Scaling Up While Maintaining Quality in Online Degree Development

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Abstract

Lower enrollments in the freshman class are forcing institutions to make decisions about how to scale the processes for creating distance learning degrees. However, the scaling up in the migration of face-to-face degrees to online degrees does not need to sacrifice quality. This paper describes the processes used to accelerate the development of online degree programs at a large research institution. In 4 years, the number of online degrees, certifications, and minors increased. By developing processes before the scaling up, the integration of specific elements created high-quality online educational opportunities for students.

Introduction

A frequent question posed at postsecondary institutions is how to expand enrollments. Overall enrollments into higher education institutions have dropped each term over the past 3 years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). During this period, distance learning appeared to compensate for some of the loss with increasing enrollment over the past 14 years (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). In 2014, 2.8 million higher education students took only online courses (Allen &Seaman, 2016). Noting these trends, the higher education institutions are including distance education an important part of the long-term strategy for enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Defining quality in higher education is extremely difficult due to the common practice of protecting faculty academic freedom associated with teaching (Ellis, 1993) and the lack of agreement between universities about what is quality (Allen & Seaman, 2016). The evolution of distance learning, the teaching of course content is more visible than those courses delivered in face-to-face formats. The visibility of online courses allowed the identification of best practices incorporated into various scorecards or rubrics. These rubrics serve as quality control mechanisms giving institutions a method for checking online course against predetermined standards, allowing for the rejection or the recycling of courses if they are below standards (Ellis, 1993).

Several rubrics are available to evaluate the quality of courses. The Quality Matters Rubric (QM) first edition released in 2005 used research about best practices in distance education to develop a set of standards to evaluate online courses (Quality Matters, 2006). Other national rubrics commonly used as quality control for online course development include Blackboard's Exemplary Course Program Rubric (2012) and the Open SUNY Course Quality Review Rubric (Open SUNY Center for Online Teaching Excellence, 2016). An evaluation of standards within the rubrics revealed common measures of quality: listing of objectives, intuitive navigation, learner engagement, including student-to-student interaction community building activities, displaying of instructor contact information, student communication, assessments aligned with objectives and course expectations, identification of support services, and explanation of accommodations for disabilities and course policies (Baldwin, Ching, & Hsu, 2017).

Beyond evaluation of the quality of courses is a second set of quality control measures at the program level. In a report to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, quality assurance at the program or institutional level relied upon reviews of faculty credentials, selection of new faculty, and faculty training (Phipps, Wellman, & Merisotis, 1998). Professional development has become a way to credential and to train faculty to teach in online environments. Professional development can clarify for faculty that the migration of courses involves more than recreating the traditional classroom for the online class (González-Sanmamed, Muñoz-Carril, & Sangrà, 2014). Through training, instructional designers explain factors of quality to assist the faculty in understanding the reason elements are included within online courses (Phipps et al., 1998). Using a course evaluation rubric as the foundation for the training, the quality of courses improved, particularly in learning interactions (Sun & de la Rosa, 2015).

A common measure of quality at the program level is the use of assessment tools to ensure knowledge and skills acquisition. These measurements can be used for performance reporting mechanisms required in accreditation evaluations (Chalmers & Johnston, 2012). The performance measures are then used to make decisions to improve degree programs (Mathes & Pederson, 2017). To ensure quality in Florida, the Florida Board of Governors' regulations direct universities to develop a process to articulate and publish the expected core learning outcomes for each baccalaureate program. Furthermore, the departments must document progress toward the learning outcomes and to use the results to improve the program effectiveness (Board of Governors, 2017).

Recently emerging in the distance education field are program standards. The Online Learning Consortium released the Administration of Online Programs Scorecard which provides a comprehensive list of criteria for the evaluation of online programs. The scorecard has 75 items for evaluation in the following categories: (a) institutional support, (b) technology support, (c) course development/instructional design, (d), course structure, (e) teaching and learning, (f) social and student engagement, (g) faculty support, (h) student support, and (i) evaluation and assessment (Shelton & Saltsman, 2014). QM developed four different review certifications to evaluate online programs. The certificates are in program design, teaching support, learning support, and learner success (MarylandOnline Inc., 2017).

