e-Learning Risks: Why Universities Should NOT Go It Alone

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Abstract

With $1M, faculty support, and their reputation at risk, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) sought a distance learning partner to assess the MS in Loss Prevention & Safety opportunity, and then market the program to qualified students ready to learn. This compelling case study demonstrates how marketplace demand and competitive advantage can overcome risks and build rewards.

Introduction

According to a recently released report by the Sloan Consortium, online enrollments nationwide are growing "substantially faster than the overall higher education student body….with 3.2 million students taking a least one online course during the fall 2005 term…an increase over the 2.3 million reported in the previous year" (Allen & Seamon, 2006, p.1). It is the fastest and most important trend affecting enrollments in higher education today.

At Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), the College of Justice and Safety (CJS) is building upon this trend by exporting the Master of Science in Loss Prevention and Safety. By doing so, EKU is extending the reach of its mission, building on its national reputation in justice and safety, meeting the field's demands for education nationwide, and creating a self-supporting program that generates new revenue.

Before expanding the online initiative, the administration availed itself of the latest research in online education. Being new to online education, the extensive amounts of research uncovered led to feelings of ….well ……exhaustion. Two things were clear: 1) there were many aspects of planning and implementation that we could not abdicate; and 2) it was not wise to "go it alone" in areas where our knowledge and expertise were limited. A decision was made to outsource marketing, recruitment, and retention services to Compass Knowledge Group in Orlando, FL, a company that is experienced in delivering these services.

This paper represents a case study in the development and delivery of an online education program, specifically the Master's of Loss Prevention and Safety at Eastern Kentucky University. It will provide an overview of the program, the research and processes that guided its expansion, and the partnership that was formed to ensure for successful student and financial success.

The EKU Program – Master of Science in Loss Prevention and Safety

The Master of Science (MS) degree program in Loss Prevention and Safety (LPS) at Eastern Kentucky University was created through a grant from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

(NIOSH) in 1991. The basic concept was to develop and offer a 36 hour Master's level course of study to prepare graduate students to effectively manage the safety and health function within American private sector industries. The first course was offered on campus in 1992.

In response to substantial growth in the on campus program, and demands from our alumni and other professionals in the field, the Master of Science degree program partnered with and acquired funding from the Kentucky Virtual University to develop and offer an online version of the program on primarily a regional basis. The online program was developed to be a "mirror image" of the on campus program, and the first course was offered in 2000. All marketing, administration and related functions were performed in-house. The same graduate faculty who developed and taught the on campus courses were assigned to the development and teaching of the online version of the courses. From 2000 through 2004, the online program achieved moderate growth.

In this decade, our world has experienced a substantial change as the result of the Oklahoma City bombing, 911, Hurricane Katrina and numerous other natural and man-made disasters. As a result of these disasters and other forces driving a need for increased knowledge, the interest in becoming better educated on response preparedness created an opportunity for EKU. The MS in LPS was in the unique position, due to its status in the College of Justice and Safety, of having access to highly qualified graduate faculty with expertise in fire, industrial security, occupational safety, environmental health, homeland security, arson, explosives, and related fields. Program faculty expanded the course offerings in fire administration, environmental health and other elective courses around the management related core of 18 hours. It was clear, however, that taking advantage of this opportunity would take more than focused attention on the curriculum. It was readily apparent that a great deal of careful assessment, analysis and planning would be needed on multiple aspects of the program to take it to the next level.

Assessing the Context for Program Development and Expansion

Past Failures in Distance Education

The failure of online learning ventures has been well chronicled. In some cases, these failures have become legendary. Past failures have included the following:

- Arizona Learning Systems – Created in 1996 with substantial legislative support, Arizona Learning Systems could not increase enrollments to a point where it benefited from a degree of solvency. The potential of attracting more students was never realized. It was reported that project leaders underestimated the level of effort and student support necessary to be successful (NEA Higher Education Research Center, 2002).

- Open University (England) – After two years and investments of 20 million dollars, Open University closed its doors due to low revenues and enrollments. The failure was attributed to poor name recognition, accreditation issues, and a lack of employer support in the form of tuition reimbursements (NEA Higher Education Research Center, 2002).

