidance.
- + Develop campus-relevant terminology and definitions for online and blended courses, programs, and students.
- + Disseminate and promote the strategy throughout campus for input and agreement—including all administrative levels, faculty senate, and student organizations.
- + Incorporate definitions within information systems to drive how courses are coded, programs identified, and student status determined.

Establish metrics that provide measurements of success:

- + Set these transparent metrics based on capacity, growth and access goals, and internal and external expectations.
- + Canvass colleges and departments to determine instructional capacity, resource needs, and academic strengths and priorities. Identify targets of opportunity that might be key to launching or extending online education within the institution.

## Leadership

Identify a management structure and a central resource for effective practices and internal and external analytics:

- + Identify or create an office or unit to serve as the lead, even transitionally, in driving the initiative.
- + Define the unit as a critical part of the senior leadership team within the academic affairs sector, and recognize the unit as the campus source for effective practices, with ultimate responsibility for the success of online education.
- + Establish leadership explicitly to champion for quality online education across the institution.

- + Ensure that the appointed leadership is empowered and resourced to establish plans and protocols for the initiative.

Document the benefits for both on-campus and distance students. Those who study exclusively at a distance and those who blend their programs on campus value the flexibility that online learning provides:

- + Illustrate how students who enroll in an online course can enhance their employment and other extracurricular opportunities—such as internships or study abroad experiences—and not lose time in obtaining a degree.
- + Diversify the classroom by allowing both campus and distance students to enroll in online courses—broadening the opportunity for peer-to-peer learning and strengthening the overall student experience for all constituencies.
- + Promote collaboration and new partnerships among administrative and academic units.
- + Articulate the advantages for students when departments and colleges collaborate in online programs. A degree with a concentration, specialization, certificate, or minor provides a competitive advantage for the student in the workplace and enables the university to reach a wider array of students.
- + Demonstrate that shared instructional capacity and financial resources enhance the opportunities to launch full degrees online through cooperative efforts, easing the burden on any single department, college, or campus.

## Sustainability

Partner with financial management staff to develop a sustainable resource strategy:

- + Consider whether to establish a separate tuition rate for distance education courses or students; how this tuition compares to existing rates for resident and nonresident students; and what other fees to assess.
- + Dedicate a portion of the revenue stream for marketing, program development, statutory regulations, curriculum revisions, technology infrastructure, and faculty development. Create an investment fund to grow and enhance program offerings.
- + Build a model for proposing new online degree programs, to test their financial viability and resource needs.

## Communication

Establish a communication plan—both internal and external:

- + Manage both internal and external spheres of influence—across the full range of stakeholders.
- + Establish a website or portal to share communications, events, and recognitions.
- + Widely disseminate updates, policies, and procedures.
- + Consider other indirect communication avenues that serve the cause. Events such as faculty development workshops, online teaching awards, and establishment of best practice examples support the communication of the overall strategy.

## Assessment and evaluation

Drive commitment to a comprehensive evaluation strategy:

- + Use analytics to drive decisions related to program development, infrastructure needs, and support systems.
- + Promote instructional research in the areas of online education and the use of technology to inform further development, and pursue opportunities for presentations and publication.
- + Develop multiple levels of assessment strategies that incorporate data from stakeholders and campus units—including their perspectives and needs.
- + Set quality assurance standards and metrics for online programs and courses.
- + Report findings and advocate for change, resources, and innovations based on results. Establish the habit of openness, self-criticism, and continual improvement, so that analytical tools fuel ongoing quality enhancement.

## Key Performance Indicators

- + Legitimacy in leadership and organizational structure
- + Powerful data analytics that drive decision-making and promote accomplishments
- + Policies that address instructional capacity, concurrent enrollment, and distance education tuition
- + Cooperation and respect among the colleges and administrative units
- + Increases in faculty participation and the number of degrees and courses offered online
- + Growth in enrollment, credit hours, and degrees completed—as well as enhancement of the stature of the institution as a whole
- + Recognition, awards, and publications



# Excellent Practice: Entrepreneurial Initiatives

## Goal:

New technological innovations, new modes of delivery, and alternative business models are saturating and altering the academic landscape. In this swirl of change, identifying what will clearly endure and what is ephemeral is difficult. Most of these emerging changes involve online education in some fashion, making online course delivery central to an entrepreneurial strategy within most universities. The digitization of the curriculum can be a liberating opportunity to expand an academic footprint or grow enrollments for resource development.

Approaching online program delivery with this entrepreneurial mindset, however, demands a pivot away from conventional programming structures and thinking and an embrace of creativity, risk, and nonconformity. Online delivery requires a set of principles similar to those of any entrepreneurial venture: a focus on market (employer/consumer/student); a differentiated product (degree programs); strategic planning and resourcing (business model); and the ability to take risks and improvise. In addition, such issues as institutional brand, faculty governance and culture, and program identification can become key elements to consider within the unique educational context. The goal is to raise awareness of the institution's singular strengths and entrepreneurial objectives and opportunities when contemplating the use of online education.

## Key Elements:

- + Identify and articulate institutional brand and reputation
- + Understand the market and proper use of market research
- + Determine program differentiation and attributes
- + Establish roles and importance of campus leadership
- + Help cultivate and build consensus among key academic stakeholders
- + Engage in effective faculty (re)sourcing
- + Assess campus infrastructure and allies needed for new ventures
- + Mobilize marketing, recruitment, and enrollment teams
- + Ascertain and build a case for resource needs
- + Recognize the need for improvisation in the pursuit of solutions and the willingness to take risks—and respond to both success and failure

## Why?

Entrepreneurship within higher education should not be seen or interpreted as novel. Institutions have existed in an educational marketplace that has experimented with and celebrated new ventures for

generations. In fact, innovation is a hallmark of the U.S. educational model and the basis for its global ascendancy for the better part of the last century. As public spending on higher education flattens or declines, an entrepreneurial venture can help cultivate much-needed financial resources that can address existing and emerging student needs. Students are increasingly savvy with technology and interested in controlling and personalizing their own educational experiences. From a public policy perspective, access to a diversified, cost-effective educational model has become an imperative. An entrepreneurial mindset can enhance an institution's ability to secure funding for core initiatives, while simultaneously playing a role in defining and expanding the institution's brand and reach in the market.

## What?

### Goal Identification

#### **What does the institution wish to achieve?**

If the goal is to grow resources, then scale and delivery efficiencies will be paramount. However, if the goal is to extend the institutional brand into new markets or expand existing markets, a different set of priorities will drive decision-making.

#### **Is campus leadership aligned (explicitly or implicitly) with the goal?**

Institutional leadership buy-in is especially essential in new ventures, particularly if this involves new strategic directions or commitments.

### Brand Alignment

#### **What are critical brand attributes needed for the project?**

It is not necessary that every project reflect the full brand identity of the institution; however, each project should have enough brand alignment with the institution so as not to be alien to internal stakeholders. Ventures that fail to align with the institutional brand run the risk of internal resistance, marginality, or eventual elimination.

#### **How does the brand influence the selection and design of a project?**

Brand can influence the type of programming that is considered, as well as how an initiative is designed.

### Market Research

#### **What type of market research do you need?**

The more understood about a particular market, the easier it will be to succeed in that market. In some cases, a project may need extensive research on primary issues such as the size of the market, labor demographics, and gender and age distribution. In other cases, trend data may suffice. Equally important is a competitive analysis of the market. Coupling trend and competitor analyses can reveal emerging gaps that can be addressed.

#### **How much market research is needed?**

Typically, market research is proportionate to the risk involved in an undertaking: critical market questions should be answered and enough confidence obtained to risk the effort required to reach that market.

