DISTINGUISHING INNOVATIONS THAT CAN MAKE ONLINE PROGRAMS BETTER AND ALSO MORE MARKETABLE

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Abstract

For an online program to say that "our quality is as good as on campus" is not very useful if potential students have never heard of the campus. It seem likely, however, that online degree programs could develop distinguishing features that are both useful for improving quality and also useful for attracting students unfamiliar with the program, such as:

1. Inclusive program designs that can engage and educate students with differing career ambitions, backgrounds, strengths, and needs.

2. Hybrid designs that offer compelling environments for practice and coaching.

3. Educationally valuable relationships with respected organizations.

4. Designs enabling an unusual degree of connectedness, bonding and community.

5. Academic teams that include individuals whose potential value as teachers can easily be appreciated.

6. Designs that prepare online students to work in their fields.

Developing each of these features takes considerable time, but once an institution establishes this kind of quality reputation over a period of years, it is equally time-consuming for competitors to get to the same level of quality.

KEY WORDS: quality assurance; quality enhancement; marketing; high impact practices; strategic partnerships; learning community; academic community; hybrid programs.

1. INTRODUCTION: PROVIDING AND PROJECTING QUALITY

There is good news and bad news for potential students looking for an online degree, and they are the same news: the number of options for getting any particular degree is very large, and likely increasing. However, many of these degrees are from institutions that are new enough or far enough away that the student has never heard of them. How do online programs currently compete in these circumstances? A study by Adams and Eveland (2007) suggests that "convenience," "flexibility," being well "established," and "accredited" are terms commonly used in marketing of online degrees. An earlier study by Shay and Rees (2004) found that students placed weight on attributes such as "flexible hours," "ability to work independently," "no local, on-campus alternatives," "convenience," and "affordability."

Of the highly rated terms in these two studies, only "accredited" relates to educational value or effectiveness. "Accredited" by itself does not make a program stand out against most of its competitors, which likely are also

accredited. "Quality" is a tougher pitch to make because many of the drivers of educational value and effectiveness are hard for potential students to notice, understand, or value. Many studies have found that the quality of distance education programs is as good (or as poor) as their institution's on-campus offerings (Russell, 2001) but that claim is of limited value if the institution itself is unfamiliar to the potential student. Potential students and their advisors may also understand that an otherwise poor institution can offer a good program, and vice versa.

Making a quality argument is certainly not hopeless for programs that are actually unusually effective, especially professional programs subject to specialized accreditation and certification of their graduates. Some online degree programs publicize rankings (how good is a program when judged against competitors). For example, West Texas A&M's (2016) web description of its online MBA program includes ratings from nine different sources, with specific ratings such as #13 in the nation for student services and technology, #19 in student engagement, #8 as a best buy, #4 in the Southwest, and #5 for its concentration in healthcare management.

Quality Matters (QM) *certifies* online courses and programs as meeting certain standards. For evaluating course designs, QM uses trained, certified reviewers to help assess eight dimensions of the instructional design: the course overview, learner objectives, assessment and measurement, resources and materials, learner engagement, course technology, learner support, and accessibility. QM also recently began piloting criteria and procedures for certifying several dimensions of *program performance*, including program design (are at least some of their courses being rated by QM criteria); online teaching support; online learner support, and online learner success. QM will also award a program exemplary status if it achieves recognition in all four of those areas within three years. The QM process does not assess the teaching and learning activities, just the course designs and program in which those activities occur. QM has grown to over 900 subscribing institutions in at least 8 countries. According to the QM web site in May 2016, well over 4,000 courses have earned official QM certification (Quality Matters, 2016a).

QM's services and rubrics are primarily intended to provide guidance and a motive for improving course designs. Examples of QM criteria, derived from instructional design, include "The course learning objectives… describe outcomes that are measurable" and "The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the… learning objectives…" Because QM certification is primarily concerned with goals, backward design and alignment, potential students are likely to have a hard time either understanding or valuing it. Our Web search uncovered only one example of a school (Anoka Technical College, 2016) that spotlights QM in its presentation for potential students.

2. CREATING A MARKET FOR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNING

A promising alternative to compete for students may be to implement innovative features that can simultaneously enhance student learning while also making the program more attractive to potential students. We call these *distinguishing innovations* because they both help make the program more effective and also help potential students pick it out from competing offerings.