- New York University Online – NYU Online formed partnerships with several businesses, but somehow could not achieve success due to a failed business approach – an approach that underestimated the level of marketing and operations needed to succeed in the online arena. Reports have suggested that sufficient market assessments were not conducted and that a true business culture (needed for online success) was never achieved within the university environment (Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness, 2004; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2005).

- Columbia University (Fathom) – In an effort to keep pace with private-for-profit educational ventures, Columbia established solid partnerships with other universities (e.g., University of Chicago) in an effort to capture some of the online marketplace. It has been argued that Fathom, established and operated as a for-profit distance education arm, was overly ambitious in course development and spent too much time and money building content rich courses. The "buying" public did not embrace the type of education that Fathom was marketing (NEA Higher Education Research Center, 2002).

- AllLearn (Oxford, Yale and Stanford) – Established at the peak of the dot-com boom in 2001, and marketed initially to its strong alumni base, AllLearn folded their operations, claiming that they could not sustain top-quality courses at affordable costs (Jokivirta, 2006; MacLeod, 2006).

- United Kingdom e-University (UKeU) – After funding its distance education initiative in excess of $113 million, UKeU stopped student recruitment in 2004 on the basis of low enrollments. It has been speculated and generally supported that UKeU suffered as a result of poor timing, a lack of focus on student services, confusion around branding issues, and costs associated with trying to build its own learning management system (Garrett, 2004; Samuels, 2005).

As can be seen from the above examples, the reasons for failure are many and varied. Reasons have included lack of a solid business plan, underestimating the marketplace, over investing in infrastructure, underestimating the level of student services and resources required, and generally failing to implement best practices as part of the planning process (Weaver, 2006). This history is fortuitous for EKU and other universities interested in online education. These examples exist to shape the learning that should occur before launching new programs, and provide the framework that can guide institutions to success.

If these well-known and highly established institutions of higher learning failed, what makes a regional, state university like EKU think that it can succeed? As a starting point it can learn from the mistakes that others have made, and partner with an organization that knows and has applied the principles of success in distance education. The following areas were identified as the focus of a comprehensive assessment to guide program planning.

The Nature of Public Universities

Operating in a university environment that is highly democratic has a price. Governance structures generally move at glacial speed, and progress often occurs at a snail's pace (Levine and Sun, 2003). As an example of this, to administer an academic change at EKU, our governance structure requires us to move through six levels of approval before implementation can occur – departmental level, Graduate Council, Council on Academic Affairs, Faculty Senate, the Board of Regents, and the Council on Postsecondary Education. Choreographing the timing of these changes is an enormous challenge. The sequencing of approvals must be carefully orchestrated.

This is why for-profits have been more successful. They do not have to overcome excessive bureaucratic obstacles. Within university structures, there are often stagnant forces that impede progress. Though unintentional, these forces can be inflexible and unappreciative of the emergent demands that are required for moving forward (Otte and Benke, 2006).

Moreover, most universities are not set up to function as a business. They often do not bring to initiatives the self-discipline or accountability that many businesses require. University initiatives can exist on inertia for a long time before someone decides it's time to pull the plug (Miller and Schiffman, 2006). We didn't have a pool of open resources to apply to the program, so we had to set limits on what we could spend. We had to decide where we were going to align the resources we did have. We had to consider the full extent of the work to be done, engage in an assessment process with our partner, Compass Knowledge Group (CKG), to determine what our approach would be, and chart a careful course of action based on sound strategic planning. Part of that assessment led to the following questions: what could we do well ourselves, what did we have to do ourselves, and what could/should we outsource to our partner?

We needed to focus our energies on integrating online education into the structure and bureaucracy of our institution. We had to examine current policies, procedures and practices (both formal and informal) to determine whether or not existing practice would support online learning. In many instances it did not. We had to transform our College on many fronts, being careful to integrate online education in a way that would complement the existing structures, philosophies and roles that have been entrenched for decades.

We decided to focus on:

- Developing and organizing our staffing structure to effectively administer an online learning program
- Obtaining faculty buy-in and support
- Establishing relationships with student services units
- Making the technology work for our faculty and students and
- Creating a learning culture that welcomed online learners into the fabric of our College.

