Improving the Development and Implementation of Online Courses: A Student's Perspective

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Authors' Notes

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

As distance education continues to be utilized by higher learning institutions, many struggle in knowing how to effectively utilize tools for the benefit of the students, faculty and staff facilitating online courses, distance education departments, and the university as a whole. This paper will highlight survey and interview results from students, professors, and instructional technologists from four public southeastern United States universities centered on how online learning affects the varying levels of a specific university located in the southeastern United States. Current and future issues that and potential solutions to counteract these obstacles will also be provided. Moreover, strategies will be proposed regarding improving the institutional effectiveness of distance education by specifically tailoring approaches to the culture and the strategic direction of the institution. In order to provide a first-person narrative from a student's perspective, these results and recommendations are discussed through the lens of an undergraduate student.

Background

One of the prime reasons for distance education is to provide educational opportunities for those who are underrepresented and without access to traditional educational institutions. However, many faculty find online education difficult to execute because of the use of the online medium (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Moreover, because online education is a different medium for teaching and learning, it requires a different pedagogy. The lack of institutional support for faculty and the lack of leadership with an understanding of online education are often contributing factors that lead to the negative effects, and potential failure, of online education in higher education (Kentnor, 2015). In addition, the three main faculty complaints about online education are: 1) the lack of understanding of this method of teaching; 2) the lack of institutional support; and 3) fear that the quality of education in the online environment suffers (Kentnor, 2015).

Southeastern State University's (SSU, a fictitious pseudonym) requires a two-step process in order for a course to be moved onto an online format – an Online Course Request form and then faculty designing the online course. As a student who has taken several online courses from multiple different institutions, the first author possesses a breadth and depth of experience when it comes to online courses and the previewed effectiveness thereof. Over the course of my years at SSU, I experienced "good" and "bad" online courses. This purpose of this study was to provide a thorough analysis of the structure, design, support, and direction of the Office of Online Learning at SSU, identifying its effectiveness and providing recommendations for future growth.

Methods

Online surveys were distributed to students (n = 35), faculty (n = 53), and administrative personnel (n = 10) (i.e., Office of Online Learning, Academic Affairs) at SSU, as well as faculty members at three other comparative public institutions within the same state. Student surveys included five demographic questions (e.g., age, class, online course history), four Likert-type questions focused on online pedagogies (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your professor(s) communication efforts in online courses?"; highly dissatisfied = 1 to highly satisfied = 5), and one open-ended question focused on their online learning experiences. The faculty and administrative survey included 7 Likert-type and 8 open-ended questions centered on online teaching training experience and professional development as well as experiences regarding teaching online.

Moreover, the director of online learning at SSU was interviewed focusing on the learning climate of SSU (i.e., support structures, resources, faculty training, etc.). In addition, in an effort to provide the research with a more holistic picture and compare similar environments, three other directors of online learning at three other public institutions within the same state of SSU were also interviewed.

Discussion of Findings

Based upon the findings, it appeared that the execution of online education was not only an issue at SSU, but an issue across the other surveyed institutions. These issues appeared to stem from different areas such as different institutions' value of online education at across differing levels (i.e., student, faculty, and administration), faculty having multiple diverse pedagogical methods they believed best to utilize, and students not understanding the factors that should be taken into consideration when deciding whether to take an online course.

First, the execution of online education at any institution first comes from the "executives" of the institution, which establishes the Online Education Department, then to the individual academic colleges to offer courses to students. However, there often appears miscommunication and misunderstanding are the dominant factors that play into the potential negative effects and perceptions of online courses. In the execution of online courses, the administrators often want to offer online education as a means of additional revenue for the university or college. However, many may have little knowledge as to how to facilitate an online course, as many have earned their last degree prior to the boom of distance education about 10 years ago. Nonetheless, these administrators rely on faculty members to remain knowledgeable of up-to-date pedagogical methods in order to advance the institution farther. This is where the administrators rely on the establishment of an online education department to bridge the gap between the creation and facilitation through offering faculty training on online education pedagogical methods.

Faculty members may rely on this training to assist them in learning up-to-date pedagogical methods to use in facilitating their online course. However, if this training is not sufficient, then another gap between faculty and students begins to surface because faculty members may not be able to deliver the same quality course online as they would face-to-face. It appears, the wider this gap becomes, another gap between students and the university as a whole begins. If students are not able to connect with professors through an online platform, then students may begin to associate this behavior with the culture of the university; thus possibly beginning the disconnection between students and the institution. Students are the heart of any institution, however, students' voices are often not heard enough when it comes to addressing needed change. Individuals may see the student voice for change as a voice for entitlement because they believe that students feel that all situations should go their way, which is not the case. Students simply want to be heard and to be taken seriously when it comes to their education because, in the end, they are the ones who are paying for it.