With pressure to develop online degree programs quickly and the need to make sure that the educational institution stands out within a growing crowded marketplace of distance learning offerings, several questions have arisen. For example, how can a higher education institution respond quickly to the growing demand of students by increasing the number of distance degree options? How can those degrees be developed rapidly and maintain quality?

The Institutional History

The basis for the foundation of the institution in the 1960s which developed the process for the migration of degrees to an online format was to invent new and better ways of making higher education available to all who sought it. From its inception, the institution was grounded in video with the first classrooms designed to capture lectures using the latest filming techniques. From those origins, the institution advanced using video technology connecting classrooms across 150 miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline (Florida Atlantic University, 2017).

Because of the origins grounded in video, online education was slow to start at this institution. An awareness of the potential of online as a delivery method led to the formation of a task force in 2009. The *eLearning Task Force Report* (eLearning Task Force, 2010) was used to create the Center for eLearning and provided guidance in the development of procedures for course development, program development, professional development, and online student support (eLearning Task Force, 2010). The first university-wide effort was to provide training and incentives to encourage faculty to convert their face-to-face classes into an online format (Orozco, Fowlkes, Jerzak, & Musgrove, 2012). This first round was effective in building awareness across the campus and created the first adopters. By the Fall of 2012, 6.8% of the total enrollment could be attributed to the online format.

Additional pressure to increase online enrollment came from the Florida State University System. The Innovation and Online Committee of the Board of Governors for the system developed an online educational strategic plan. That plan included goals to reach an overall online enrollment of 40% across the Florida university system by the year 2025. Although the expectation was not for every university to reach that goal, each was expected to participate (Task Force for Strategic Planning for Online Education, 2015).

The Plan for Migrating Degrees Online

Although the first approach was good at building awareness and quickly launching the online distance learning at the university (Orozco et al., 2012), a different approach was needed if the online enrollment growth was to include new enrollment and to meet the goal of replacing the anticipated declining freshmen enrollment due to the shrinking size of the high school graduating classes. To impact the online enrollment, the development of online courses needed to move from the random adoption of distance learning dependent upon a faculty members' desire to convert their courses to a systematic institutional-wide approach. The *eLearning Task Force Report* recommended growth of online programs using bottom-up and top-down approaches (eLearning Task Force, 2010).

Once the decision was made to develop an institutional plan, a systematic approach was used to expand the number of distance learning degrees. The first step was to identify degrees that benefited from the online delivery format. Degrees fitting into this category had many students who were most likely to be working full-time and

not able to attend campus classes on a regular basis. These students often had full-time jobs but wanted to expand their employment opportunities through educational options. Degrees in criminal justice, nursing, and business were good candidates for program migration in this cluster. Another cluster was highly specialized degrees with small numbers of students that would benefit in the additional enrollment from online courses.

Before launching the migrate of degrees to online learning environments, two concerns required consideration. First, the faculty were very concerned about maintaining the quality of the degrees as the program was migrated online. As an extension of the quality concern, the faculty wanted to maintain student interactions, protect the academic integrity, and participate in the design of the courses (Golden & Brown, 2016). The second concern revolved around the identification of incentives for a department to offer online degrees. This was particularly challenging as the institution wanted to avoid over-incentivizing departments. The rewards for the departments needed to balance the demand for online and ensure the appropriate programs opted into the migration process.

The online degree migration program became a solution to address the two concerns that surfaced about the development of online programs. The components of the migration plan addressed quality while providing incentives to the department for becoming involved. The goal of the migration program was to increase the number of online degree programs through two processes: converting on-campus degrees to online and to develop new online degrees. The institution did not want to scale up to just create numbers. The scale up also had to be high quality.