## Idea Generation

### How do you get organized to develop new ideas?

Ideas for new online programs typically come from:

- + Internal agents (faculty, staff, or campus leadership who, by virtue of their deep understanding of the organization, will have ideas that could become new ventures)
- + External agents (alumni, employers, or external partners who possess unique perspectives)
- + Market research (compelling data that inform program development and indicate gaps in either an underserved area or a demographic population ill-served by other institutions)

An entrepreneurial university will have formal or informal structures in place so that ideas can be shared and discussed. Ideas are easy to generate, but vetting and evaluating them requires discipline and focus. Ideas are highly malleable and should be subject to criticism and improvement. This iterative process typically advances the initial concept while recruiting internal champions and opinion-makers willing to support an idea. An organization open to hearing ideas and perfecting them will be more likely to successfully launch new ventures.

### What kind of ideas should be generated?

Ideas should serve a market need, and can encompass everything from completely new degree programs to redesigned existing programs. Perhaps a fresh student population is targeted in a new way, or curricular innovation is embedded into the online format.

### What attributes are used to evaluate ideas?

An objective evaluation rubric, based on agreed-upon criteria, can be useful in vetting ideas. Those ideas that meet baseline criteria on goals and brand need to then be tested more thoroughly.

### If an idea appears viable, what is the next step?

Simply identifying a potentially viable idea is not enough to green-light a project. Once an idea has been fleshed out, evaluating it from a market perspective may be necessary. Focus groups, discussions with potential employers, and further labor-market studies can all lead to vital information. This may be enough for a low-cost, low-risk initiative, but as stakes, investment, and entrenchment increase, so, too, should self-scrutiny and caution.

## Project Plan

When an idea has been given the green light to proceed, it should meet baseline brand and goal criteria. The next step is to develop a project plan that will anticipate the various steps necessary for launching the enterprise.

### Marketing:

Every good idea needs a story told by a marketing plan. The marketing plan should address basic messaging about the program and express the value proposition to the intended audience. Determining target markets—and the respective strategies and venues to reach those markets—is critical.

### Academic Readiness:

The eventual success of an initiative is often predicated on the momentum created by the initial steps. A number of questions should be answered: Will current faculty teach the degree program, or will new faculty need to be recruited? Will the curriculum be ready to enroll students by launch date? How will

inquiry management and academic advising be handled? Initial success often determines long-term viability—and initial failures can abort what otherwise might have been a sustainable new venture.

#### **Enrollment Management and Student Recruitment:**

Recruitment and enrollment management are critical, especially when scale and new markets are at play. Lead generation and cultivation are essential for meeting enrollment targets. Managing expectations is critical; it is always best to exceed low forecasts than to disappoint with lackluster initial results.

#### **Other University Services:**

Financial services, the registrar, student services, and others need to be incorporated into the new initiative. A project plan should have a communication protocol that notifies others on campus of the particulars of the program and how these will be handled.

#### **Launch Date:**

A new initiative needs a proper launch. Putting a date on a calendar and committing to it are powerful management tools. They allow energy to be harnessed and focused. Sometimes a soft launch of a program or its course components can prepare a program for its eventual initiation in the marketplace.

#### **Resource Allocation and Business Planning:**

Capital is essential in making a project successful. Some projects can be supported by internal reallocation of existing budgets; larger projects will need substantial cash infusions. Development funds are critical in bringing all the pieces together. Underfunding a project can mean a degradation of programmatic quality or an anemic marketing plan. All new ventures have an opportunity cost, which needs to be considered in how an enterprise will spend its finite time and money. Finally, every new venture risks failure, which needs to be anticipated with an agile strategy for either a teach-out or a scaling back to a more modest undertaking.

## Who and How—Implementation

### **Dedicated Project Team**

Each new initiative needs a small group of individuals tasked with bringing the project to reality. The team should represent a cross-section of the various stakeholders, but their roles should not be limited to a particular narrow or formal function within the university. It is helpful to have individuals on the team who share an excitement about launching a new venture but who are also savvy about navigating potential university roadblocks. The project team should be formally charged, motivated, and empowered to work expeditiously through the normal protocols of the university's daily operations. This identified group of expert and highly regarded individuals should be given ownership of day-to-day decisions, while remaining nimble enough to adjust and modify plans as a situation demands. Whether ad-hoc or more regularized, the project team tasked with program development and implementation should be empowered and accountable—and ultimately responsible for orchestrating all moving parts of the initiative from concept development to launch. As a program becomes assimilated into the infrastructure of the institution, this team can relinquish oversight to an area management team or corresponding unit.

## **Online Development Team**

Course developers, videographers, educational technologists, and the corresponding support staff of the online operations group should work with the academic community to develop content into a superior online presentation. Often, the best-quality resources are devoted to new ventures to ensure that a launch succeeds.

## **Marketing and Communication**

The marketing and communication team needs to be mobilized to help develop a marketing strategy for the new initiative, as well as to prepare for and execute its launch. Too often, good ideas falter because of an inadequate effort to promote the program.

## **Faculty**

Faculty need to provide content, develop the curriculum, and design the courses. They also personify the program to the public. New online ventures—especially those differentiated by a unique or distinctive idea—need special attention from the faculty in the early stages. Faculty may also be called upon to develop admissions standards for programs and, in some cases, oversee the admissions process. A program intended to build scale in numbers may require additional support to ensure admissions standards are maintained.

Ideally, an institution will have a formula in place to show any incremental staffing needed for new programs at various stages of development.

A number of tactics are commonly used to incentivize faculty. Release time, additional compensation, and planning grants are frequently effective. For tenured and tenure-track faculty, clearly articulating where online teaching fits within the tenure, promotion, and reappointment process goes a long way toward establishing online engagement as a norm rather than a distraction, and provides an opportunity to elevate effective teaching throughout the faculty. Ultimately, online teaching should inspire emulation rather than apprehension. Faculty commitment, especially from those most likely to create a positive momentum, is perhaps the greatest determinant of future success.

## **Enrollment Management and Student Recruitment**

Although many institutions lack even rudimentary marketing resources, marketing alone will not enroll students. The student recruitment team needs to be mobilized to conduct targeted outreach to various markets—including organizations, businesses, and other specialized populations. This group's role is to leverage leads generated by marketing campaigns and deliver completed applications for admission consideration. In new program ventures, involving faculty in the recruitment and selection process can be especially important.

## **Specialized Vendors**

An institution may not have the necessary infrastructure to meet the ambitious goals of a new initiative. If that is the case, a range of educational vendors can serve as capacity-building agents on

an institution's behalf. Advertising agencies can design campaigns. Enrollment coaching services can manage high-volume lead and application generation.

Online-enabling companies can help develop courses for online consumption. In contracting external services, realistic entry and exit strategies should also be contemplated.

Shorter service contracts are typically more expensive. Many of these services operate on a longer-term revenue-sharing model, where vendors put up their own investments for a portion of a school's revenue stream.

### Campus Leadership

Depending on the size and ambition of a particular online initiative, key campus leadership can be active supporters and ambassadors of a new venture, particularly in securing campus cooperation and external advocacy.

## Key Performance Indicators

Performance indicators for entrepreneurial initiatives depend greatly on stated goals. Among the performance indicators to be considered:

- + Did the project or initiative meet its desired goals within the allotted time? Was the institution able to garner additional financial resources? Has the initiative expanded the institution's market share?
- + What market intelligence was developed that could be applied to other programs? What lessons were learned that could help propel future initiatives?
- + Did infrastructure cooperation and expansion occur?
- + Did the initiative increase institutional capacity to take on additional projects?
- + Was the institutional brand enhanced? Did the project over time:
  - Increase the institution's visibility in targeted markets?
  - Create positive media attention?
  - Result in conference presentations, published papers, or other forms of public scholarship?
  - Produce reputational gains?
  - Show unexpected, positive outcomes that accrued to the institution?
  - Generate enthusiastic, supportive students to carry that message forward for future enrollees?
- + Were there enrollment gains or other benefits across the institution that resulted from the online venture?
- + Were faculty and staff engaged effectively in an online initiative that garnered positive and measurable impact?
- + Did faculty and staff skills increase as a direct result of the project?
- + Did the initiative reveal new funding opportunities for the units involved?
- + Did the initiative spin-off other new ideas or projects?

