

Not Yet a Duck: An Effort to Strengthen Online Degree Programs

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Online baccalaureate programs now serve a quarter of American degree-seeking students. As those programs proliferated in the past decade, host institutions tended to “unbundle” academic affairs and student affairs (often neglecting the latter in the design and delivery of online programs). And so, while online programs opened the door for students facing barriers, the programs might not be conveying the full set of social, personal, and professional benefits of a college education. Herein, we describe our initiation of a data-driven effort to enrich online degree programs.

The Rise Of Online Programs

Online baccalaureate degree programs in American higher education proliferated in the last decade, more than doubling enrolled students from 2012 to 2021 (NCES, 2021). Post-pandemic, approximately a quarter of degree-seeking undergraduate students are enrolled in online programs. Early adopters tended to be for-profit educators, while traditional, comprehensive institutions more recently added online programs to their existing campus-based programs (Hall, 2022). For many institutions in the first group, online programs were and are the core business. For the latter group, adding online programs may represent a hedge against an unfolding enrollment cliff (Grawe, 2017); having already added *a la carte* online course sections for campus programs in the aughts, many traditional institutions cobbled together section offerings to form entirely online degree programs a decade later. The same courses were assumed to have the same impact on student learning and development. Herein, we report on our first steps to enriching online programs.

The Sameness Heuristic

An oft-cited heuristic suggests that we can assume something is a duck if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck. A sameness heuristic can be an efficient guide, but it can also mislead. A principle of sameness guides the authorization of generic drugs, for example, efficiently producing largely positive results—expanding affordability and access to medications (Holman, 2019).

Concerta is a long-acting methylphenidate (MPH) that becomes available to the body via multiple phases across twelve hours (Lally et al., 2016). When patent protection expired, two generics were approved by the FDA upon demonstration of similar key elements (bioequivalence) while *assuming* broader sameness (including therapeutic equivalence). The approved generics delivered MPH through a uniphasic (not the brand's multiphasic) pattern with differing effects. Patient reports soon pointed to poor outcomes, including less benefit, shorter benefit, and harm. The FDA recognized that, though similarly providing MPH, the generics were not substitutes for Concerta and changed their approval ratings accordingly (Lally et al., 2016).

Might American universities have similarly rushed to assume that curricular equivalence would necessarily translate into equivalent outcomes for online programs versus fully featured campus programs? In the case of Concerta generics, the non-equivalence can be pegged to differing pharmacokinetics. However, even the appearance of generics (e.g., color) has significantly altered patients' adherence and ultimate outcomes (Lumbreras et al., 2022). Beyond the curriculum, many impactful differences between traditional and online programs may exist.

Learning Reconsidered, Again

Online programs in higher education opened the door to matriculants who had been barred by work, family obligations, or distance (Samra et al., 2021). That underserved group now has access to the intellectual benefits of college. When Student Affairs components are excluded, however, the students still have limited access to the full set of social, personal, and professional benefits of college—limitations that likely contribute to the retention challenges in online education (Bawa, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019).

American universities recognized the importance of educating the *whole* person in the nineteenth century, and through the twentieth century, Student Affairs gradually became a co-actor with Academic Affairs (Long, 2012). *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* was published in 2004, just before the explosive emergence of online programs. In *Learning Reconsidered*, NASPA urged campuses to coordinate the efforts of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs so that students are availed of transformative learning wherein students gain knowledge *and* new social and personal frames of reference in which knowledge takes on meaning. So far, many online programs have focused simply on knowledge transfer. To maximize impact and the likelihood of persistence, we need purposeful integration of student affairs components for our online programs, creating a *virtual* version of the “seamless learning environment” (Nesheim et al., 2007, p. 435).

For students in an online program, the barriers to engagement are real but not insurmountable. We know how to work with the whole person but have neglected to translate what we know to the online context. The authors find evidence consistent with a “distance education deficit” (Simpson, 2013, p. 106) in data collected from graduating seniors; online-program students appear less likely to have been able to connect with “high-impact” co-curricular activities than campus-program students. Seeking to reconstrue *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) for modern distance learners, the authors have undertaken work that may serve as an example (positive and cautionary) for others.