Devising an Organizational Structure

If online learning was to gain a solid footing in the midst of the other priorities within the College of Justice and Safety, it was clear that the College would need to demonstrate the commitment of its leadership in advancing an agenda that would support distance education. The Dean of the College of Justice and Safety, Allen Ault, created an office of Distance Education and Multimedia Services (ODEMS) to facilitate the program's goals. Several key positions were created, including a Director of Distance Education (that would oversee all distance education activities for the College) and a Program Director for the online MS program. Both of these individuals were to function as change agents in obtaining the necessary support.

Obtaining Faculty Support

In our College, the faculty generally belong to one of three camps with respect to online learning: those who believe that meaningful learning can only occur in a face-to-fact context, those who have fully embraced online learning as an effective system for delivering education and as an operating reality of the future, and those who favor online learning but are waiting for others to blaze the trail. Working with the online "champions," we were able to engage in planning and development activities and firmly commit to implementing the proposed online program model. Moreover, the faculty fully embraced the need to comply with our regional accrediting body (SACS) requirements, as well as any requirements established by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. As typically occurs with online programs, those generally favorable to online learning but sitting on the fence, quickly joined the effort once they saw the level of commitment and quality involved. It did not hurt that additional stipends were made available for developing and teaching online courses.

Establishing Relationships with Student Services Unit

Those new to launching online initiatives would do well to study the litany of changes that must be considered across the entire student services spectrum, including IT, admissions, registration, financial aid, advising, and billings and collections. Changes WILL be necessary in ALL of these areas. At EKU, obtaining their support in a wave of competing priorities required careful planning and sensitivities toward the workloads of these units. Among the many changes that had to be adopted for our program was a revamping of the online application and graduate admissions process, changes in the course scheduling procedures (including drop/add) to accommodate a new format and course schedule, and new coding schemes within our student records system (Banner) to ensure that student bills would be accurate. Financial aid had to be carefully researched to ensure that procedures, particularly those that relate to federal aid, were administered correctly.

Assessing the issues, planning for change, and implementing new procedures took months of careful planning and meetings involving hours of time by key stakeholders in the university. In addition to the planning and implementation that had to occur just to have a successful program launch, it is important to recognize that change is an ongoing process as well. Meetings and communications on these matters are an everyday reality. Each of the student services areas critical to the success of the program has pledged their full support for the initiative.

Making the Technology Work

We had to focus on updating our basic infrastructure, including equipment and software, to ensure that our students would enjoy state-of-the-art course design. We established a strong partnership with EKU's Information Technology and Delivery Services (ITDS) unit. ITDS maintains our course management system, Blackboard, and provides technology support to all EKU students.

The College's newly formed Office of Distance Education and Multimedia Services (ODEMS) was created to provide instructional design support for our faculty. The Office provides Instructional Designers and academic support staff. Staff is charged with developing advanced and cost-effective instructional methodologies through the use of e-learning technologies. We work as a team with faculty to explore ways to optimize use of curricula resources (e.g., incorporating key learning tools such video digests that enhance the learning experience); design courses with appropriate attention given to interface design, sequencing of instruction, use of assessments, and design of materials and activities; and ensure that courses incorporate standards regarding order, clarity, conciseness, style, and terminology.

Training programs for our faculty and students are ongoing, and technical assistance is provided whenever and wherever it may be needed. For example, an Instructional Designer is assigned to each online course, and this professional monitors and communicates regularly with students as needed.

Creating a Learning Culture

We have worked hard to create a culture within the program that reinforces learning and builds a sense of community. The benefits of obvious features like orientation courses have been well documented (Lynch, 2001). We strive to go beyond the basics to make sure that classes are interesting, stimulating, and fun. Within the learning community, we endeavor to not merely provide cyber-services, but to create a spirit of camaraderie among our students in which they feel comfortable sharing experiences and knowledge. Nowhere is this sense of attachment or belonging more evident than in our discussion boards. The rich exchange that occurs there is often invigorating, always informative, and never boring.

The Need for Assistance and a Strong Partner

While many universities have miscalculated the resources and expertise needed to secure program success (Weaver, 2006), we acknowledged that we were not as familiar with the best practices of online learning as we needed to be. While we were willing to do research and invest the time needed, we also wanted to move at a faster pace than that generally supported by the university structure. To do so, we had to contemplate selecting a partner that could help us fulfill our goals.

