Recommendations to Expand Online Learning at Wichita State University

Background

An online work group was formed in November 2012 to again ascertain the University's readiness to begin offering 100% online programs. A report was issued on December 13, 2012. The work group determined the best way to expand online learning, beyond offering additional online courses, was to fully market and deliver a cadre of online programs that address workforce needs and also provide opportunities for students to complete the general education requirements for the first two years of their education (for any program) in a timely fashion. To date WSU only promotes individual online courses, not programs. This recommendation estimated a cost of approximately 1 million dollars to launch provisionally (HLC) approved programs: the Master of Aging Studies and Criminal Justice programs and bachelor completion programs in nursing (RN➔BSN) and dental hygiene.

In concert with the President's wishes, we believe the best plan of action is to launch a scaled-down version of the recommendation (at least initially) with one program (the RN➔BSN completion program) in the fall of 2014, with minimal support for aging studies, dental hygiene, and criminal justice to ready their courses for online program deployment thereafter. This plan also includes building a structure to support students in terms of the full range of student services expected in online environments.[1] To assess the appropriateness of this plan and timeline, an online program consultant will need to be hired. If needed we will move the start date back to spring 2015.

In order to move forward, some of the obstacles that need to be overcome (immediately) mostly relate to our last HLC accreditation site visit review (in 2007). At that time we were given provisional approval to offer the programs listed above if we were able to:

- Provide an adequate institutional infrastructure to support the proposed online programs.
- Assure involvement of faculty and staff members who are appropriately matched and trained to offer the programs.
- Provide evidence that senior administration supports online learning.
- Develop a university-wide plan for online learning.

In 2007 a task force was put in place to address the above concerns; however, a plan was never adopted and the University withdrew its request for approval of online degree programs. Beginning in 2009 the University decided to slowly focus on building its online faculty development infrastructure before any further requests were made to HLC. We have since hired an instructional designer, offered 11 faculty development bi-annual training seminars for the preparation and development of online courses (which are one week long and have trained 113 faculty), and offered short instructional technology workshops (reaching an additional 150 faculty and staff each year). This has led to 310 online courses being offered in FY 2013. From 2007-2013 we have had a 538.9% increase in SCH from online instruction. In short, we have invested minimally in our infrastructure, which has led to dramatic increases in online course offerings, but we have not addressed any of the other concerns that will allow us to move beyond offering these online courses. What follows is an approach that moves online education forward in an incremental fashion, but more importantly, addresses deficiencies identified by HLC in order to have a fully operational presence in online education.[2]

Institutional Infrastructure Needs

The decision to aggressively offer online programs at WSU requires the university to offer a range of services that mirror those on the main campus. In addition, some services need to be expanded, since the assumption in an online world is that materials and services can be accessed from anywhere at any time.

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[1] None of the programs we assessed require general education (as they are degree completion programs), but further development of online general education courses is a need if WSU is to offer a full range of academic programs.
[2] Acceptance of this online expansion plan (or something similar) by WSU administration will satisfy HLC in terms of the requirement for "senior administration support" and a "plan for online learning."

To move beyond our current online activities, five additional areas need additional investment:

- A budget for a Director of the Office of Online and Distance Education
    - The Director and Office will provide leadership and management of online education that is coordinated out of the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs with Information Services and Campus Life and University Relations.
    - It should be led by an individual with experience in online education with additional support staff (project manager, instructional designer).
    - The primary duties of an office of online education should include:
        - Strategic oversight of WSU's online education activities with input from teams located in academic affairs, information services, student services, and university relations
        - Serving as the "gatekeeper" for campus issues regarding online education, and as the point of final decision making (subject to approval from the President's Executive Team)
        - Maintaining a WSU portal for all WSU online/distance education offerings
        - Coordinating with state and other entities that influence online education (e.g. State Authorization)
        - Working with colleges and schools to encourage exploration and implementation of programs that are consistent with WSU's online guiding criteria
        - Coordinating faculty development needs
        - Leading a WSU conversation of criteria that should be used to assess new online degrees and programs (i.e., in terms of quality, success, etc.)
            - Defining WSU's data collection needs related to online education and assuring that they are met
        - Working with the UCATS, MRC, OFDSS, Admissions, Financial Operations, Registrar, Library, Bookstore, Counseling and Testing Center, Disability Services, Career Services, University Relations, Student Health and other key units to assure support of online programs, just as on-campus programs are currently supported.
- A consultant to the Director/Academic Affairs/Task Force with expertise in developing comprehensive online programs.
- A WSU portal for all WSU online/distance education offerings (i.e. a virtual one-stop)
    - This is crucial and should provide ready access to students needing services (without stepping foot on campus) ranging from obtaining information about all of our programmatic offerings, to orientation, enrolling, student support, and graduation. Without this, we will not receive approval from HLC.
    - Additional budget will be required to develop this portal and includes the necessary technology
- A marketing plan to market the RN➔BSN program, but also our existing online coursework and other flexible learning programs.
    - Additional budget will be required
- An increase in fees to support needs as outlined above and below

Faculty and Staff Identification and Support

Based on our assessment, we believe it is reasonable to launch the RN➔BSN program first. Among all of the provisionally approved programs, it is the most ready. No new courses are needed in terms of development, but they will need to be reviewed and updated. With appropriate marketing, we estimate 100 new students within the first year (see data in December 2012 proposal). In terms of support for this program (i.e., faculty development, instructional design, etc.) we will need the following:

- Full-time nursing academic advisor
- Part-time faculty coordinator
- Part-time lecturers
- Freelance instructional designers to review and update all existing courses (no new courses needed)

Existing resources for faculty development within the Media Resources Center should be sufficient to support the nursing faculty.

We also believe it is important to provide additional free-lance instructional design support to begin developing aging studies, dental hygiene, and criminal justice for deployment in 2015 and beyond

- Aging Studies: update 11 existing courses (no new courses needed)
- Criminal Justice: update 12 existing courses, one course needs developed
- Dental Hygiene: update one existing course, three new courses need developed

Tentative Timeline for Implementation Fall 2014

Fall 2013
- August: Contract with consultant to assess scope and plan
- August: Establish Office of Online Learning coordinated out of Academic Affairs.
- September: Hire a Director of Online Learning/instructional designer and continue to contract with a consultant to assist in the development of online learning.
- September: Hire 0.5 FTE nursing coordinator of online nursing students
- September: Contract with web developer to create one-stop portal
- September: Develop marketing plan, including content
- October: Provide instructional design support for nursing as outline above
- December: Test portal (processes for enrollment, advising, financial aid, bill pay, etc.)
- December: Train staff

Spring 2014
- January: Hire nursing advisor for online students
- January: Implement marketing plan
- January: Launch portal for nursing applicants (continue upgrades, additions)
- January: Acquire Quality Matters™ University Subscription for Course Review – begin course review
- February: Begin testing newly developed instructional material
- March: Begin enrollment
- April-August: Continue testing refining above

July 2014
- July: Provide additional free-lance instructional design support to begin developing aging studies, dental hygiene, and criminal justice for deployment in 2015 and beyond
- July: Hire nursing lecturers required for 100 new students