Another goal of the online program development was to expand the university degree offerings beyond the local region. To meet that goal, the degrees and certifications needed to be online. The second step was to identify the low-hanging fruit. Those degrees with many of the courses available in the online delivery format became the next cluster of degrees that were migrated to online. A careful evaluation of the courses across the campus identified the potential degrees for this cluster. Those programs were approached by the Center for eLearning to consider development of the remaining courses. The third step was to migrate master's degrees. Master's degrees require 10 to 13 classes developed in online format compared with baccalaureate degrees.

Bachelor's degrees took more coordination and planning because of the 45 to 60 credits required in the content area. The first step involved converting the upper-division courses required for the major online. The second step was to encourage the development of general education courses from each of the content areas to be available online. The two sets of courses, general studies and upper-division courses, allowed the university to offer a 4-year online experience. The general education courses also filled in missing courses in support of the other degrees, allowing students from across the campus to finish their degrees in a timely manner.

Three Phases to Online.

Migrating a degree program took commitment from the department. To explain the process, all the components are presented as three steps: (a) exploration phase, (b) development phase, and (c) implementation phase. During the exploration phase, the expectations and the advantages were explained. The departments with new degrees began with a market analysis. At the end of the exploratory phase, the departments made a commitment to the process. The Dean of the College also signed the agreement. The signatures ensured that the departments would follow processes and would include the quality assurance elements. By signing the agreement, the departments agreed to the development of a curriculum map and three plans. The curriculum map guided the process. The three plans were (a) development, (b) sustainability, and (c) marketing (see Figure 1 to identify how the plans were integrated into the phases).
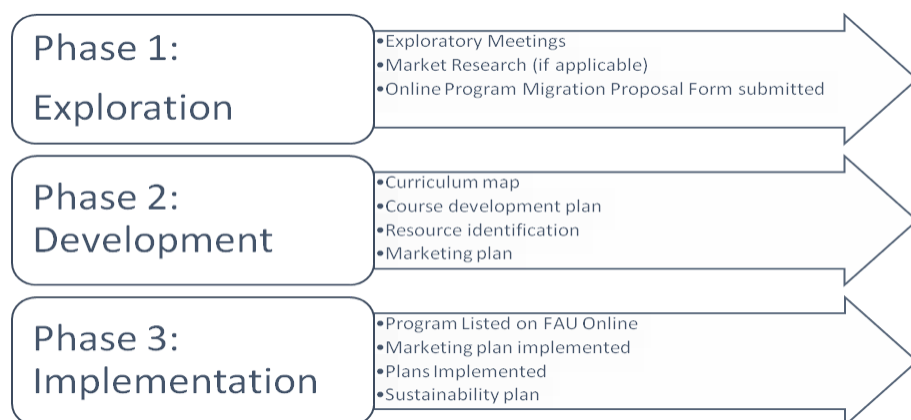
Phase 1: Exploration
- Exploratory Meetings
- Market Research (if applicable)
- Online Program Migration Proposal Form submitted

Phase 2: Development
- Curriculum map
- Course development plan
- Resource identification
- Marketing plan

Phase 3: Implementation
- Program Listed on FAU Online
- Marketing plan implemented
- Plans Implemented
- Sustainability plan

Figure 1: Online Program Migration Process

Phase 1 Exploration to Accelerate Online Degree Offerings

To accelerate the number of online degrees, the faculty recommended both top-down and bottom-up approaches to expand online learning (eLearning Task Force, 2010). One of the top-down approaches was utilization of marketing analysis for new degree program proposals. The marketing analysis supported the department in the development of a quality degree program. Part of the marketing analysis was an evaluation of the viability to create online content for the degree programs. The marketing analysis protected the department and the university from investing in a program for which a market did not exist. The second part of the analysis was the ability to ask other institutions about what strategies used to maintain the quality of their programs in the online environment. The analysis also provided suggestions the Center for eLearning could incorporate into a marketing plan for the department by identifying students for the degree program.

The information from the marketing analysis guided the creation of a marketing plan. The marketing plan became an incentive for the departments. The departments appreciated the additional support in the development of the marketing materials from the marketing teams. The plan included brochures for department marketing events and for the university admissions team. The Center for eLearning's listed the degree programs on the online website and created social media assets.