# Excellent Practice: Faculty Support

## Goal:

To be successful in delivering quality online education, faculty must be able to rely upon well-planned orientation and professional development, technical support, instructional design expertise, institutional quality standards in course design and engagement of faculty and students, and clearly communicated policies for compensation and workload. Faculty should expect to be fully supported in their online teaching endeavors, as they assume a significant role in learning new technologies and pedagogies, providing high-quality instruction, and demanding excellence from themselves as online instructors.

Faculty who are geographically remote from the campus should benefit from the same caliber of support as those who live and work close to or on campus.

## Key Elements:

- + Establish scalable practices for program and enrollment growth
- + Develop workload and compensation policies
- + Clarify intellectual property rights and faculty responsibilities for online authorship
- + Provide various and diverse opportunities for faculty development
- + Inspire faculty creativity and continuous enhancement of the online experience
- + Maintain ongoing technical support for faculty and students
- + Cultivate quality instructional design and development
- + Ensure ongoing assessment of faculty support services

## Why?

Faculty who have received initial training and ongoing professional development opportunities—supported through technology, staff expertise, and personal compensation and recognition—will be able to provide high-quality online instruction, engage students more effectively, and maximize learning outcomes.

## What?

Faculty support systems can take various forms. Institutions should consider every potential touch point where support may be needed. This begins with the buy-in process: faculty must feel secure that they will receive adequate support with technology, pedagogy, and instructional design. There must be a

clear understanding of the institutional expectations for teaching online. As online courses become part of the institution's core strategy for addressing student issues such as time-to-degree, learning effectiveness, and flexibility, modes of instruction becomes less flexible and varied. Time and monetary compensation—from online course development through teaching—should be standardized within institutional policy and clearly communicated to all stakeholders as a mainstream aspect of faculty life. It is critical that the institution sets high expectations and monitors, supports, and rewards faculty so they can achieve a superior level of performance. Key concepts for faculty support include:

### **Institutional Policies for Faculty Who Teach Online**

Recognizing that quality online teaching is time consuming and requires ongoing pedagogical re-design mandates that institutions take into consideration policies related to 1) instructors who may be geographically distant from campus; 2) workloads and expected time allotment for teaching online; 3) on-load or over-load compensation; 4) course design and re-design stipends; and 5) intellectual property rights and responsibilities of authorship.

### **Alignment with Overall Mission**

Strategic planning for success in online education should be aligned with institutional policies around faculty commitment, time allocation and compensation, and resources needed to ensure continued success in online programs.

### **On-Boarding**

Prior to teaching an online class, faculty should be engaged through readily available and incentivized institutional training. A mentor program can assist new online instructors in feeling connected and confident by pairing them as co-teachers with more experienced online faculty members. Information related to intellectual property rights should be disseminated, along with a respect for the intellectual property rights of the materials of others that might be incorporated into online courses.

### **Ongoing Professional Development**

Faculty must be continually encouraged through professional development opportunities that are high quality, consistent, and available through a variety of formats or technologies. Opportunities for such growth may take the form of institution- or program-specific professional development, institutional workshops, seminars, or discussion-board exchanges with other faculty. Additionally, professional association conferences or web conferences are important resources for ongoing professional development opportunities. Via dialogue and exchange of ideas and practices across programs, ongoing institutional support should encourage reflection on teaching practices, assist faculty with emerging technologies, and provide the foundation for continued pedagogical improvement.

### **Course Design-Team Approach**

The ultimate objective is to unleash faculty imagination to create courses that meet their highest aspirations. Faculty should be able to achieve teaching and learning outcomes that far exceed their classroom experiences. A design team provides faculty with much-needed assistance in course development and access to ideas and techniques used elsewhere. Media development enables a varied approach to teaching and learning. Creation of concrete learning outcomes, assessment tools, and communication methods will assist faculty in the smooth operation of their course. Support in course design should be provided by the university, ideally through a centralized production unit and also through templates and clear guidelines available for use in a more independent mode. Each time a course is taught it should be evaluated for use of new technologies and innovations, along with updated web resources. A complete review of courses and program outcomes should be completed on a regular, three-year cycle to ensure that gaps, obsolescence, or redundancies have not crept into the curricula.



## Preparing Faculty

### **Orientation:**

Help faculty learn about the institution and how to be successful in the online environment by providing customized orientation. This should combine both an institutional and a discipline-specific perspective. At a minimum, virtual orientations can provide access to general information on institutional goals for quality online teaching; contact information for the course design team; technology requirements; introduction of key players within the institution; an overview of the learning management system; information about key policies—including FERPA, intellectual property, course ownership, academic integrity, grading, library and virtual laboratory services, fair use of outside materials in a course, student anti-plagiarism software; and an overview of available online student support services (such as tutoring, writing support, disability services, or career services).

### **Technology:**

Provide initial setup support for faculty-used equipment, as well as access to technology support office hours to help with the learning management system and any other issues that could impede faculty access to the virtual classroom or university services.

### **Payroll Policies and Benefits:**

Make payroll policies and benefits information accessible to adjunct instructors teaching from a distance. Make compensation (both in release time and over-base) clear to full-time faculty.

### **Shared Governance:**

Ensure faculty understand the role, if any, they play in the shared governance processes with the university and, specifically, within the online program where they are teaching. Create an advisory or steering committee comprised of faculty, administrators, and alumni and students to provide input and guidance regarding policies and practices for the institution's online efforts.

### **Policies and Procedures:**

Provide faculty with the policies related to teaching expectations and grading, and other special student needs and circumstances. Sample syllabi and course rubrics that identify important learning outcomes should be provided. Faculty should also be prepared to handle student conduct issues—missed participation and work, plagiarism, online etiquette, and grading standards—and informed where to seek counsel as needed.

## Ongoing Support

### **Focus on Excellence:**

Campuses that have successful, robust online offerings often have established a center for excellence in teaching and learning—a dedicated resource strictly to support and promote high-quality teaching. Many of these units have faculty members as key members of the team, and are committed to mentorship and the effective use of technology to reach academic goals.

### **Establish a Virtual Community:**

Provide access to any virtual meeting space for faculty. Consider setting up discussion boards within each college or discipline area where faculty can gather to address concerns, ask questions, and build community with their fellow instructors.

### **Library:**

Identify available services (e-journals, book borrowing, and reserves), ensure that faculty have the access needed for their discipline, and designate a library liaison to assist as needed.

**Bookstore:**

Facilitate easy access to print or online course materials through the availability of a contact person. Provide required textbook or other instructional content as early as possible to allow time for the faculty member to become fully familiar with course materials. Encourage faculty to consider open education resources to assist with use of materials in an online environment.

**Virtual Laboratory and Computing Needs:**

Determine if virtual access to campus computing resources is required. Many expensive and difficult-to-install software programs can be hosted centrally by the university. Make sure that faculty have at least the same access needed to virtual laboratories as that afforded to distance students.

**Academic Services:**

Help online faculty understand what academic services might be available for their students, and how to facilitate a smooth hand-off to those resources. This may include, but should not be limited to, advising, tutoring, writing support, disability services, career services, sexual misconduct and harassment policies, and other workshops and services.

Full-time faculty have existing systems in place to provide avenues for communication and participation. Contracted online instructors also need to feel engaged with the institution and valuable to the process of teaching and learning. It is imperative that these instructors understand the culture and climate of the institution where they have chosen to work.

## Who and How—Implementation

Many institutions excelling in faculty support have created units on campus that help faculty in the use of technology in their courses—whether the course is technology-enhanced, blended, or fully online.

Faculty governance committees charged with online teaching excellence can identify policies, procedures, and support systems that encourage an interest in teaching online and a commitment to high-quality courses.

Instructional support should be key a component in budget and resource conversations and decisions.

