

# The Expansion of Online Learning at Wichita State University

Report and Recommendations

Russ Adkins, Inc.  
9/4/2013

# Expansion of Online Learning at Wichita State University

## Report and Recommendations

Russ Adkins, Inc.  
September 4, 2013

### Background

A 2012 work group studying the feasibility of launching an expanded and coordinated online learning initiative recommended: a) developing and marketing complete online programs that address workforce needs; and b) providing online course options that students can use to complete general requirements associated with online degree programs and any other academic program. The initial programmatic goal was to develop and deliver:

- Two master's degree programs (Aging Studies and Criminal Justice)
- Two bachelor's degree completion programs (RN → BSN and Dental Hygiene)

A new task force, under the leadership of AVP Richard Muma, was formed during summer 2013 to refine the working plan (*Recommendations to Expand Online Learning at Wichita State University*) and prescribe resource needs. A blueprint to guide the development of infrastructure to support students with a full range of academic and student support services is being refined by the task force, and appropriate student services leadership and staff and is included in planning and design efforts. Insofar as program development, progress on course and degree development will be steady and incremental, with the launch of the nursing program scheduled for fall, 2014. Work will continue on the development and completion of the aging studies, dental hygiene, and criminal justice programs planned for launch within the next two years. Many of the courses needed to provide these degree programs and already in place, though they have not been vetted for quality.

Even without a plan and infrastructure, the University's online presence has increased substantially over the 5 years, a remarkable accomplishment. Section offerings increased from 150 to 310 during this time, while FTE increased from 811 to 2,829. Online learning now accounts for about 20% of WSU's FTE. Current course offerings are distributed as follows:

Health Sciences	121
Liberal Arts & Sciences	94
Education	48
Business	23
Fine Arts	19
Engineering	5
Total	310

Russ Adkins, Inc., a higher education consulting company, has been engaged to assess the appropriateness of this plan and timeline, and to assess the readiness of the University to move forward with coordinated online programs and related services.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### **Strengths**

**Executive Sponsorship:** President Bardo considers online learning one of a number of strategies to be used to increase WSU's FTE from 15,000 to 22,000 over the next several years. VP of Academic Affairs Tony Vizzini and VP of Campus Life and University Relations Wade Robinson sponsor the re-positioning of online learning as an institutional priority.

**Start-up Funding:** President Bardo understands that online learning must be built on a strong foundation that will require an initial investment to create the necessary human and service infrastructure.

**Program Focus:** Initial development will focus on workforce programs for which there is a demonstrated need, not only in the Wichita area, but also in Kansas and the region. The on-the-ground versions of these four programs are successful, in terms of enrollment and job placement. Each program already has a considerable number of online courses designed and developed, and a supportive and committed faculty. College of Health Professions Interim Dean Keith Pickus and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Interim Dean Ron Matson are solidly behind these initial program efforts. Adult learners, who in previous years were the mainstay of WSU's student population, will be the focus of enrollment development efforts.

**Organizational Placement:** The University has recognized the importance of online learning being grounded in teaching and learning, rather than seen as a technological service. Organizational placement in academic affairs will ensure that the program is focused on student success as its first priority, with enrollment development an outcome of the quality, value and marketing of the program.

**Guided Development:** A task force composed of faculty, continuing and adult education, and academic technology professionals is leading WSU's next generation of online learning. Led by Dr. Rick Muma, these knowledgeable advocates are providing leadership necessary to build the infrastructure and visibility of the program within the institution.

**Institutional effectiveness and planning:** Dr. David Wright, AVP of Academic Data Systems and Strategic Planning, along with Dr. Muma, bring considerable knowledge and experience in data-informed planning, decision making and continuous program improvement.

**Media Resources Center:** A hallmark of WSU's online course design and development will be the rich media and engagement strategies developed with the resources and expertise of the Media Resources Center. The Center's instructional design team will be a vital part of the course and program development process.

**University Library:** The Library already provides an array of online library resources available to support learning anywhere, anytime.

**University Legal Counsel:** Associate General Counsel Jennifer Kassebaum, working with AVP Muma, is securing authorization for the university to "operate" in neighboring states and beyond. She will be an important resource in other matters, such as disabled student access and intellectual property policy in relation to online course development.

**Strategic Plan:** As President Bardo begins his second year, institutional strategic planning efforts will move from higher level vision, mission and values components to goals and strategies creation (Level 2) within the Colleges. This is the perfect time to consider how online learning will support the strategic development of the University's academic programs over the next several years.