Obviously, having the *potential* to be both valuable and attractive does not guarantee that the program will be either valuable or attractive. To actually achieve both goals, the innovation needs to be well-implemented; marketing then needs to do a good job of featuring it. Some online degree programs have great educational strengths that go unmentioned in their marketing. And some programs boast of "strengths" they barely possess. In this article, however, our concern is with well-implemented innovations that are used appropriately in institutional marketing.

3. SIX INNOVATIVE WAYS OF DISTINGUISHING ONLINE PROGRAMS

Six families of distinguishing practices that seem to have the dual potential of enhancing both effectiveness and marketability are identified below. Readers may well be able to identify additional families of distinguishing innovations and will certainly know of additional examples of their implementation.

3.1. Designs for Inclusive Excellence

Champions of distance learning have always placed a high value on serving students who might otherwise not get an education. Traditional distance education students often differ from campus students in their location, non-academic commitments, and mobility, for example.

But underserved students differ in other ways that also make a difference to their chances at authentic educational achievement. For example, students signing up for online degree will differ in their reasons for studying and in their motivations to study. They will have different academic strengths, preparation and needs. They may differ in the strengths of their senses and in their native language (instructors differ in these ways too). The list goes on.

The best online degree programs are those that offer each student a real chance at genuine excellence. This programmatic goal is termed "inclusive excellence" (AAC&U, 2016). Working toward inclusive excellence means improving learning for all students while simultaneously decreasing or eliminating achievement gaps among groups of students with different characteristics.

Here are three different routes to inclusive excellence, each with some potential to also contribute to an online program's marketability: (1) High Impact Practices, (2) Universal Design for Learning, and (3) pedagogies powered by student diversity. Although many of these ideas derive from research on undergraduate education, the same pedagogical principles apply to online learning and to graduate education (Clark, 1983).

3.1.1. High Impact Practices (HIPs)

Campus-based institutions seeking inclusive excellence often make use of High Impact Practices (HIPs) including, for example:

- Learning communities;
- Writing-intensive courses;
- Collaborative assignments and projects;
- Engaging in research for real-world purposes;
- Diversity/global learning to explore different cultures, life experiences and worldviews;
- Service learning and community-based learning;
- Internships;
- Capstone courses and culminating projects.

Why are these practices so valuable for inclusive excellence? Authentic problems, audiences that matter and the expectations of teammates all attract students to work hard at applying what they have been taught. It's an approach to learning that is more likely to produce learning that lasts. Research on undergraduates on campus suggests that even a modest number of HIPs can improve learning and chances for graduation for all students while also reducing achievement gaps among different types of student (Kuh et. al., 2010).

Use of HIPs has increased in part because of studies raising questions about what all undergraduates are studying and what they may be failing to learn. For example, Arum and Roksa (2011), in *Academically Adrift*, made the case that colleges are doing a disappointing job in developing student capabilities in critical reasoning and communications. They cite a decrease in time that students invest in studying as one reason for the decline in these key learning outcomes. Happily, HIPs are high impact in part because of their exceptional ability to motivate students to work long and thoughtfully; when a student engages in academic service learning, for example, they can see the people who could benefit from their projects.

To be considered a distinguishing innovation, a practice needs to have obvious potential both for improving learning and also for improving marketability. Many HIPs meet those twin requirements, as evidenced by the number of campus web sites mentioning them. For example, MIT uses undergraduate research as a major feature of its marketing to potential undergraduates (MIT, 2016).

Some HIPs have been part of online learning in professional programs for a long time; an example would be online undergraduate nursing degree programs that include clinical rotations in hospitals and other practice settings.

Southern New Hampshire University has organized its College for America (CfA) around a spine of High Impact Practices. In CfA, online students do not take courses in order to get a passing grade. Instead the program consists of a set of competencies, organized into goals. For example, the twenty goals for a B.A. in communications include "Negotiate Difference," "Use Math to Solve Problems," "Construct and Deconstruct Media," and "Contribute to Society." To achieve a goal and demonstrate mastery of the relevant competencies, the student takes on a role in a workplace scenario and must produce a typical deliverable. These deliverables are realistic enough that students sometimes adapt them for use in their own jobs.