Having fully determined where we should concentrate our resources and expertise, we had to further consider the other elements of successful programs for which we were lacking in sufficient skill and expertise. We knew that we needed a knowledge partner to focus on marketing, recruitment, and retention services – elements that are key to e-learning success. We knew that marketing campaigns must be targeted to the audience; recruitment efforts must be predictable and consistent; and retention strategies must focus on the delivery of quality student services with purposeful communications and follow-up. We also knew that we simply did not have the expertise necessary to successfully deliver these critical, and often overlooked, services. Our research revealed that many universities attempted to deliver these services in-house, and failed. By partnering with an experienced online learning company, we could be freed up to focus on the areas where our attention was fully required -- navigating heretofore previously un-navigated administrative waters within the existing university structure and culture. EKU began by assessing online degree opportunities within the College of Justice and Safety, including the MS in LPS.

The Assessment Process

Compass Knowledge Group (CKG), Orlando, FL, is the distance e-learning services partner for EKU. CKG believes that success in the working professional marketplace is contingent upon carefully choosing the best programs for export to a regional, national, and international audience. Wise program planners begin by assessing the degree or certificate marketplace—to target and profile the input occupations of the target audiences, understand the target audiences' demand drivers, measure the level of access to the these audiences, and evaluate the level of extant distance e-learning competition. Further the marketplace is just one part of the equation. It is also important to evaluate the scalability and marketplace relevance of the curriculum and instructional model, identify faculty resources and champions, and assess the readiness of institutional student services to serve students online and at a distance (Compass Knowledge Group, 2006). These components are assessed against a list of critical success factors (CSFs) that CKG has benchmarked over 10 years of predictable student growth and

retention working in partnership with higher education institutions like EKU in a variety of disciplines. None of the benchmarks are single predictors and some overlap, but when taken as a composite, they can create a compelling argument for a "go or no go" decision. There are 20 CSFs to consider for assessing the marketplace, and they are grouped in four main categories.

- *Audience Profile*. Identifies and evaluates target groups or occupations most likely to pursue the education offered by the program under assessment. CKG evaluates these target audiences for size, industry growth rate, median earnings, and educational attainment.
- *Degree Demand*. Identifies trends in degree production as well as evaluates the forces that motivate the target audience to pursue the proposed education, such as licensure or certification, career advancement, career change, or professional parity.
- *Audience Accessibility*. Focuses on the means by which an institution can reach and educate prospective students about the benefits of the degree program. It is predicated on identifying the target segments and understanding the demand drivers that influence these groups. The purpose is to establish the viability of potential marketing channels. A secondary goal is to estimate the cost of generating program inquiries.
- *Competitive Landscape*. Compares the program under assessment to those programs that currently inhabit the distance learning arena against factors such as cost, admission requirements, length of program, and evidence of active promotion (Compass Knowledge Group, 2006).

Let's consider each of these categories in more detail. (The following information is reprinted with permission by Compass Knowledge Group.)

Analyzing the Target Audience

To identify target audiences, CKG first looks to those occupations that should logically compose the prospective audience. Often, these input occupations are a logical match to the program. The process of identifying input occupations is much easier for advanced degrees in instances where there is a clear career ladder. To varying degrees, identified target audiences for a proposed distance learning program should exhibit the following favorable characteristics.

- **Size of Audience**. As a minimum threshold, CKG seeks audiences with input occupations employing more than 100,000 workers.
- **Homogeneity of Audience**. A homogeneous audience is one in which large portions of the identified target audiences come from one or two related input occupations sharing common demographics. Homogeneity of an audience is not as easy to determine as its size.
- **Growth of Input Occupations**. Input occupations employing the target audience should be growing at least as fast as the national average of all occupations (currently 15%). Growth within input occupations can have a reciprocal effect on enrollment growth.
- **Annual Median Earnings**. Prospective students should be able to afford enrollment in the proposed program. CKG uses $38,000 annual median earnings as a rule of thumb.[1]
- **Academic Eligibility**. Large segments of the identified target audience must possess the minimum degree to be considered eligible for the proposed program.

The Audience Profile provides an overview of the size and characteristics of the existing market for the proposed RN to BSN and RN to MN programs. Section 2, Degree Demand, investigates the strength of the existing degree market and the strength of the demand drivers that motivate working professional RNs to enroll in one program or the other.

Measuring Degree Demand

The demand for higher education is the result of several factors. For some occupations, a graduate degree is an entry point into a field; for others, it serves as a differentiator and a readiness for leadership or career advancement. Five demand drivers tend to be predictive of success for distance learning degree programs.