**Marketing:** As the University's marketing and associated web/media presence are redefined, online learning can benefit from being included in what appears to be a major transformation of enrollment development at the University.

Accreditation: The Higher Learning Commission has authorized the University to offer up to 20% of its degree programs via distance education.

### Challenges

1. Regional and Specialized Accreditation: Communication between the HLC and WSU in 2007, and in 2011, specifically recognized the following online programs:

Program	HLC recognition date	
Bachelors in Criminal Justice		2012
Bachelor's degree completion program in Dental Hygiene		2012
Bachelor's degree completion RN-BSN	2007	2012
Masters in Curriculum & Instruction	2007	2012
Masters in Gerontology (Aging Studies)	2007	2012
Masters in Criminal Justice	2007	2012
Certificate in Reading Endorsement (Education	2007	2012

The 2009 *Statement of Affiliation Status* report advised that the development and delivery of programs other than those “approved in 2007” would require prior notification. Further, the “mandated focus visit” scheduled for 2009-10 was cancelled by the University.

The 2012 *Statement of Affiliation Status* report advised that the University was approved to offer up to 20% of its degree programs online.

**Recommendation: The University should seek explicit confirmation from the HLC regarding its approval of WSU's distance education programs. Even though the agency's website recognizes seven programs, the University previously notified the HLC that online program development was “on hold” and requested cancellation of a focus visit. In addition, the University must confirm that its programs with specialized accreditation are approved before marketing efforts begin.**

2. State Authorization: While the Department of Education has suspended enforcement of state authorization requirements using federal financial aid (or the loss of) as an incentive to comply, states have the ability and right to enforce their laws. Regional compacts and the ongoing work to create state authorization reciprocity agreements (SARA) offer hope that at least some of the costly issues associated with state authorization might be mitigated over time. However, nothing is certain, and therefore, WSU must continue its efforts to ensure that it has approval to operate in states where its students reside.

### Recommendations:

- 1) Continue to apply for authorization in states where existing online students are enrolled, or in states with potential for enrollment. States where the University will be actively marketing (using purchased student contact lists) must be included in authorization efforts.
- 2) Avoid operating in states with onerous, expensive and labor intensive requirements. Students residing in these states who are seeking admission into online programs should be denied access. One of the nation's leading public higher education institutions with online programs will not admit students from Arkansas, Georgia, and Maryland, states where WSU has students enrolled in online courses.

3. Processes, Procedures and Policies: As the University prepares to coordinate and manage its online initiatives; attention must be given to developing a university-wide approach to policies, procedures and practices. Without doing so, practices will vary from college to college, program to program, which will impact governance, compensation, program marketing and student success. Items marked with an (\*) represent HLC requirements or best practices:

Issue	Current Practice	Recommended Practice
Ownership/Property Rights *	Current University policy gives faculty ownership of products they create as university employees.	<b>Joint ownership, with the University having the right to 1) reuse and repurpose online courses; 2) hold faculty accountable meeting university-wide standards for course design; 3) hold faculty accountable for student success and students being able to demonstrate course learning outcomes; 4) require the continuous review and improvement of online courses, based upon data/evidence.</b>
Professional development	Faculty may attend a “boot camp” to learn how to develop online course.	<b>Faculty will be required to demonstrate their readiness to engage in course development either by demonstrating professional development learning outcomes, or by participating in structured professional development as they begin course development. Professional development will feature modularized units organized around outcomes related to certain competencies, and be organized around basic, intermediate and advanced competencies.</b>
Course Design and Development	Faculty are free to develop their course, but may request instruction design assistance.	<b>After certifying readiness, faculty will be paired with an instructional designer, who will support the course design and development process, and ensure that the course meets all University online course quality standards prior to initial delivery.</b>
Course Development	Faculty may choose to develop their own version of a course.	<b>WSU will commission the creation of “master courses” that satisfy online degree requirements. Master courses may be taught by the course creator, and/or made available to other faculty to teach.</b>
Integrity of student work *	LMS secure login and password is used to verify the identity of students. Some courses and/or faculty require proctored exams.	<b>Professional development will introduce faculty to federal and regional accreditation requirements related to the integrity of student work. The university must also develop the means to validate student identity beyond the basic LMS login and password. Strategies may include identity challenge questions posed when a student prepares to submit an assignment and/or the use of technology that provides video, audio and finger print verification of the student during high stakes testing.</b>
Course approval/certification	Online courses are not subject to systematic review and approval prior to delivery.	<b>All WSU online courses must be certified based on Quality Matters standards and standards established by the University.</b>