## Key Performance Indicators

- + A successful faculty support system is measured by student satisfaction and retention rates; faculty job satisfaction and retention rates; and course evaluation data.
- + Qualitative and quantitative data should be mandated matrices employed to measure success and benchmark quality practices among faculty.
- + Access should be granted to external assessment instruments that faculty can utilize to assess online course design and teaching ability.
- + Ultimately, faculty success consists of far less-tangible factors—the ease with which they can create and incorporate innovative components into their teaching and the incremental improvements that result from their ability to experiment with new ways of teaching.

# Excellent Practice: Student Support

## Goal:

Online education should not be reduced to a merely transactional relationship with students, but should seek to impart a memorable, impactful, and holistic educational experience. Online students are savvy consumers of education, with an expectation for excellent support and service, and their engagement with their institution of choice should be no different. In order to be successful, online students require strong support in alignment with the institution's retention and time-to-degree goals. Online leadership should strive to foster social and academic connectivity, providing students with a distance educational experience that exceeds what they would receive on campus. A significant percentage of an institution's distance students may never set foot on campus; therefore, education and services should be designed to focus on this remote population. To the extent possible, the quality and comprehensiveness of support for the virtual community should approximate, if not exceed, that of the campus community—every student need must be met without having to ever appear on campus.

## Key Elements:

- + Ensure the quality of the student experience for fully online students
- + Foster community engagement and cohort diversity
- + Provide targeted student support services
- + Create a student learning experience through intentional instructional design
- + Develop student success/retention initiatives
- + Implement ongoing technical and pedagogical support for faculty and students
- + Commit to ongoing assessment of faculty and student support services

## Why?

Because online learners may differ from campus students in geographic proximity, native language, culture, age, motivation, and persistence, an extensive support system is needed to facilitate student success in the online learning environment. Key elements to this are participation within the university community and active engagement with other learners. The challenge is to provide a holistic student experience without the advantages of proximity. The goal is to engage the student with the university and fellow students before, during, and beyond program coursework.

Effective student support systems and community engagement increase student retention and satisfaction, and are especially critical for degree students during their first two to three courses. Students become more invested in completing the program as they experience success and satisfaction over time.

## What?

Student support systems can take various forms. Institutions should consider where support is needed at every potential touch point with the student. Distance students appreciate hearing from the institution via a variety of contact points and modalities, including telephone. The institution should regularly initiate personal contact with students. If the target student population spans multiple time zones, the support structure may need to be extended to provide after-hours access.

The goal of student services is not simply to respond to problems or technical needs but to create and sustain relationships that provide the context for the total educational experience and beyond. Key areas to consider include:

### Early Planning

#### **Admissions to Matriculation:**

Engage prospects early during the recruitment process by intentionally seeking those who can succeed in your institution. Engender geographic and professional diversity among the virtual student community. Ensure that admitted students enroll by welcoming them to the university and providing early support to help them feel comfortable with the transition to the program and the virtual environment.

#### **Student Privacy and Confidentiality:**

Ensure that all federal privacy laws, such as FERPA, are followed for online students. When designing the virtual environment, set clear guidelines for how private information such as grades, academic support, and confidential consultations with faculty will be protected so the environment remains a safe space for learning.

#### **Accessibility:**

Make certain that services are available to students with disabilities. Determine how the need for these services will be assessed and delivered, and what accommodations will be made in the virtual environment to provide appropriate support for students who may need it. Faculty called upon to provide accommodation should receive frequent and consistent information from the appropriate office as well as professional development related to universal design and appropriate teaching techniques.

#### **Course Design:**

Provide faculty with extensive assistance in course development, particularly with a student perspective in mind. Student success begins with courses that are designed with a student-centric approach. Instructional design is more than organizing content on the web; it is the intentional creation of a safe and engaging learning experience for the student. A supportive environment includes having a consistent look and feel by program; clear instructions on how to progress through the material; accommodations for multiple learning styles; opportunities for interaction and reflection; and community-building elements. Be specific about learning goals, assessment methods and rubrics, and faculty contact preferences. Course design is an important component in student success because it guides the experience for the learner. A chaotic, confusing virtual environment with competing instructions and vague assignments will quickly disengage students. Professional course design should be provided by the university, ideally through a centralized production unit or by making templates and clear guidelines available for use in a more independent model.

#### **Ease of Use and Navigation:**

Today's students expect to encounter an environment that is well designed, comprehensive, and easy to navigate and understand. Significant energy and expertise is required in the area of web design and

navigation to create the optimum environment for students, in a comprehensive and inclusive manner across all aspects of the student's online experience.

## Preparing Students

### **Orientation:**

Help students become familiar with the institution and successful practices in the online environment by providing an orientation customized to distance learners. Virtual orientations should include access to information on technology setup; details on the course of study; introduction of key players and their roles and responsibilities; an overview of the virtual-learning space; and a review of core policies. Also important are efforts to connect students to one another, with faculty, and with staff.

### **Technology:**

Provide initial setup support as well as access to extended-hours help with the learning management system and any other issues that could impede a student's access to the virtual classroom or university services.

### **Registrar:**

Determine how students will register, receive grades, complete course changes, obtain help with general registration-related matters, and consider what support will be necessary.

### **Student Accounting:**

Ensure accounting and finance practices are convenient for online students. Processes for using these services and handling financial matters should be clearly posted in an easily accessible location.

## Ongoing Support

### **Virtual Community:**

Provide access to virtual meeting space for student groups. These can be used for online study teams, work groups, or general gatherings. Consider setting up common activities within each course where students can gather to "hang out" online and discuss common non-academic topics. Help your students find one another geographically by sharing hometowns, interests, and employment, within privacy parameters.

### **Library:**

Identify available services (e-journals, book borrowing, and reserves), ensure that students can access them at a distance, and that help is available from professionally trained library staff when needed. Where appropriate, provide access to an online librarian who is familiar with the course and be able to point to supportive materials within the library infrastructure.

### **Bookstore:**

Facilitate easy access to printed or online course materials through an online bookstore with extensive shipping or download capabilities. Textbook needs can be supported by the university bookstore or by the plethora of web-based tools and services available.

### **Mini Workshops:**

Provide students with short content-specific modules on key topics such as plagiarism, copyright protection, academic writing styles, citation rules, library use, and other timely topics that can be accessed on demand or scheduled at regular intervals.

**Virtual Laboratory:**

Determine if virtual access to campus computing resources is required within and across coursework. Many expensive and difficult-to-install software programs can be hosted centrally by the university.

**Other In-Course Support:**

Determine what type of assistance will be available to students throughout the course. A student services representative should be embedded in the course to monitor it, and dedicated support should be available to students who require help navigating elements of the course. Tutors and others should be on hand to assist students at risk or who are otherwise challenged by course requirements.

**Academic Advising:**

Create availability for distance students to receive academic guidance on course selection, degree progression, academic progress, and career implications. Determine how to provide appropriate faculty support in this area. Provide a web-based environment that clearly details students' progress through their programs of study, and provides access to course schedules related to their programs. Provide dedicated "success coaches" for students, who will be responsible for tracking student progress and success through the program of study, and who can intervene with support as needed.

**Career Support Services:**

Provide access to support for career changers and job seekers. Determine how students will be able to use the institution's career support office and whether additional resources and tools will be needed. Leverage learning outcomes by offering career advising, including portfolio building, job-search skills (such as identifying prospective employers and interviewing), and résumé and cover letter development.

**Tutoring and Writing Support:**

Ensure students have access to tutoring and writing support when needed. Determine if the institution's academic support center can provide these services to students at a distance or whether external assistance will be needed.

**Academic Content Help from Faculty and Tutors:**

Map a process for students to receive academic help on course content from instructors and tutors when necessary. Ensure students know whom to contact when there is a question, and the expected response time.