- **Size and Growth of Degree Market.** As a rule of thumb, CKG considers a degree discipline that shows consistent growth over time and confers *1,000 or more* baccalaureate and *500 or more*

graduate degrees annually to be a strong candidate for distance learning.

- **Requirement for Licensure or Certification.** Often, a degree fulfills a condition to work in the intended output profession. For instance, to be a registered dietician one must complete at least an accredited nutrition bachelor's degree program. When it is present, the requirement for licensure or certification can be a powerful motivating force for students to enroll in and complete a particular program.
- **Professional Parity.** As a demand driver, professional parity relates to the tendency for people to seek a level of education commensurate to their peers' educational levels.
- **Professional and Personal Enrichment.** Opportunities for career advancement can be a strong motivator for seeking advanced education. If the chance for increased pay or promotion is augmented by the completion of a relevant educational credential, then professional enrichment can be a very strong demand driver. Professional enrichment can also mean adding a skill or competency in response to market forces or needs. The personal satisfaction of achieving a life goal can also be a strong demand driver and often is the first reason named for working professional students and graduates when asked why they sought additional education.
- **Lack of Substitutable Degrees.** Demand for specific degrees is stronger in cases in which no other degree, certificate, or continuing education program provides the same benefits.

Audience Accessibility

This category evaluates five channels that have historically served as the most common means of reaching a specific audience and generating leads for online programs. Four of the five channels offer more than one way, or initiative, to reach the target audience.

- **Direct mail.** Involves purchasing qualified lists and sending material via postal mail and e-mail.
- **Career resources.** Relevant industry publications and websites that can include banner or display advertisement, e-newsletters, and sponsorship initiatives.
- **Search engine marketing.** Optimizing search engine (SEO) marketing through pay-per-click and organic search engine initiatives.
- **Online education directories.** Portals (OEDs) that list online degrees and collect prospects' contact information on behalf of their client universities
- **Outreach.** A catch-all category that includes alumni marketing, employer and association marketing, and press release initiatives.

Competitive Landscape

The higher education institutions that are regionally accredited and promote online, hoping to penetrate the national market, would be competitors to the program under consideration. Those who have brands more closely aligned with the degree granting institution of the proposed online programs would be the most direct competitors. A program can have a favorable position in the competitive set if it meets the following criteria.

- **Few significant competitors**. As a rule of thumb, a ratio of distance learning programs to total degrees conferred (campus-based and online) that exceeds 1:250 shows a healthy degree market that can support more distance learning programs.
- **Comparable or reasonable cost.** The proposed program is priced competitively, but neither at the very top or bottom of the range.
- **Comparable or favorable program admission requirements.** Entrance requirements will not be a barrier for an otherwise qualified, working professional audience.
- **Comparable time to complete the degree.** The number of credits and length of time required to complete the program does not significantly exceed those of programs in the competitive set.
- **Minimal residency or on-campus components.** On-site attendance is not a requirement for completion of the program or on-campus experiences are minimal and directly related to the curriculum and specific competencies.

Findings from the EKU MS LPS Assessment

Examining data from the Bureau of Labor of Statistics (BLS), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), various professional associations,

Internet key word searches, and three audience surveys, CKG assessed the marketplace for the EKU MS LPS distance e-learning program. The following table compares the results for each CSF against CKG benchmarks.

Critical Success Factor	CKG Benchmark	EKU Assessment Favorable-----Unfavorable
Audience Profile		
1. Audience Size	100,000+	460,000
2. Homogeneity	<5 input occupations	9
3. Growth Rate of Input Occupation(s)	>15%	18%
4. Annual Median Income	$38,000+	$51,266
5. Academic Eligibility	50% w/ BA/BS or >100,000	186,000
Degree Demand		
6. Growth of Degrees Conferred Annually	>500 Master's >1000 Bachelor's	709
7. Licensure/Certification Req. Required	Yes	N/A
8. Professional Parity	Yes	Management
9. Professional & Personal Enrichment	Yes	Salary Increase, Promotion
10. Lack of substitutable degrees	<3	6
Audience Accessibility		
11. Direct Mail	60,000+ postal & email lists	3 large lists @ average cost
12. Career Resources	Print ads, banner ads, newsletters	2/3 & growing
13. SEO Marketing	1.1% CTR & 50 CPM	7.7% & 41
14. Online OEDs	3+	4 @ average cost
15. Outreach	Direct to large groups	Major employers
Competitive Landscape		
16. Few Competitors	1 online program:250 degrees conferred	0 (4 related)
17. Tuition	Average	Average
18. Admission Requirements	3+ admissions, no GRE	6 admissions, GRE
19. Time to Degree	2 years or <	2 years
20. Minimal Residency	None	None