Early evaluation results are encouraging. The project-based curriculum seems likely to be contributing to student success (Wilkes and LeMoine, 2016). Instead of engaging in traditional recruiting directly to potential students, CfA markets itself to employers. Once an agreement is reached, the employer reaches out to employees who may want to enroll. A video aimed at potential employer partners stresses the competency-based nature of the program and how other employers have reacted to this distinctive education (College for America, 2016).

3.1.2. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

One UDL strategy is to create materials and activities that are accessible and attractive to groups that might otherwise be poorly served. This is not simply a matter of creating one option for each group. Often a new best practice for one type of student can be leveraged to help other types of students as well. Adding captions to videos was originally justified to help deaf students. It turns out that closed captioning helps other kinds of students as well, such as students whose native language is not English and students who can better remember terms if they can see how those words are spelled.

Another example of an online feature that helps many kinds of students excel is the use of asynchronous text conferencing. When writing rather than speaking, students need not worry about interrupting the flow of a lecture or what another student might be about to say. Students can take their time interpreting what has been said to date and clearly composing their own contribution. In short, this slower conversational pace gives students time to think. It can potentially help all learners and certainly helps the previously mentioned groups as well as students whose culture makes them reluctant to engage in real-time conversation. Shy and introverted students often seem more comfortable contributing in online discussion than they do in face-to-face classrooms.

A second UDL strategy is to provide different options for different kinds of students. A simple example is dividing a course like physics into sections for students on different career paths, and providing each section with different problem sets, appropriate to their interests. A very early online course, at Oregon State University, took this a step further. Near the end of the semester, Jon Dorbolo asked students to rate the assignments for the term; each assignment was rated by a majority of his students as useless and uninteresting. Upon further reflection, he realized that subsets of students found different types of assignments to be valuable and relevant. Eventually this led Dorbolo to develop a communications-intensive online Introduction to Philosophy that began by asking students to choose one of five phrases that best expressed their worldview: (1) self-interest is central, (2) cooperation is the key, (3) faith is the focus, (4) reality is relative, and (5) knowledge is negligible. Each worldview came with its own, overlapping set of readings and activities. Special software channeled and sparked peer critiques, discussions and other interactions within groups and across groups (Chadwick and Dorbolo, 1998).

Thus far, the authors have not found examples of online programs using UDL as a marketing theme, but it does seem worth trying, especially when UDL practices are of obvious value in helping students with different ambitions, preparation, and abilities.

3.1.3. Pedagogies Powered by Student Diversity

One additional effective and attractive strategy for inclusive excellence is when educational experiences are enriched by certain kinds of student diversity. Here are just three examples. First, in campus classrooms, clickers can be used to present conceptually challenging questions to students who respond and then pair up to explain their reasoning to one another. (The more different the perspectives that students bring, the more provocative become their discussions.) Such polling can also be used to enrich online discussions. Second, role-playing simulations of international negotiations become more powerful and attractive when the student players are drawn from different countries. When the students have different native languages, other students from foreign language courses can be engaged as translators. (Garcia-Carbonell and Watts, 2010) And, finally, scholars from MIT and other universities in the US and abroad pioneered an instructional strategy called Cultura, in which students in university courses in different countries collaborate online as they learn to interpret one another's cultures (Furstenburg and English, 2010).

3.2. Hybrid Designs Providing Appropriate Environments for Practice and Coaching

Many online degree programs can be more valuable and attractive if they combine online with appropriate site-based activities. One way to compete in these fields is to have a better or larger collection of such sites than do competing programs. In the Master of Health Administration Program at George Washington University (MHA@GW), students are required to complete four in-person immersion experiences during the 2-year program. One of these involves spending a concentrated period of time studying a health system either in the United States or a national health system outside our borders. Students work in groups to critically examine and assess the structure, function and operations of a system. This activity includes collaborative active learning, substantive interaction with health system executives, and real life case examples. All of this is enabled by the hybrid nature of the program.

In addition, "on-site" can also include the student's own environment. For example, students in GW's Masters of Public Health (MPH@GW) program discuss HIV education in one of the classes. The instructional potential of that discussion stems from the fact that students are located in such diverse locations as Saudi Arabia, Peru, a farm in the mid-west, an American middle class suburb, San Francisco and the Bronx. These on-site, personal experiences enrich learning while also making the program more distinctively attractive in the marketplace.