First Steps and Stumbles

Focused on the online program, our team of faculty members formed with the intention of using the university’s LMS (Blackboard) to deliver compelling co-curricular programming that provides information, builds community and a sense of shared purpose, creates dynamic frames of reference connected to current events and to research and to students’ own lives, encourages reflection regarding ones growth moving through the curriculum, provides opportunities for peer connection

and leadership, facilitates effective connections with university resources, and that promotes personal and professional development of the whole person – altogether, features of student affairs. The project’s interprofessional design (members from the Online Psychology Major and the Online Social Work Major) leads to immediate cost efficiency and a compelling experiential basis for soon generalizing the discoveries to other online programs.

An internal grant funded the first steps in our practice effort. Offering small stipends for some team members in the first summer likely did little to incentivize the work being done by highly motivated faculty. However, it established a precedent for respecting work related to student life. As the first wave of faculty someday drifts into other projects, that precedent helps us plan to attract new faculty talent to maintain the project for future years.

Among our early discoveries was that online-program students are liable to be assessed fees at a far lower rate and avail themselves of far fewer services than campus students. Sustainable, institution-wide buildouts of online programs depend on advocating for sufficient fees to support relevant units and professionals on campus. After our first-semester launch, our team expanded to include the university’s Director of Distance Programs; we consult extensively with professionals on campus and know that sure-footed progress depends on understanding contexts beyond our unit’s daily experience.

Beyond solving technical puzzles (e.g., working with Institutional Research and Computer Services to connect the enrolled online students with a persistent LMS community), the team has worked during the startup phase to (1) generate plans for current and future synchronous events via the community, (2) create compelling content for just-in-time access on the community, (3) develop an Online Psychology Club, (4) gather and reflect on data, and (5) begin collaborating with other departments hoping to build out their online programs. With every task undertaken, we have one eye on the future – finishing today’s work while planning for sustainability when we eventually move from the startup stage to the maintenance stage of this project.

In the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, a mysterious voice encourages Kevin Costner, “If you build it, he will come.” We can offer no such reassurance. Programs undertaking similar efforts should expect disappointment and gird for a long, multifaceted process. Only a few students attend some well-planned events, and invitations for deeper participation often gain tepid responses. Building out Student Affairs components for

an online program involves both creating a supply of those components and patiently re-nurturing a demand for those components. Recent accelerations of unbundling (McCowan, 2017) – wherein universities break down higher education into marketable components sold separately – may have contributed to universities failing to educate students about the nature and value of transformative education.

Preliminary results emerging from our IRB-approved study are consistent with a *they-don't-know-what-they're-missing* attribution regarding online-student understanding of student affairs. Approximately 20% of each program cohort – online program and traditional program – consented to participate. Online students reported less access to extra-curricular activities ($t(48.275)=3.18, p=.001, d=.703$) and less closeness with faculty ($t(157)=2.11, p=.018, d=.395$) than traditional students reported. However, the reported satisfaction of online students did not differ significantly from the satisfaction of traditional students ($t(157)=0.13, p=.448, d=.025$).

Macfarlane (2020) argues that attitudinal shift toward credentialism among students is a myth; rather, without knowledge about robust, holistic higher education (i.e., education with the unbundling undone), students temporarily lack desire for a college experience that takes account of “what [they] know, who they are, what their values and behavior patterns are, and how they see themselves contributing to and participating in the world” (*Learning Reconsidered*, 2004, p. 9).

An Invitation

We are pleased to share our experience with program enrichment in this preliminary report and to offer a sincere invitation. Working together to enhance online programs might even lead to more intentional and effective work with students in every type of program. Online degree programs can avail far more than access and courses. Through credentialism, like other sorts of assumed equivalences, leaders might have supposed that “a diploma is a diploma is a diploma.” Well, maybe. But an education is something grander. Please contact the authors directly (tdaugherty@missouristate.edu).

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