Through the bottom-up approach, programs self-identified a desire to migrate online. The programs that self-identified typically had one of three concerns. First, the demographics of the current students indicated that they were not living on campus or were working professionals looking to advance their careers. The second reason was a need to expand the number of students accessing the program due to low enrollments. These degrees tended to be highly specialized degrees. Third, groups of departments struggled to maintain enrollment due to increased competition by other institutions providing the degrees online.

Development

The development phase involved several strategies to ensure quality. The curriculum mapping of the degree addressed two issues by combining academic outcomes with assessment strategies. In the undergraduate programs, state regulations require the programs to have Student Learning Compacts (Board of Governors, 2017). The outcomes evaluated three areas: (a) knowledge and skills, (b) communication skills, and (c) critical thinking skills. Depending on the content area of the degree, accreditation agencies expected documentation of the students' progress in achieving outcomes. For those degrees with no accreditation standards or criteria, development of curriculum for the Student Learning Compacts were very helpful. The use of curriculum mapping became one of the quality assurance points within the plan. Using the curriculum map enabled departments to meet the evaluation and assessment requirements as set forth in both the Online Learning Consortium and QM program reviews (Shelton & Saltman, 2017; Online Learning Consortium, 2014).

To accomplish this part of the plan, the departments worked with the migration specialist to map the curriculum based upon the different learning outcomes and standards for the courses. The departments decided on the assessment strategy for each objective. The departments used a variety of methods to measure the learning outcomes. Some departments designed the assessments as a team, while other departments allowed the instructors of the courses to determine the assessments. Who designed the assessments was often a decision made depending upon the size of the departments and how many instructors were teaching the core requirements. If one instructor taught the courses, then that instructor made the decision. If several instructors or adjuncts taught the courses, the departments made the decision. The assessments were then added to the curriculum map. From the curriculum map, learning objectives were entered into the outcomes tool of the learning management system by a team member at the Center for eLearning. The learning management system allowed the online courses to gather the student learning outcome data easily for reporting purposes. Upon completion of this process, the departments then had a curriculum map that could be used to shared with accrediting agencies, demonstrating the equivalency of the online curriculum with the face-to-face.

This element addressed several concerns. The curriculum map allowed the departments to develop an evaluation plan to monitor the quality of the online degrees. The faculty compared results from the online courses to the traditional formats. As the faculty members became comfortable with the online assessment measurement tools, they often converted the traditional courses into the online outcome tools in the learning management systems as well. This led to another incentive for the departments, making it easier to gather and to submit assessment results to the university for the student learning outcomes or to the accreditation agency with the click of a few

buttons, the reports were generated. The departments also had the evaluation plan to submit to the accrediting agency.

The development of the evaluation plan promoted quality as the department members worked together. The result was a more cohesive program of study. To improve the program of study, some departments made changes in the requirements within courses. Other modifications included adding or droping courses. The departments submitted these changes through the faculty approval process.

Based upon the curriculum map, the departments created a plan for the program by identifying the courses that needed migration to be online. The departments prioritized the courses with the guidance of the migration specialist. Faculty members were identified to work with the instructional designer in the creation of the online courses. Finally, the course development timeline was determined. The development plan also allowed the instructional design team to manage the workload within the unit to accommodate the department's needs. The development plan became another quality assurance point. Only when the required courses and several elective courses became available to assure online-only students could complete all the required coursework online was the degree listed upon the website as an online degree program. The development plan also ensured that the courses met the QM standards before the courses were taught.

Implementation Process

Critical to the implementation of the degree program was the sustainability plan. The sustainability plan included several subcomponents that were necessary to ensure long-term support and quality. The components included the initial development plan. Core courses were prioritized in the development process. Using the curriculum map, the departments created a plan of study that specified availability of courses by semester and ensured that students could complete the degree in a timely manner. The sustainability plan confirmed that the department was supportive of this decision. If a faculty member left, the department was committed to continue offering the degree online.