Compensation for online course development.	Unknown	Faculty will be compensated for development of courses identified by the online unit as necessary to support targeted degree programs.
Course Delivery	Boot Camp includes outcomes related to course delivery/teaching practices.	One or more professional development modules will prepare faculty to successfully teach online, with special attention given to faculty-student interaction and engagement strategies. * These modules are independent of the course development modules, but may include competencies related to adding instructor specific information, assignment due dates, and so forth.
Course delivery	University standards for critical online faculty teaching behaviors do not exist.	Faculty are expected to respond to student questions within 24 hours, 7 (or 5) days per week, either via course email (to individual students) or discussion posts (to all).
Section course enrollment limits	Academic departments set course limits.	Academic departments recommend course enrollment limits to the Online Director, based on universally agreed-upon limits. These limits are set based on the discipline, and course assignment and interaction requirements. Enrollment limits are set lower for the first delivery of a new course.
Online Course Evaluation	Department chairs may periodically review data related student success in online course sections.	Online course sections will be evaluated using: 1) Learning Management System analytic data reports; 2) student course evaluations; 3) institutional data reports related to success, attrition, retention and the demonstration of course learning outcomes.
Continuous improvement *	Faculty choose to update their courses.	Online courses are subject to a three year redesign cycle, with more periodic review and redesign driven by student success data and content updates based on amended learning outcomes.
Section scheduling	Department chairs balance competing demands in scheduling online sections.	Based on documented student demand for online sections, the Online Director will request the creation of additional sections by the department chair.
Faculty incentives (other than compensation)	Departments may offer faculty incentives for their participation in online learning.	Incentives include: support for participation at conferences; recognition as exemplary online professors; recognition in tenure and promotion decisions.
Text & course materials selection	Faculty are free to select texts and other course materials.	“Master Courses” will be designed around open education resources (OER) and digital texts and course resources. Ideally, these learning materials will be integrated into the course and the LMS, so that they are available to any student that enrolls in the course. This enables a standardized approach to course design, and potentially reduces the cost of participating as a student.

4. Governance: WSU has a tradition of active faculty involvement in the governance of the University.

**Recommendation:** Create an Online Learning Faculty Committee to advise the Director of Online Learning in matters related to professional development, incentives for faculty participation and online course quality standards.

5. Existing Online Courses: The University has developed and delivered 310 online courses, a majority of which are offered in the College of Health Professions and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. While these courses may have been subject to some initial review and/or approval by the offering unit, none have been reviewed using standardized, research-based rubrics.

**Recommendation:** Use the Quality Matters rubric to review each of the 310 existing courses currently being delivered. Provide instructional design support to assist faculty in understanding the value of courses meeting these standards. From a process perspective, identify from existing online faculty a group of peer course reviewers, ideally with representation within each major discipline, who team with an instructional designer to perform the review. For those faculty needing additional professional development and/or support, provide those resources to support bringing the course up to University standards.

6. Online general education courses: The two Bachelor's degree completion programs selected for completion and delivery over the next two years require that students satisfy the 42 hour university general education requirement. Students transferring into these programs with AS degrees will need to successfully complete general education courses, as well as program courses, in order to graduate.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) In addition to the development of program-specific courses leading to the degrees selected for delivery, the University will identify and develop those general education courses required by these programs. Courses previously developed will be part of the existing course review and approval process. Highest priority for development will be given to general education courses that: a) satisfy requirements in both online degree completion programs; and b) are likely to generate enrollment demand, based on current enrollment data, within and outside of the online programs.
- 2) Programs should explore a waiver of the additional general education requirements for students who have earned the Associate Degree credential and have satisfied licensing requirements (for example, possess the RN credential as a result of successfully sitting for the NLN exam).

7. Online Learning Staffing Infrastructure:

**Recommendations:**

- 1) Immediately hire a Director of Online Learning to: a) centralize the online learning support elements, b) satisfy accreditation and state authorization requirements; c) review, modify and/or create new policies and processes; d) guide the development of a "one stop shop" for online academic and student support services; and e) provide coherent high quality degree programs.
- 2) Employ two full time instructional designers in the 2013/14 academic year to: a) initiate review and redesign of the 310 existing online courses; b) complete course development for the nursing and dental hygiene degree completion programs; c) to sustain course development for the Master's programs in aging and criminal justice; d) to begin development of additional general education courses to support these programs; and e) design and deliver a structured, modularized professional development program for existing and new online faculty.
- 3) Given the importance of providing prospective and existing online students with expert advising regarding their academic programs, WSU should hire a minimum of one online program advisor this year, and augment advising staffing beginning in the 2014/15 academic year. An option would be to provide program-specific advising at the department or College level.