Perceived "Issues"

Generational gaps. The generational gap in today's workforce is phenomenal in that there are four very different generations all working together – Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z (i.e., iGen or Centennials). These same four generations are together in the educational system as well. It

appears most institutional administrators reside with the Baby Boomers and a few Gen X, most faculty are Gen X with some Millennials, and the student body consists mostly consists of Millennials and Gen Z. Some perceive that Baby Boomer administrators and faculty members have trouble trying to tailor education to the "needs" of Millennials, who have coerced the need for the change of education. This impasse is not because faculty members are not trying; it appears it is because of the extreme difference in the way faculty members were taught and how they are being "forced" to teach currently (i.e., online instruction). Learning this new style of pedagogy can easily turn faculty away from ever wanting to teach online courses because of how difficult it's presented to be upfront (i.e., front-loaded work required to create an effective online course). This is where department heads, deans, and other institutional administrators should hear the voices of faculty expressing their thoughts, concerns, and issues with facilitating online courses. These voices need to be heard now in order for concerns to be addressed and improvements made in order to make more effective online courses. If an institution fails to recognize these pedagogical issues now, then the institution may not be ready for the next, and even bigger, challenge to come – Gen Z.

Compared with Millennials Gen Z may be an even more complicated generation to understand and satisfy within higher education. While Millennials grew up in the transition to the technological era, Gen Z was raised completely exposed and dependent on technology. If higher education finds it so difficult to tailor online education, or even traditional education, to the Millennial market, it will prove to be extremely problematic to tailor education to Gen Z.

Changes in student enrollment and demographics. Based upon survey data, the vast majority of participants believed that adding additional online degree programs would increase student enrollment by 1 to 10% (32% of responses), 11 to 20% (39% of responses), or 21 to 30% (18% of responses). With increases in tuition and overall cost of attendance, more students have to work in order to support themselves through college. Of students surveyed, 50% stated that they work part-time, 21.1% work full-time, and 28.9% do not work; thus, an overall 71.1% of surveyed students are working in some capacity. Thus, distance education may assist with meeting the schedule flexibility needs of working students. In addition, the number of nontraditional students are continuing to increase as most job advancement opportunities are requiring a minimum of an associate or bachelor degree. However, many faculty and institution administrators constantly worry about course quality and academic integrity when it comes to delivering courses online. This is where the effective use of educational technology could ease the tension with these issues.

Educational technology. With the effective use of educational technology, online courses at SSU appear like they could be significantly improved. However, many SSU faculty either do not understand how the use of additional technology could improve their courses or they are completely against the use of educational technology. The use of educational technology should improve the student's course experience, as well as improving instructor's course pedagogy. This is a mindset that has to be instilled into faculty in order to begin the deconstruction of the negative perception of online education.

SSU's Director of Online Learning stated that she believes that the pedagogical methods used for online learning can also be used in traditional courses. These pedagogical methods include: providing opportunities for the learner to be responsible for his/her own learning by researching on his/her own and reporting the findings to peers, providing opportunities for learner-to-learner interaction, collaboration through online discussions and group projects, and maintaining social, cognitive, and teaching

presence during the course through regular communication both course and non-course related social outlets. However, even with these methods, faculty are continually concerned about the loss of presence associated with online education. Although these methods can be effective, there is a great need for improvement as students are accustomed to the "typical" online course with simple discussions, PowerPoint presentations, a few quizzes, and a couple of tests. It appears these methods need to be revamped to improve student learning and to counteract the technology and services that have decreased the online course experience over time.

Educational institutions should begin to realize that with the increase of internet availability and content, facilitating online courses (and even traditional courses) will have to change. While many professors often look to book publishers, previous instructors of the same course, and even a variety of sources on the internet to provide tests and quizzes for students, they must be forewarned that this type of information is freely available by anyone. Many faculty may not realize how easy answers to tests and quizzes from the book publishers and previous instructors can be found through simple internet searches. There are several open source websites that assist users to publish information and ask questions to receive answers from others (e.g., Koofers, 2017; PostYourTest.com, 2017; Quizlet, 2017; StudyBlue, 2017). Although it is questionable that this was the original intent of some of these websites, this is how students have transformed some to be. Different methods could counteract this access of information such as the educational technology Respondus (2017) Lockdown Browser, open-ended questions, limited test times, and/or rephrasing questions and answers in that they would less likely to show up in search engine results.

Contrary to SSU's Director of Online Learning's online pedagogical beliefs, another interviewed director of online learning at a different university felt that there are certain pedagogical methods that can be used solely online with the proper use of educational technology. He stated that in a typical classroom of 25 to 30 students, it is nearly impossible for a professor to ask every student to respond to a question due to time constraints. However, using educational technology, such as YouSeeU, a professor may be able to get full participation from all students because of the extended amount of time an asynchronous online course provides. This method would include the professor recording a challenge question (e.g., "Solve this problem…, Tell me your opinion of…, Tell me what you know about 'X' from the readings," etc.) and then waiting 24 to 48 hours, for example, for each student to respond via a recorded response using a webcam and microphone. With this sample method, all perspectives within the class are shared. Likewise, the use of classroom clickers may be another alternative (see Carnegie Mellon University, 2017).