Many of the programs wanted to submit the courses through the QM review process to receive certification for the degree. After teaching the courses, the faculty submitted the courses for the QM Rubric (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2014) review process. Once all the courses received the QM Certification, the process for a program certification began.

The sustainability plan included training of faculty, adjuncts, and teaching assistants before teaching the online courses. The Center for eLearning offered a system of professional development to support the faculty. A certification course provided the basics in how to teach online. The course was a great starting point for the faculty as they began the journey to becoming online instructors. The course was good for the adjuncts and the doctorial students who could be teaching the courses or assisting the faculty members. Faculty could attend open labs as they decided to make improvements to the courses. This prevented the courses from becoming stagnant. Furthermore, the faculty could participate in the community of practice to learn new approaches.

The sustainability plan ensured good experiences by the students. The students knew what courses were online and when to take those courses. The course of study developed in the sustainability plan ensured the scheduling of the proper courses. The sustainability plan also required the adjunct faculty to go through training before teaching online and newly hired faculty could attend online training as part of their welcome to the university events to support the faculty training measure in the Administrator of Online Scorecard Programs (Sheldon & Saltsman, 2014).

Other Factors Contributing to Quality

Because a development plan was in place, the faculty members were scheduled the semester before the classes were offered online to design the courses with an instructional designer. The course designer and the instructor became partners in the development process. Within that process, the instructional designer assisted the faculty member in the inclusion of teacher presence and student interaction. The faculty member provided the content to the instructional designer for inclusion into the course. The faculty received a stipend for assisting in the development of the online classes. A course evaluator reviewed the course before the faculty member received a stipend. The review process used the QM Rubric (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2014) with additional criteria to enhance lesson structure and presence within the course.

Before the degree was ready to accept online students, support for the students required coordination with the student services offices. Advisors for the program received the 2-year and the 4-year plans of study for the

bachelor's programs or the 1-year or 2-year plans for the master's level programs. The advisors identified additional stumbling blocks that needed solutions before launching. For example, courses with high drop or failure rates received easily accessible tutors embedded within the course. Occasionally, additional services needed to be made available. For example, the computer science department developed an online computer lab for students to receive assistance with computer programming projects.

Both the QM Program Rubric and the Administration of Online Programs Scorecard required that the online student support services be addressed in the evaluation of a high-quality program. The connection between the department and with student support services allowed the different units at the university to communicate with one another about the online degree and the expectations of the degree with student support services. At that point, those units were prepared to handle issues that the online students may encountered in the program.

Quality Incorporated into the Process

When departments contact the Center for eLearning to migrate a degree online, quality becomes the first consideration. The quality built from the course level to the program level is then reflected at the institutional level. All courses are reviewed internally using an enhanced QM Rubric (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2014). Additionally, the department developed a curriculum map, assessment measures, and a sustainability plan to maintain quality throughout the program. The student support services became involved to ensure successful completion by the online students. Table 1 below maps the measures of quality to the processes in the migration process in a matrix.

Table 1: Quality Migration Matrix

Quality Measures	Migration Process
Course development (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2017; Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	Courses designed to QM Rubric Standards and with the support of an instructional designer.
Course structure (Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	Course template was used in design process, so the course structure was the same across all courses. To receive a stipend, the course must pass an internal review.
Best practices in teaching and learning for online courses (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2017; Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	Best practices were built into the course and professional development process. Courses are not taught until an internal review is completed.
Evaluation and assessment (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2017; Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	Curriculum maps included the assessment strategies
Faculty support (Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	A system of professional development was available for the faculty. Departments began requiring faculty to attend the certification courses.
Institutional support (Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	The exploratory phase ended with signed agreements by the department chair and the college dean. The development of a sustainability plan continues to ensure quality.
Student support services (MarylandOnline, Inc., 2017; Shelton & Saltsman, 2014)	Course of study developed, advisors consulted, and services implemented.

Resources to Implement Quality Program Migration Process

To implement the program migration plan required two individuals. The migration specialist was at the Center for eLearning. The migration specialist guided the departments in the development of each of the components of the migration process ensuring quality and provided incentives to migrate online. Additionally, the migration specialist implemented the quality assurance pieces by ensuring that the department courses met the QM standards, developing a cohesive evaluation plan with the curriculum map, and monitored the sustainability plan.