CKG concluded that the overall marketplace opportunity for the MS LPS was favorable and recommended that EKU proceed to market the program to a national audience. With faculty champions, strong administrative support, and re-alignment of student services to be able to meet the needs of

eventually at least 200 steady-state distance learning students, CKG assessed that the program should be successful. CKG noted, "The audience for this degree is large and spans multiple professional classifications. This is also an educationally underserved population. EKU has a unique program, well-known faculty, and a generalist curriculum, all of which will appeal to a broad national audience of working professionals. The faculty and curriculum for this program are prepared, with minor modifications, to launch this degree nationally. The College and EKU will need to make staffing and infrastructure adjustments to accommodate a large population of distance students" (Compass Knowledge Group, 2005, p. 4).

Discovery Process and Lessons Learned

From the outset, inquiry generation for the MS LPS distance e-learning program was strong and predictable, but conversion to applicant and fully enrolled student (post-drop/add) was under enrollment goals each admission cycle. CKG conducted new student surveys and non-enrolled prospect surveys to refine market intelligence about the educational needs of the various target audiences. Certain segments of the target audience, such as safety professionals, expressed high interest but were disinclined to make application because the generalist curriculum was not specific to their career needs. Others indicated that the name of the degree did not clearly convey the discipline and was not relevant to them.

Both CKG and EKU had believed that the generalist degree would have broad appeal and it did attract a large c ross section of all audiences who expressed enough interest to take a look. But the audiences were different enough that upon close scrutiny of the curriculum, they could not find their niche. Further, conversions typically came after two or more admission periods, indicating that the pipeline would need to be large and would require frequent contact. Although new student enrollments steadily grew each subsequent term and returning student retention was above 95%, both partners believed that curricular modifications would serve to improve the relevance of the degree to the target audiences.

CKG recommended that the College consider re-naming the degree to better reflect the target audience and break up the generalist curriculum into targeted concentrations, adding more courses for each target audience. At the same time the prospect communication plan would be revised to reflect a longer conversion process, anticipating longer and more frequent advisements about program changes.

The New Program Model

As a result of our collaboration with Compass Knowledge Group, and with the support of the graduate faculty, three major modifications were made to the structure of the MS LPS program. First, the name of the program was changed from Loss Prevention and Safety, which carries a retail security connotation, to a name which better reflects the expertise of our graduate faculty and the demand drivers indicated by the marketplace. The new name of the program is Master of Science in Safety, Security and Emergency Management (SSEM). Second, the graduate curriculum was substantially enhanced through the addition of three new four-course concentrations in Occupational Safety, Fire Administration and Homeland Security. Third, for those graduate students who are not able to pursue the entire graduate degree, but wish to acquire the specialized knowledge provided in the program options, three course certificates will be offered. Students can acquire a certificate by completing the four courses offered in the concentration areas. With theses program modifications, it is anticipated that our partner, CKG, will have enhanced opportunities to market our program to a larger audience that will drive enrollments toward our program goals.

Benefits of the Partnership

After 12 months of implementing our online master's degree program, and assessing the merits of our partnership, it is clear that our partnership has resulted in significant benefits for EKU.

Increased Efficiency

With CKG providing substantial assistance in marketing, recruitment and retention services, EKU's staff and graduate faculty have been freed from these responsibilities and are better able to focus their time and energies in the online and on campus classrooms.