**Retention Practices:**

Develop robust student tracking mechanisms based on analytics from the learning management system (LMS), customer relationship management (CRM) software, and student information systems (SIS), which record when students stop out, monitor their projected return dates, and include outreach plans to contact students through their dedicated success coaches to ensure a return to their programs. Practices should be created to include students in university communications during inevitable absence and welcome them back when they are ready to return.

Students need to feel a continuous connection to the university, and to know people are available to offer live support as needed.

## Support After Graduation or Program Completion

**Continued Engagement:**

Determine how students will remain connected and engaged with the institution after program completion. Communication and outreach can foster a productive and engaged online alumni base.

Online alumni should receive all university alumni communications, be incorporated in efforts to recognize their successes and milestones, solicited in fundraising efforts, supported in their career advancement, and encouraged to participate in future educational opportunities tailored to their career trajectory.

## Who and How—Implementation

It is critical to map the student lifecycle by identifying every potential interaction with the student from admissions through graduation—accomplished through a collaborative and coordinated process with representatives from multiple functional areas across the university.

Once the student lifecycle has been mapped, the next step is to identify every potential point of student interaction with the institution. The goal is to ensure a coordinated, consistent communication effort at every step of the lifecycle. An owner of each touch point should be identified and assigned the task of creating detailed sub-processes to assure a seamless workflow.

Once these touch points and interactions are identified, a student services staff member with an expert understanding of the program should be assigned as the primary point of contact for the student, serving as a “success coach.” The success coach advocates for students through a concierge model. The goal is to avoid requiring students to call multiple departments around the university—a telltale sign of institutional failure.

A single unit does not independently fulfill student support needs. Student success depends on a variety of interwoven units and processes. Student support must become an ongoing conversation across an institution, and be the responsibility of every individual who touches the student experience in any way. It is critical that every office within the institution understands that distance students are every bit as important as residential students to the success of the institution.

## Key Performance Indicators

- + Successful student support is measured by rates of graduation and student and alumni satisfaction. The institution should track the returning student retention rate and compare this number to industry norms.
- + Student satisfaction data can be obtained through end-of-course evaluations and then student and alumni surveys. Course evaluation data alone are insufficient to track student satisfaction metrics. Multiple methods should be deployed to obtain these data, including recording feedback obtained from student support staff, end-of-semester outreach efforts by deans and department chairs, annual student satisfaction surveys, as well as direct emails.
- + Data should be, at a minimum, generated annually and shared with faculty and staff.
- + Standard customer-centric satisfaction and benchmarking measures should also be considered. For example, consider asking standard questions (e.g., “Would you recommend this program to a friend?”) that can indicate student satisfaction when tracked over time.
- + Data gained from benchmarking measures can help measure satisfaction and provide insight about student engagement, while yielding useful critique for course development and redesign, program level issues, and faculty success.

- + Alumni are an excellent source of satisfaction data. Consider establishing a feedback survey for new alumni, following up at regular intervals in their professional careers. Information gathered from this group can enhance the understanding of program outcomes, job success, alumni achievement, fundraising opportunities, and potential referrals or corporate connections for new students.
- + Whatever methods are used to obtain feedback, students and alumni want to know their voices are heard. Establish a system for responding conscientiously to students who offer salient feedback—whether positive or negative.



# Excellent Practice: Digital Technology

## Goal:

In online education, every aspect of instruction, communication, interaction, and assessment—in fact, all transfer of ideas, information sharing, and expression—relies on digital technologies. The combination of tools, techniques, and approaches creates an immersive, engaging experience for all participants. Media comparison studies have long debated whether technology is merely a vehicle for educational constructs or whether it acts to enhance the learning process. Meanwhile, it is clear that the quality of the learning itself comes down to the caliber of instructional activities, the faculty, and processes being conducted. There is no doubt that technology issues and negative artifacts can most certainly create dissatisfaction for both faculty and student, and can hinder the intended experience.

With the vast array of powerful tools available to us now and in the future, harnessing these technologies adds the potential for creating experiences far more comprehensive than those in a traditional face-to-face environment. Technologies can assist expert educators to leverage grounded learning theories in new ways. They also enable educational institutions to scale and expand the outreach of their world-class faculty beyond the capacity of the single classroom. The road to success with technology-delivered education involves thoughtful and purposeful application of complex tools and systems in ways that can enrich the experience for all participants.

## Key Elements:

- + Develop current and dependable technical infrastructure
- + Provide ongoing technical training
- + Explore new technologies and optimize their use
- + Implement consultative process for technology review and improvement
- + Ensure information security and system integrity

## Why?

Technology is the fiber and platform joining students, faculty, content, and institutions in online education. This support infrastructure becomes the environment through which all interaction and all experiences are managed in the process of providing higher-education experiences online. As with every other aspect of how we conduct business as world-class institutions of higher education, the purposeful selection, application, and support of technology must be carefully managed and thoughtfully and completely implemented in ways that are driven by student-centered concepts and pedagogies.

## What?

The complete set of technologies involved in implementing, managing, supporting, and conducting online education is exhaustive. Technologies utilized will enable the minimum following functional areas:

- + Marketing and advertising
- + Advising
- + Admissions
- + Financial aid
- + Program and course rosters and lookup
- + Registration
- + Orientation
- + Course delivery
- + Participant interaction
- + Mentoring and remediation
- + Testing and proctoring
- + Co-curricular support systems
- + Program process and management
- + Alumni interaction
- + Assessment
- + Enrollment Management
- + Student Engagement
- + ADA Compliance

Specific types of technologies utilized in developing mature systems that support the above areas include:

- + Computer servers
- + Cloud-based systems
- + IT networks
- + Learning management systems
- + Database systems
- + Web development tools
- + Security systems
- + Authentication systems
- + Video and audio production tools
- + Television studios and classrooms
- + Graphics development

- + Animation systems
- + Proctoring and testing systems
- + Adaptive learning platforms
- + Web conferencing
- + Closed captioning

## Driven by Pedagogy

In and of themselves, these tools and systems do not accomplish much until they are combined in purposeful ways to become comprehensive educational environments. These tools need to be identified, created, and supported by talented individuals who deeply understand the nature and focus of the institution itself and the instructional goals of its faculty and students. Humans will always be the most critical element within any educational system.

While frameworks for best practices are helpful, there is no single recipe for the appropriate combination of tools and technologies ideal for every application. The prescription does not begin with technology; it begins with thoughtful consideration of educational goals and desired outcomes.

## Who and How—Implementation

### Who is Involved?

Designing, developing, and maintaining the total technology infrastructure for online program operations generally involves a wide range of individuals and talents across the institution. Often, individuals with critical technical knowledge from a range of areas such as admissions, registration, database management, system security, library, student engagement, marketing, financial aid, and similar offices participate in infrastructure development and support. In fact, there are very few mission-critical areas of the institution not involved in the design, development, operation, and maintenance of online education systems. To be effective, online distance learning must be a centrally supported and adopted component of the institution, as opposed to a tangential operation seen as something outside the norm of the institution.

Key leaders from online education, academic affairs, information technology, administration and finance, and academic affairs must guide discussions as to the levels of academic and pedagogical quality, student engagement, system reliability, system security, scalability, and adoption expected with this effort.

### Understanding the Application

Effective instructional processes and activities are designed and guided by instructional designers using grounded theories of education that utilize technology to connect participants. Managing this effort takes a complete understanding of the applications, levels, and approaches required to conduct academic programs. An understanding of the capabilities and resources available to participants is also required. Still, programmatic technology standards should be applied to ensure a consistent student experience.

## Planning and Design

Online study requires the cooperation of program planners, faculty, instructional designers, and instructional technologists, as well as a thorough review of current industry best-practice standards and specifications. Every instructional goal and any related activities should be reviewed, and appropriate, consistent online tools and techniques should be identified to meet each stated outcome. Some considerations might be:

- + What forms of instructional guidance will be conducted and by whom? Will video and audio lectures be synchronous or asynchronous, or combinations of both?
- + Where will the participants be, and what resources will they be expected to have? Will students be presenting materials and guiding sessions as well, and if so, what tools will they need?
- + What types of interactions are expected? For instance, will there be video and audio interaction amongst all participants, or breakout groups of students working in subsets with faculty guidance? What type of student-to-student interaction will be conducted?
- + What assessments will there be and how will they be managed? Is proctored testing an expectation?