- 4) **Given the need for peer review and support, WSU should engage “Online Learning Faculty Fellows” to: a) assist in the design and delivery of professional development; b) provide peer mentor support for faculty developing online courses; and c) provide peer mentor support for faculty delivering an online course for the first time.**

8. Academic and Student Support Infrastructure:

**Recommendations:**

- 1) **As part of the one stop shop, develop an orientation to learning online that all students must successfully complete prior to their enrolling in their first online course. Among other things, the orientation should assess a student’s readiness to learn online.**
- 2) **Partner with Smarthinking or similar provider to provide online tutoring services, especially for students enrolled in general education courses.**
- 3) **Provide resources sufficient to support the provision of disabled student support services for online learners that is equivalent to those services provided for on-ground students.**

9. Marketing Online Learning: WSU’s online learning initiative and the University’s marketing program are both in transition, going through substantial change and re-focus. The University’s web presence is being substantially overhauled, and aggressive out of state marketing activities are planned. The timing is good for the online unit to become part of development of major marketing initiatives.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) **Marketing of WSU’s online programs cannot begin until all accreditation matters are resolved.**
- 2) **Insofar as online learning is concerned, out-of-state marketing lists and marketing must be synchronized with the ability of the University to obtain authorization to operate in selected states.**
- 3) **Online learning must be prominently featured on the university’s splash page, with ease of access from this location to WSU’s online web presence.**
- 4) **The brand name for WSU’s online program needs immediate review and consideration.**

10. Technology Infrastructure: A solid technology infrastructure (human and systems) is an absolute necessity in scaling the University’s online program. The LMS will become a mission-critical part of the University’s teaching and learning infrastructure, with service interruptions as serious an issue as the loss of power, water and/or access to the campus. Infrastructure elements must include:

- A dependable LMS hosting environment, running at 99.9% availability, with frequent system and course back-ups, active monitoring to identify potential system issues before they force a service interruption, and system maintenance performed in non-peak hours (Sunday morning, 2-6 AM). Planning must ensure that the environment can readily and quickly scale as enrollments grow, as existing online students satisfy more of their degree requirements online, as blended learning grows, and as faculty learn to use the LMS to support engaged learning in their campus-based courses.
- A student and faculty LMS help desk staffed 24/7. Online learning is a full time enterprise and is generally marketed as “anywhere, anytime.” Faculty must be able to focus on teaching and learning, while other resources support students with technology.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1) **The University must establish an acceptable level of service for its online infrastructure and technology support. Once established, options for service delivery should be explored, including: a) internal hosting and help desk services; b) outsourced hosting and help desk services; or c) a blend of both.**
- 2) **As the University develops its strategic plan, attention should be given to ensuring that its technology resources will support the Plan's goals, objectives and strategies. Development of a technology plan to support and enable the strategic plan (including on-campus teaching and learning and online learning) is critically important.**

#### 11. Investment and revenues to support online learning infrastructure:

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1) **Infrastructure investments must be made in order to ensure basic needs are met (as described throughout this report) as required for accreditation and best practices.**
- 2) **Take care in increasing the online fee beyond its current level. Instead of a large increase, phase in increases over time, as the University's online programs become better known. Take into account public and private competitors. While Nursing will compete with the University of Kansas, future programs may be competing with Fort Hays State University and community colleges. Consider imposing a basic online learning fee, and adding program-specific fees where warranted.**
- 3) **Ensure that online fees are channeled back into the online program to sustain and improve its operation, and to support unique expenses.**
- 4) **Review existing fees charged to on-ground students, and eliminate those fees associated with services that cannot be used or accessed by students enrolled in online programs.**
- 5) **Explore assessing a technology fee to all students, with some of the fee revenues used to offset the LMS license, technology hosting and online student/faculty help desk services. Doing so will allow the University to use the online fee to provide services and support **ONLY** for online students.**

#### Summary

WSU appears to be ready to transition from the uncoordinated delivery of online courses to the centrally-managed delivery of workforce-related online degree programs. The University understands the importance of systematic instructional design and course development as a means of better ensuring student success. WSU has the necessary research and planning infrastructure to support the use of data-informed decision making and continuous improvement. The proposed one-stop-shop of academic and student support services will be developed and implemented in order to ensure the successful delivery of online degree programs. Though the medium term business plan should ensure that distance education contributes to the financial health of the University, WSU must be prepared to make short-term investments in online learning infrastructure to ensure a firm foundation for future development.

Russ Adkins

9/4/13