3.3. Educationally Valuable Relationships with Respected Organizations

Strategic partnerships can enhance program effectiveness and also attractiveness in a number of ways, including:

- Providing sites for students and faculty to do research, clinical practice or creative work;

- Providing channels for recruiting potential students;

- Providing partners with targeting workforce development;

- Enhancing the potential for recognition by students unfamiliar with the program itself;

- Assistance in marketing and program support.

This distinguishing feature has a comparatively long history. For instance, the quality and reputation of some nursing programs have long been enhanced by the well-known hospitals that provide their students with study opportunities.

The College for America program (CfA) of Southern New Hampshire University demonstrates other potential strengths of strategic partnership. CfA only markets its degree programs to the employees of employers with which it partners. The degrees offered are selected because of their relevance to the company's needs. Assignments and projects are designed to be realistic (a series of projects may all be set in the context of the same simulated company that may resemble the employer). Some students are able, and often encouraged, to adapt their projects for use in their jobs. CfA is working with some of its employers to investigate and evaluate the impact of a CfA degree on recent graduates of the program. The CfA program is only three years old, but recently Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield found that 20% of its graduates had already been promoted within the company (Wilkes and LeMoine, 2016).

CfA has also begun working with a different kind of strategic partner: community-based organizations that provide counseling and academic support to disadvantaged students in public schools; when those students enroll in CfA degree programs, the community organization continues to provide them with augmented support.

3.4. Designs Providing a Distinctive Degree of Connectedness, Bonding and Community

Another way to make a program both more effective and more attractive is to help students, faculty, and other stakeholders feel connected and supported. Students can sense that someone is consistently paying attention to their needs, from their first inquiry to graduation. Activities and services can be crafted to help students, faculty, and collaborators become connected to each other, to others at the University, and to the institution's past and future.

The educational leadership program at the University of Illinois Springfield is taking this challenge to a new level, providing assessment feedback on the state of the academic community to faculty in order to guide the faculty's next steps to enhancing three important dimensions of learning. The UIS approach is based in part on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory (Swan et.al. 2013). CoI is based on the general assumption that learning is socially constructed; each person develops their own capabilities and ways of perceiving through interaction with the world and with other people who are also interacting with that world. Randy Garrison and his colleagues (2000) had postulated that a healthy online community of inquiry required learners to sense a larger world in three distinct dimensions,

- Cognitive presence – the extent to which participants are able to construct shared meaning through communication with one another.

- Social presence – the extent to which participants see one another as full human beings and feel seen as real people by others.

- Teaching presence – the extent to which the participant is able to engage in educational activities that are seen as effective ways to realize personally meaningful, educationally worthwhile goals.

This social view of learning is far more consistent with modern learning theory than the notions underlying traditional distance education such as correspondence programs in which the isolated learner is being fed instruction by the teacher-publisher.

After the courses were offered, data were gathered to estimate the degree of cognitive, social and teaching presence. Armed with that feedback, faculty would adjust course designs each semester. Swan and her colleagues (2013) found that this feedback was associated with improved learning outcomes. (Thus far, this design and finding have not figured in the marketing of the educational leadership program, however).

In addition to course design, course delivery can also enhance community and connectedness. Online creates options that are not always available to campus programs. The MPH@GW program's synchronous sections are limited to a maximum of 15 students, each taught by an individual faculty member as this video on this web page illustrates (Public Health Online, 2016). MPH@GW believes its particular strategy for taking advantage of small class sizes both fosters deeper learning while also deepening interpersonal connections.

The process of building community should also include out-of-course activities. For example, each year the George Washington University holds a university wide Research Day, where students can present their scholarly work and compete for awards. The GWU School of Public Health offered a virtual presentation option for all its students to participate. Nearby online students were invited to present their work on campus, and conversely, any residential student who could not make it to campus, could present their work through a portal and could be accessed by judges prior to Research Day. During the campus poster sessions, several monitors showed looping student presentations. All these presentations competed equally for awards.

When students feel a bond with peers, with faculty, with a network of alumni and with the program or institution itself, connectedness can enhance learning and retention (Tinto, 1987). The online MBA at the University of North Carolina promotes alumni engagement with online students through social events at major metropolitan areas, career services roadshows, and webinars that include both active students and alumni. It's worth noting that a student body that develops an intimate connection with a program and institution, as residential students sometimes do, is more likely to provide support for their institutions in the future.