High-quality educational environments utilize the optimum toolsets and systems for the desired instructional environment. That starts with a clear understanding of pedagogical objectives.

## Design and Development

Once the planning and design teams have reviewed the program and framed-up the types of instruction and related activities, information technologists and systems engineers should be brought in. Currently, the state-of-the-art in online education involves the use of a modern learning management system (LMS). If the organization has unique requirements and is large enough to support the effort, an LMS can be custom built or constructed from various unbundled technologies. Video and audio interactivity should be available for live instruction and group work. These tools can be built into the LMS or provided separately for this purpose.

Ideally, the application of these tools would be completely and seamlessly integrated into the existing student services of the institution, supporting the student lifespan (ideally from prospect to alumnus) with a cohesive and consistent educational environment. From course searches and registration to financial aid, advising, instruction, interaction and mentoring, proctoring and testing, and career management, the tools should be organized and presented in a way that is familiar, attractive, easy to navigate and execute, and comprehensive.

Many powerful tools are currently available that support communication from basic textual messaging to advanced, real-time social networking. The challenge lies in seamlessly integrating these individual capabilities into a comprehensive educational infrastructure.

In order to construct and manage a truly comprehensive solution, representatives from nearly every branch of the campus operation must be consulted and involved in the planning, including subject-matter specialists, pedagogy and teaching experts, instructional designers, information technologists, engineers, programmers, graphic artists, authorities from admissions, prospective and enrolled students, advisors, marketers, database administrators, library technologists, and registrars, among other talented professionals.

## Accessibility

All digital experiences designed and developed as part of the online educational environment must be universally accessible to all students. Care must be taken to balance digital innovation with dependability.

## System Architecture

### Quality

Equally important to a well-designed hardware and software system is the selection of quality components. Computer systems and hardware are available from a broad array of vendors catering to a wide range of clientele. For public institutions that are required to accept the lowest bidder on system acquisition, it is important that high-quality components are specified in the system design. Those charged with the development of online education systems must be careful and selective, and obtain and listen to the advice of those with expertise in systems operation and maintenance.

### Scalability

For institutions that see a growing role for online education, system scalability must be a fundamental consideration in every stage of planning—not just with system servers, licenses, and bandwidth, but with the human element as well. How many students will be together in any given course section? How many course sections will be offered? How will faculty guidance and interaction be conducted in larger courses, and how many faculty will be required to teach the anticipated or acceptable numbers of students in these courses? All of these systems, from the technology to the people involved, need to be planned out in advanced and designed around scalability. Begin that process by creating short- and long-term plans with quantifiable targets for numbers of programs, courses, students, and enrollments.

These plans will guide the technology acquisition and implementation process.

### Redundancy

Because every electronic component is subject to failure, excellent online system infrastructures should feature redundancy in system architecture and engineering. We must rely on redundant components with automatic failover hardware and software switching to ensure that operational interruptions are avoided and minimized. This can nearly double the hardware costs, increasing the expense of the software and system design considerably.

High-quality institutions of higher education cannot suffer significant interruptions to such services such as campus building power, network connectivity, lighting, or air conditioning. Neither should institutions utilizing online education expose their participants to the failures related to single-thread delivery systems.

### System Security

The area of computer network system security and protection covers a very broad range from general system design and reliability to protection against unwanted malicious attacks and data breaches. All advanced institutions of higher education will be significant users of IT resources and networking systems, and will have authorities in the area of IT network security on the team of experts behind the online system design. Problems with IT security range from system downtime due to denial-of-service attacks on network computers, to the release of secure information—such as student records—to an untrusted or unauthorized party or environment. The cost of keeping IT systems protected and secure

is rising on college campuses, but information assurance is a mission-critical component of any high-quality online education system.

### Technical Support

While we aspire to build systems where the need for technical support is virtually nonexistent, with today's dependency on technology certain types of failures can, and will, occur. Technical support must be available to students and faculty when that occurs.

Participants in online educational programs—especially asynchronous programs catering to students across wide geographical areas—expect even higher levels of service and response than on-campus students. Technical support systems must be available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week—and the systems must be well-organized and efficiently run.

Technical support staff must be highly trained and tightly integrated into the operational aspects of the online system. Excellent technical support systems are data-driven, and support experts should have access to live dashboards showing system operational status of all mission-critical components. They must also have access to information necessary to support an individual student in need—for instance, a course listing for that individual, and access to that course in order to investigate an issue completely.

Technical support services should be integrated into the online educational environment, so that help is easily found and accessible wherever the participant may be in the environment. Self-help support services such as FAQs and contact information must be well-organized and organic.

Support staff and resources must be scaled appropriately for the number of participants and type of systems being utilized.

### Training

Ideally, a system of online education will be so clearly designed and laid out that it will be intuitive to use and straightforward to navigate. However, these systems are complex and not all participants will be comfortable or familiar with the concept of online education. Even expert teachers may be unfamiliar with online systems and approaches. In order for optimal training to be available for faculty and students, a significant team of trainers who themselves are constantly engaged in their own ongoing education must be prominent in the enterprise.

The introduction of new systems, tools, and services must be provided routinely for:

- + New faculty and first-time faculty participants
- + Faculty course developers
- + Faculty teams and departments
- + New students
- + Continuing students

The excellent online environment is driven by teaching quality—and pedagogy must employ significant resources in the areas of instructional design, instructional technology, technical support, and training, provided as ongoing, steady, and integrated functions of the online enterprise.

The digital technology landscape is always shifting, with new opportunities and challenges rapidly arising. Those engaged in the use of digital tools must remain agnostic in their selection and

application. Focusing on the objective at hand will allow for adept application, modification, and evaluation of any tool applied to the learning experience, and allow for a fluid shift from one to another.

### **Continuous Improvement—Looking Forward**

Tomorrow's technology-enabled education will provide all participants with instantaneous, reliable, high-quality opportunities for immersive interaction; content development and collaboration; information display and sharing; and graphical, visual, textual, and verbal communication. Students will be able to connect with others as effectively as in a traditional face-to-face environment, with enhanced tools for instantaneous interaction. Collectively, we must always look forward, continually driven to eliminate barriers that impede interaction and the exchange of information and ideas.

Administrators, faculty, and staff will be similarly driven to break barriers and defy limitations that frustrate participants in systems today. Internally, online leaders should expose their systems to a regular process of review and improvement by routinely conducting focus groups and soliciting evaluations from participants; externally, they should participate in world communities to stay abreast of both current possibilities and the next generation of improvements.

Classrooms may be similar to what they were a hundred years ago, but the online world reinvents itself every four to five years. Those entering this arena must be prepared for rising costs of technology and staffing to keep up with the demands and expectations of student and faculty participants in this environment.

## **Key Performance Indicators**

A successful system of online education would be one where faculty and students praise the infrastructure and have identified few problems with its operation, capabilities, reliability, ease-of-use, convenience, robustness, navigation, or availability. The system would approach 100 percent availability and reliability, with access to all tools and services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Delays in system responsiveness would be minimal, and wait times for any human interactions—such as access to advising or technical support—would be negligible. In fact, the user should be barely aware of the existence or complexity of this infrastructure.

All aspects of the system should be monitored as a guide to what performance or utilization levels are being achieved, including:

- + Technical support system trouble logs and problem resolution timeframes
- + Web server statistics
- + LMS system statistics
- + Network bandwidth utilization trends over time
- + Toolset utilization levels
- + Server CPU-level utilization
- + Authentication system utilization
- + Faculty feedback system reports
- + Cloud-based (external) system reports
- + Registration and enrollment reports
- + Faculty training participation logs

- + Course and program development logs
- + Social media-based posts and feedback

Modern computer systems used in online education have systems for logging critical data points. These systems should be utilized for the data they provide. Specific reviews of page request logs from web servers will tell administrators what functional areas, services, and support pages are of primary interest to the students.