Improved Student Services

Support for online students is one of the fundamental elements that must accompany any good online program. Without the typical structures (both formal and informal) and campus rhythms to guide them, online learners are left to their own devices to navigate their way through their educational programs. Thus, it is critical that activities and offerings be implemented to support the online learner (Scarafiotti and Cleveland-Innes, 2006). Unless formal structures are put in place to support basic student needs (e.g., registration reminders, help with ordering books, reminders about upcoming courses), students will often get lazy and/or forgetful, and things (e.g., deadlines) can slip through the cracks, adversely affecting retention. Because these support structures are typically not in place for online programs (in fact, they often are not well-structured in traditional on-campus settings), this is where breakdowns can quickly occur. There is a cost to establishing these support structures, and most universities are not typically well positioned to create them, especially if their institutional culture has not yet been transformed to fully embrace online learning. Thus, partnering with CKG to deliver these services was a judicious decision for a lot reasons, including cost, time and expertise. Unless online students are provided with a full complement of student services, one cannot reasonably expect a high degree of success or retention with those students that venture down the online learning road.

Shared Expertise

The expertise that EKU brings to the partnership is related to the content of the degree. EKU provides a uniquely specialized student learning experience that is geared to developing future leaders in the safety, security and emergency management professions.

The expertise that CKG contributes to the partnership has been evident on several matters. First, EKU engaged CKG to help ensure that the program clearly met the conditions for being successful. The evidence-based assessment discussed above confirmed that our desired direction was, in fact, a sound one. They reviewed EKU's student services infrastructure, conducted focus groups with students and interviewed faculty. They determined that there was indeed a demand for the program and that EKU was ready to deliver it to a distance audience.

Second, once the results confirmed the validity of our program goals, we further engaged CKG to help us provide our unique brand of expertise to students on a national scale. They have fulfilled our marketing goals by generating hundreds of qualified leads for the program; they have fulfilled our recruitment goals by helping us to enroll a significant number of students into the online program; and they have fulfilled our retention goals by helping us to retain over 95% of the students that enrolled in the program.

Third, CKG was able to conduct research that suggested a course of action for us that we have set out to implement. Their ongoing evaluation and assessment activities led to program refinements that we are confident will result in positive outcomes. They were able to manage the assessment in a timely manner that reduced our costs. They were able to do this because they already had the existing infrastructure in place for conducting this type of research. In fact, it is a routine part of their business practices.

Shared Investments and Risks

As this paper has demonstrated, there are substantial costs involved in developing and delivering a quality online learning program. Resources in excess of one million dollars have been made during the first year of the program. It simply would not have been possible to even consider launching the program unless this investment was shared. EKU didn't have to commit resources in certain areas -- resources that would have made the venture cost-prohibitive. The combined investments should enable both partners to recover their cost and enjoy revenue sometime during the third year of operation.

Risk reduction was a key factor in deciding to partner with CKG. By sharing our risks we were empowered to make investments that we could not have otherwise made. For example, if we had to budget funds for marketing, we would not have been able to budget funds for instructional design support or faculty training. Especially because our program did not initially meet its targeted enrollment goal, we were able to assess our obstacles and reengineer the program to accommodate the demand drivers that were identified from our research.

A Sound Business Model

By partnering with a private, for-profit entity, EKU also bought into a business model. Because good business models require a certain amount of discipline and accountability in order to be successful, we were able to benefit from sound practices that not only made good business sense, but also facilitated improvements in the overall program model. For example, by adopting an 8-week courses format and enrolling students over six distinct program terms, we have moved toward a program structure that ensures constancy in the number of the students and course offerings that have to be offered to fulfill commitments made to students.

Summary / Conclusions

Successful features of online learning are beginning to be well researched and established. Included among those features are a strong organizational structure, faculty buy-in and support, solid relationships across all student services units, a commitment to maintaining infrastructure and technology, and an online culture or community that supports student learning. There must also be a strong commitment to marketing, recruitment and student retention. Guiding all of these features and services is the need to engage in continual assessment and evidenced-based research to inform ongoing practices. Eastern Kentucky University has determined that it should not "go it alone," and has found its partnership with Compass Knowledge Group to be beneficial to its program goals. These goals include delivering a quality curriculum to a purposeful audience of safety, security and emergency management professionals. Wrapped around the curriculum is quality student services designed to support student learning. The partnership has produced increased enrollments and a high retention rate ensuring that students will complete their degrees in a timely manner. Additional benefits have included increased efficiencies, shared expertise, shared investments and risks, and a sound business model contributing to financial success.

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[1] Based on the 2006 average starting salary for secondary teachers in the U.S. ($38,589), from the National Education Association, state-by-state breakdowns are available at http://www.nea.org/student-program/about/state.html).

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