A second coordinator was within the department. The department coordinators signed a contract with the Center for eLearning to receive a stipend for the additional duties. The department coordinators became the liaison with the department chair and the faculty. The department coordinators were responsible for coordinating the activities within the components for the migration process and for assisting the department chair in the implementation. The department coordinators became invaluable to the process. Depending on the department chair to coordinate

the activities was overwhelming. The department coordinators focused exclusively on the online program, allowing the Center for eLearning to move programs through the process in an effective manner.

Financing the migration program created additional costs to the institution. The costs were in the hiring of the migration specialist and the department coordinators. The migration specialist became a part-time position. The department coordinators were staff or faculty in the department so a stipend for each semester they worked on the project reduced those costs. The Center for eLearning collected a fee for the distance learning courses by credit hour. As the degree programs grew, fees charged for the online courses increased allowing the expansion of the department coordinators.

The Results

The degree migration process was successful in increasing the number of degrees offered online. In 4 years, the number of online offerings rapidly expanded from 6 degrees to 40 degrees, 4 certificates, and 6 minors. The number of students taking most of their coursework online tripled from 1,185 to 3,345 during that period. In the 1st year, the university increased enrollment into the online programs by 300 students. That growth in online enrollment accelerated into 12% per year. In Fall 2017, over 700 students started at the university taking all courses online. This increased the percentage of online enrollments from 8% to 17% of the total enrollment in 3 years.

Lessons Learned

The partnership between the migration specialist and the department coordinators proved to be invaluable beyond the scope of the original intentions of the migration process. At first, the Center for eLearning attempted the program migration process with the department chairs. However, with the department chairs managing many other responsibilities, they were not able to follow through in bringing the courses online in a timely fashion. The department coordinators assisted in scaling up the degree migration process.

The first plan was to only hire the department coordinators for 2 years as the degree was migrated online. However, the department coordinators were invaluable to the Center for eLearning beyond the migration process. The assessment plans and the marketing plans were often created after the degree was launched. Convincing the faculty to take their courses through the QM review also took time. The faculty often wanted to perfect their courses before the review. The coordinators within the departments became important in guiding the department through other initiatives. The university decided to change its learning management systems. The department coordinators developed a second development plan to convert the courses into the new system. With their assistance, the conversion process was implemented very efficiently.

With the growth of the coordinator program, the Center for eLearning decided to implement two new changes. The duties of the migration specialist were divided creating two positions. A full-time program quality assurance specialist was hired. The quality assurance specialist monitored the programs that completed all phases to ensure the courses were offered on the scheduled course of study, made modifications when the course of study changed, provided training for the department coordinators, and worked with the department coordinators to support new initiatives required by the university that impacted online programs. The migration specialist continued to assist new programs online through the various phases of development.

The other change was the addition of a department coordinators' advisory group to the Center for eLearning. The department coordinators provided another perspective of what was happening with the online courses and degrees. This group allowed the Center for eLearning to quickly change and to meet the needs of the students and the faculty.

One challenge that has yet to be resolved is the gathering of the assessment data generated from the assessment plan. Gathering cohort information for groups of students going through a sequence of courses can be tracked. However, legacy student information systems and other barriers make the gathering of online-only student data challenging. Currently, unless students self-identify by selecting online as their degree option, the student outcomes and success data are difficult to track as online only. Frequently, the identification of online-only students occurs after the enrollment process is complete. As an institution, different options are being explored for tagging distance learning students to compare their outcomes with other student groups.

Conclusion

The migration specialist and the department coordinators allowed the Center for eLearning to scale up the process of migrating and creating new online degree programs. The process is systematic with processes in place to ensure that the departments were engaged. The instructional designers could plan for the courses and were able to prepare for the number of courses they would design in a semester. The process was instrumental in meeting deadlines and participation in the quality assurance processes.

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