All institutions should be regularly surveying participants— both faculty and students—as to their level of satisfaction with the systems, and to address specific issues identified by users.



# Excellent Practice: External Advocacy and Leadership Beyond the University

## Goal:

It is critical to create a singular, transparent lens through which external constituencies view the quality, substance, and application of services provided by the online-learning arm of the university, and to ensure that the full array of stakeholders of these services and products are informed and confident in their dealings with the institution.

## Key Elements:

- + Represent institution publicly and authoritatively
- + Cultivate strategic corporate, governmental, foundation, association, community, and academic alliances
- + Manage outsourced services
- + Engage alumni and trustee groups
- + Ensure regulatory compliance
- + Meet professional and regional accreditation standards

## Why?

Online delivery has broadened the higher-education marketplace to include various consumers unwilling, unable, or uninterested in engaging in a traditional format of study. Product variance is expanding, as new forms, applications, and outputs of higher education are molded and shaped by online formats. These two factors have altered the traditional definition of a college degree. Adaptive learning, competency-based degree programs, flipped classrooms, blended learning, nano-degrees, certifications, and MOOCs—although not the sole purview of online learning—have created a need for clear definitions of what a college or university is producing. Enhanced media scrutiny and the threat of increasing governmental oversight of online education demand greater accountability and exposure on a public stage.

## What?

### Represent Institution Publicly and Authoritatively

Advocacy requires a thorough understanding of the institution's online program and its competitive advantages and weaknesses. This understanding will allow for the representation of the institution publicly and authoritatively among and between a diverse set of stakeholders.

Designate an educated representative of the university to speak on its behalf regarding online learning,

in response to requests for information from the media, accrediting bodies, peer institutions, ranking services, and others. At a minimum, the spokesperson should understand how online learning supports the university's mission and be aware of major online initiatives underway, as well as the key highlights and organizational aspects of the university's online endeavors.

Increase external advocacy in order to assist the institution with aspirations towards high online program rankings. Peer ratings are becoming an important factor in these rankings, and exposure (as well as perception) is critical in a successful result.

## Cultivate Strategic Alliances

Several important alliances can positively impact the institution's efforts, including the following:

### **Corporate:**

Partnerships with local corporations can be fruitful in many ways, such as helping to recruit new students, providing students with valuable work experience, and giving faculty access to a wealth of practitioner knowledge and potential research opportunities. By hiring graduates, a corporate partner can acknowledge the value of a curriculum. Becoming a preferred educational partner to an organization establishes a relationship with busy employees who may value the convenience of online learning through their employer's partnership. Hosting educational fairs at the corporate site is an efficient way of reaching students directly to explain the institution's value proposition. Often, executives within the organization are willing to provide virtual guest-speaking opportunities in the online classroom, and the institution's curriculum benefits from being supported by industry experts who can bolster academic theories in operation. Corporate partners may also be amenable to hosting remote students working on special projects as part of their academic assignments. In addition, faculty can benefit from access to the organization as a potential research site and partner.

### **Government:**

Alliance with local and state governments provides regulatory support to ensure that policy, law, and operational requirements do not impede an institution's online operation. Exposure at these governmental levels can also help educate public servants on the important role the institution plays in the community.

### **Foundations:**

Alliances with foundations provide opportunities to experiment with and grow innovative programs through grants and other funds.

### **Professional and Industry Associations:**

Association alliances can offer the most targeted exposure for the institution's activities. Associations provide collaboration, peer support and recognition, education, and general validation for institutions with emerging online programs.

### **Community:**

Understanding the needs of the community (both geographic and virtual) allows an institution to tailor programs accordingly. Community alliances bolster the institution's sense of belonging at the local level. They can provide additional resources to the university, from potential adjunct faculty, to event exposure, to student recruitment opportunities. Perhaps the most important benefit to community advocacy is building awareness that online programs offer yet another study alternative for busy local citizens.

### Academic:

Identifying peer academic institutions that have compatible online offerings allows for operational efficiencies and cost savings, as well as creative partnerships. Alliances can be formed to share best practices, curricula, research opportunities, virtual student exchanges, and more. This is an important frontier for dual degrees and sharing online courses with institutions abroad, and especially for broadening the student diversity of the virtual classroom.

## Manage Outsourced Services

There are a multitude of potential partners who have the ability to positively influence the outcomes of an institution's online learning operation. There are vendors available to assist with almost every aspect of online learning from marketing and admissions to tutoring and exam administration. Outsourcing can provide an effective way to gain immediate expertise about a new aspect of online learning, without having to invest in substantial upfront university resources. Institutional resources can be used later to build internal competency once the learning curve has matured. Opinions of consultants are often paid greater heed than those of internal staff, so these service providers can be important advocates in introducing needed change in the institution.

## Engage Alumni and Trustee Groups

Alumni and trustee groups span both internal and external stakeholders, and play an important external advocacy role for the institution.

Alumni are an excellent source of feedback, idea generation, and peer support. Through positive feedback and cultivation, alumni can help recruit future students, enhance the institution's brand image, or possibly serve as future adjunct teaching staff.

Trustees are often engaged in business activities in the region. Make specific efforts to educate the trustees about your online efforts so they can be important business and community advocates for the institution's programs.

## Ensure Regulatory Compliance and Meet Professional and Regional Accreditation Standards

Compliance and standards are not only important for external advocacy—they are critical to doing business in the online world. Compliance issues and accreditation standards are changing rapidly, and will continue to do so. To stay current, institutions should actively engage in industry associations and speak to peers.

Many institutions have found it advantageous to appoint at least one internal expert who can guide the university in its compliance efforts. The leader of an online enterprise must be familiar with federal and state regulations, as well as regional and professional accreditation standards and processes—in order to reflect positively on these critical components of institutional standing. Even a new online enterprise should anticipate that students might reside outside state boundaries, and those other states' regulatory processes must be anticipated and addressed to ensure compliance.

## Who and How—Implementation

As an institution begins to implement online learning there must be a clear understanding of the public presentation of these programs, perceptions of success, and areas of constraint or concern.

Institutions that excel at external advocacy understand and then exceed professional and regional accreditation standards for online education, national quality benchmarks, and local measures of success. They have learned how to mobilize for and articulate their work to provide clarity and confidence to the external audience. These institutions have mapped these metrics to their program outcomes and can produce data to demonstrate adherence to the standards.

The implementation of these standards requires coordination across diverse campus functional areas.

## Key Performance Indicators

Due to the exposure resulting from the global nature of online education, external advocacy and leadership are now a necessity. Success in this area can be measured by:

- + Public awareness and appreciation of the institution and its online programs
- + Peer recognition
- + Number of graduates hired by community and corporate partners
- + Legislation that is harmonious with the objective of the online learning program
- + Consistent and emergent grant funding that allows for operational and educational innovations
- + Association with professional organizations that advocate for online learning
- + Up-to-date compliance with state, local, and national regulations and accrediting standards
- + Participation in open, frank, and informative conversations regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with online learning
- + Investigation of strategic partnerships with peer and peer-plus academic institutions, both in the United States and abroad, that allow for partnerships, course and cost sharing, and expanded access.