Boston University provides an example of using connectedness (and other distinguishing features) both to improve its online programs and also to market them. This video (Boston University, 2016) and other material on the online degree programs home page emphasize themes such as engagement, the benefits of the diversity of the other students, small sections, live interaction, guest speakers online, collaboration, virtual laboratories, faculty and adjunct qualifications, and award-winning, interactive course materials.

3.5. Instructional Team Members Whose Value will be Easily Recognized by Potential Students

When a course or program is not place-bound, it can enable collaborations between faculty located anywhere. Distant experts can be included, for example, teaching alone or working as members of a team. At least some of these specialists may be chosen both because of their great teaching potential and also because their

positions, track records, or name recognition make their value to the program obvious. The University of St. Thomas provides an early example of this strategy in online learning. Starting in the 1990s, their online MBA in health care management included a blended course taught by former Senator David Durenberger, an expert in health care policy who was directing the University's National Institute for Health Policy in Washington, DC. Students mostly worked with Durenberger and each other online. There were also face-to-face sessions with the Senator in Washington DC and in the Twin Cities.

Open SUNY of the State University of New York fosters the development of programs by faculty teams drawn from multiple institutions (Open SUNY, 2016). This offering suggests that consortial programs have the potential to draw on a pool of academic assets, prestige and reputation that exceeds that of any of its member institutions. Distant experts can provide leadership for an entire course or parts of a course. They can offer short lectures or assess student work. In the MHA@GW program, the final student capstone projects are assessed by expert panels that include both regular full time faculty and prominent experts from around the world.

Obviously, simply signing up 'dream individuals' does not assure that they can teach well, nor does it assure that they can function as a team that takes collective responsibility for student achievement of programmatic goals. Serious team-building would be needed to develop a sense of collective purpose and accountability from a group of experts who rarely see one another.

3.6. Education for a Hybrid World

Obviously, today's work world is increasingly hybrid. Potential students seem likely to value programs that explicitly teach them how to work in that world.

For example, in the MPH@GW program, student teams are placed in the role of communications staff working in a public health division that must respond to a public health crisis. They work collaboratively to develop a messaging and communications strategy using behavior change and communications theories. The ultimate product is a full communication intervention plan. Throughout the term students are provided the opportunity to practice, develop and present their ideas to the group. In the MHA@GW immersion experiences described in section 2 on hybrid programs above, experts who previously faced a management crisis develop case study materials and then come to campus to work through the cases with students. Students work through each scenario as if it were unfolding in real time, working in teams, assuming different roles, and afterwards debriefing. The expert who actually experienced the crisis walks students through how the case was actually handled, as well as what did or did not work. All of these activities have immediate and direct application to the hybrid workplace.

Faculty's personal experience in their fields is not the only source of experience and expertise for teaching students how to work in a hybrid world. The preceding section pointed to the advantages an online program has in incorporating outstanding experts who work far away, in order to improve the quality of the program team. Members of such a distributed team might well have worked together in a hybrid environment to create the program. And, of course, students work in a hybrid world when they study in the program. Faculty choices about the program's design, and students' reactions to those choices, comprise another way to teach students how to work in a hybrid world in their fields.

4. START EARLY AND KEEP WORKING

Institutions can compete on grounds of quality, especially if they adopt features for improving quality that are also likely to be easily appreciated and valued by potential students and employers. Although each of these six

distinguishing innovations is enabled by online technologies, they are not simply the product of superior software or hardware. Each feature also requires sophisticated human capital that must be developed slowly and with difficulty over a period of years: expanded skillsets, a distributed team of experts that has learned to take collective responsibility for a program and its students, carefully developed curricula, trusting relationships with distinctive institutional partners. Because each feature depends so heavily on these challenging human elements, it can take a long time for a program to become distinguished. Fortunately, potential competitors must also take years to respond to these challenges. Because each of these six features is built on a complex mix of new skill sets and relationships, there is no short cut to becoming a leader.

5. NEXT STEP: EMPIRICAL TESTING

This article has suggested that quality improvement can sometimes also improve marketability - a hypothesis that some may think flies in the face of their own experience. One of the next steps in the discussion of this hypothesis by the field of online learning is to investigate the extent to which distinguishing features such as those described in this article do seem to attract the interest of potential students.

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