# Excellent Practice: Professionalism

## Goal:

Professionalism in online higher education is essential for long-term success and development within this still-formative field. A high standard of professionalism—established at the inception of a program—will help deter criticism from those who are reluctant to accept changes in approaches to teaching and learning. Whether demonstrated individually, in relation to others within an institution, or on the national and global stage, professional behavior must be the cornerstone of any online endeavor to build trust and mobilize others, foster ethical behavior, establish scalable growth, and encourage attainable objectives. Furthermore, professionalism promotes pride and a shared purpose within the workplace, inspires continuous improvement and collegiality, enhances accountability, and reduces conflict. Because online leadership is still a young component of the academic enterprise, its early leaders must set the initial standard for others to emulate. With the increasing importance of online education, its emerging leadership must ensure professionalism across all operations to encourage the widespread acceptance of online opportunities and to meet the ever-changing needs of contemporary students.

## Key Elements:

- + Establish a professional voice that creates ongoing credibility with all constituents including students, faculty, and staff, as well as external funders, regulators, political leaders, media, and the public
- + Develop practices that ensure trust among faculty, staff, and other constituents
- + Set high expectations of competency
- + Treat all faculty, staff, and external constituents with respect
- + Act with integrity and transparency in all interactions with faculty, staff, students, and external constituents
- + Formulate and sustain the ethical aspects of online programs—particularly academic honesty
- + Exhibit empathy and consideration with faculty, staff, and external constituents
- + Ensure effective business, human resources, and financial leadership practices
- + Participate at a regional and national level to learn from others, compare practices, air issues and concerns, and establish high standards of excellence
- + Support research, presentations, publications, and award submissions
- + Demonstrate continuous receptivity to improvement in operations, innovation, and new approaches, concepts, and technologies
- + Exemplify the ongoing quest to achieve even higher ideals by putting educational quality and student success above all else

## Why?

Professionalism increases student satisfaction and enhances the acceptability of online offerings in higher education.

Because online learning environments require leadership and approaches that may differ from other higher-educational venues, professionalism assists an online unit with reaching across borders to facilitate faculty success in teaching and student success in learning. Professionalism provides a foundation for innovative practices in teaching and learning. The challenge is to promote growth of innovative modalities in online courses and programs while ensuring trust, quality, and dependability in learning outcomes.

## What?

Professionalism must be evidenced across all areas of online operations. All constituencies—from leadership to faculty, staff, and students—must uphold the highest levels of professional conduct to ensure continued development of quality online education opportunities:

Establish practices that evoke trust among faculty, staff, and external constituents.

- + Faculty, staff, and students must feel confidence in the online learning leader and staff. This trust is the social capital for practicing innovation and risk-taking in teaching.

Set expectations of competency.

- + Leaders and staff in the online education unit must remain relevant, competent, and aspirational in the field.
- + Practice environmental scanning to understand the changes that occur daily within the field.
- + Demonstrate a thoughtful balance of risk-taking and prudence to ensure minimal disruptions and concerns.
- + Build a reservoir of respect for the caliber of the online operation, so that key stakeholders entrust themselves to this enterprise with confidence.
- + Ensure appropriate and specific professional development for faculty and staff who affect online learning quality and initiatives.
- + Participate, and encourage staff participation, in national and regional professional organizations.
- + Accept responsibility for the product and services provided across the institution to all constituents.
- + Own both the problems and the successes of online education at the institution.

Set ethical standards for instruction, student behavior, and staff performance.

Treat faculty, staff, and external constituents with respect.

- + Act with integrity and transparency in all interactions with faculty, staff, and external constituents.
- + Act with empathy and considerate behavior with faculty, staff, and external constituents.

## Ensure Effective Business, Human Resources, and Financial Strategic Leadership Practices

### **Operational Practices and Strategic Partnerships:**

Operational practices should align with (if not exceed) standards established by professional associations and certification boards, and be informed by partnerships with local business and industry. Outsourced services should be critically monitored, as should the decision to form strategic partnerships with vendors in support of greater return on investment. All aspects of online education, even those delegated to external agents or decentralized with the university, should be included and considered as part of the professionalism of the enterprise.

### **Online Learning Ambassadors:**

Faculty and staff should be encouraged to serve as champions of online education outside the institution. They, too, should not only present knowledge at academic and professional conferences but meet and collaborate with PK–12 colleagues, potential students, parents, and employers to develop more comprehensive and sustainable partnerships in advancement of online learning at all levels.

### **Human Resources:**

Personnel practices should focus on stable instructional teams built around shared institutional goals for online student learning, success, and completion. Communities of practice and learning should be established within and across all divisions and departments. While the organization should allow for these communities to grow organically, it should meet them with robust support and other resources to sustain them, once formed.

### **Administrative Practices:**

Support all students to completion of their courses; observe faculty rights over instructional material they develop; provide incentives to faculty for time commitment to online development; optimize buy-in by building on collaborative and cooperative models; develop precedents and a body of knowledge to help prepare faculty and new programs for possible online offerings.

## Encourage Research, Presentations, and Publications

### **Research:**

Encourage scholarship to support the study of online teaching and learning. Faculty should be engaged with online learning units to provide a variety of discipline-based approaches to online learning-related scholarship. Research that impacts the classroom, both longitudinal and theoretical in nature, encourages a variety of practices that can be explored and utilized to assist with growth and innovation in the field. Research on the efficacy of the institution's online programs should be encouraged and supported.

### **Presentations and Publications:**

Report on new program development continuously and persistently in professional and lay press. Encourage presentations and publications by administration, staff, and faculty in the field of online teaching and learning. Presentations related to teaching and learning in the online environment should be encouraged both in specific discipline areas, as well as in conferences and journals that specialize in the field of online learning.

## Maintain a Culture of High Ethical Standards and Trust

### **Ethical Standard:**

Espouses written and spoken professional ethical standards.

### **Trust in Others:**

Supports exchange of ideas, a collaborative environment, and individual responsibility. Maintains confidentiality.

### **Trust in Ourselves:**

Models individual responsibility and representation in the field of online teaching and learning.

### **Integrity:**

Ensures the integrity of the course materials, the student assessment process, and the use of intellectual property. Creates policies and procedures to ensure honest and open operations across the institution.

### **Response to Student Issues:**

Respond to all student complaints with respect, allowing the student dignity- of-person in concerns and complaints.

## Who and How—Implementation

A culture of professionalism is essential from the inception of an online course or program throughout its lifecycle. This culture is supported by leaders who model ethical and professional behavior in all actions.

Policies should undergird professional expectations and desired outcomes. Procedures should be followed to ensure that a culture of professionalism is established with all constituents across the institution.

## Key Performance Indicators

- + Success is measured by continuous growth, acceptance, and trust of online education by academic leaders, faculty, staff, students, and employers.
- + Professionalism can be measured through the receptivity of solicited and unsolicited feedback from stakeholders (internal and external), covering:
  - Conflict and issues resolution
  - Communication styles and strategies
  - Responsible leadership
  - Development of shared values and purposes
  - Low employee turnover
  - Image the unit portrays to all online learning constituents, both internal and external

A culture of professionalism will enhance and strengthen the stability and success of the online enterprise. In this still-young facet of higher education—where there remains skepticism and concern



about the role and reputation of online education—the challenge for online leadership is to establish the credibility, idealism, and array of services and standards that ensure that faculty, students, and staff will embrace online education at their institution as a source of pride and achievement.

Ultimately, the measure of success for online leadership is more than simply providing conventional, basic services. A forward-thinking enterprise inspires faculty to design and deliver outstanding online instruction—enabling students to achieve learning outcomes and career success even beyond what an on-campus experience might provide, and propelling the whole institution to excellence and innovation in online education.

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The UPCEA Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Leadership was developed by the UPCEA National Task Force on Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Leadership: Jay A. Halfond, Boston University & Senior Fellow UPCEA Center for Online Leadership and Strategy (chair); Andrew Casiello, Old Dominion University; Dave Cillay, Washington State University; Nancy Coleman, Keypath Education; Vickie Cook, University of Illinois Springfield; John LaBrie, Northeastern University; Mary Niemiec, University of Nebraska; and Witt Salley, Clemson University.

The UPCEA Hallmarks of Excellence in  
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at [www.upcea.edu/hallmarks](http://www.upcea.edu/hallmarks).



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