Office of online learning infrastructure. With a strongly established and effective online learning infrastructure, an institution may ultimately be able to support an increase in student enrollment, while maintaining course quality and academic integrity. The Office of Online Learning at SSU was recently able to expand the staff by adding two instructional designers, resulting now in four total staff members – including one director and one online learning technician.

The recent change to this infrastructure makes it appear that SSU is more reactive compared to proactive when it comes to supporting online education. In relation to SSU's size (i.e., about 5,000 undergraduate and 900 graduate students), it will certainly be challenging for these four individuals to support the university to the extent that may be needed. By being reactive to the "train" of online education, it may prove detrimental to the university as a whole. The general generational diversity in the

current student demographics alone should give enough reason to be more proactive to this train. However, the upcoming of Generation Z warrants more attention to online education via necessary support changes and implementations in order to supply market demand.

Nonetheless, credit has to be given when it comes to furthering the acquisition of two educational technologists for the SSU in the improvement of its infrastructure. The Office of Online Learning recently acquired the use of Respondus Lockdown Browser. However, the use of the educational technology provided is rarely being used, if at all. This is in reference to the continuing issue of faculty not understanding how these tools can be effectively utilized in their courses.

With the university aiming to offer online programs completely online, this small infrastructure certainly will not be sufficient. There will be a need for more staff in order to accommodate the increase in enrollment. Furthermore, the increase in staff would need to expand over a greater range of hours to accommodate the greater range of student diversity – age, employment schedule, degree of technological savviness, and time zones just to name a few.

Faculty training for online courses. Moreover, many faculty at SSU have stated via survey results that current training is not sufficient enough to suit their needs in regard to designing and developing an online course. With the current training, faculty are taught how to fundamentally use different features of educational technology, such as Blackboard Collaborate. However, faculty have the issue of the training being too broad in that it does not address how professors could specifically use it in their courses (i.e., business management, English, psychology, etc.). This leaves faculty contemplating how they could incorporate this, or any other, educational technology into their course(s). For example, a professor teaching a management course online may not understand how the use of Blackboard Collaborate, or a synchronous collaborative session, would be beneficial for the course. However, a synchronous collaborative session could be beneficial when addressing a common issue among students in the course, having a test review session, or even allowing students to do presentations. Therefore, there is certainly a distinction between learning new educational technology and knowing how to implement the same educational technology in an online course. This causes for training to be more specific in giving faculty different uses for the technology. By addressing this issue during training, faculty would be able to have a general idea of how to implement the technology and be able to ask specific questions while still in the training session.

Moreover, some faculty are already uncomfortable with the use of technology, therefore, a goal of the training should help ease the discomfort by providing enough knowledge and exposure to the technology to start a new wave of thinking that is more easily acceptable to technology rather than completely against it. This new wave of thinking is needed because faculty are not so easily ready to move out of their comfort zone. This reluctance is not just with faculty, but with others due to the fear of the unknown or a lack of understanding. However, faculty have an extra factor when it comes to being reluctant to change. Faculty members have to ensure the academic integrity of the course so that accreditation is not compromised in any way. By looking down a path that makes faculty feel uncomfortable, it puts a lot of high risks on the line that they are not willing to gamble on; this forces faculty to revert to what they know is acceptable and comfortable for them to execute.

Faculty responsibilities and commitments. Despite the positive and negative perspectives that faculty have concerning online courses and training, it seems that many have come across the issue of being

overstretched with responsibilities and commitments by the university and/or their departments. Designing an online course for the first time takes an extreme amount of time for faculty to properly execute. University administrators seem to believe that it is not an undue hardship to create online courses (i.e., equal to the creation of other face-to-face courses). However, some faculty are not able to design an effective online course to their professional liking because of the responsibilities and commitments they already have.

Furthermore, some faculty members also find it difficult to design an online course with their current traditional course load. From the survey results, it takes faculty members approximately 4 hours to transfer course materials from a single traditional 1 hour and 15-minute lecture. Moreover, for example, it was reported that it took one faculty member approximately 6 to 7 months to design an online course. This was because this faculty member never taught an online course and had never taken an online course as a student either – further exasperating the unfamiliarity with creating one. Many faculty members voiced their opinion that they would be unlikely to be able to improve their current online courses unless they were afforded course release time to do so.

Policy issues. The Distance Education policy, established by the Office of Academic Affairs at SSU in 2009, states, "*Faculty must attend a training session, through the [Teaching and Learning Center] or an individual training, before a course is implemented.*" The policy was established for the purpose of properly training faculty on online pedagogy. After reviewing the survey data, it was shocking that many SSU faculty members did not go through any type of training or were not aware that training was required (or even offered) before an online course was implemented. The results of the surveys demonstrate that not following or enforcing this policy could be a detrimental factor in the execution of delivering online courses at SSU.

Online teaching pedagogy training appeared to be perceived as "optional" by the faculty as a lack of enforcement and accountability of this requirement seemed apparent. Again, most faculty did not know of this policy. Although some faculty did either attend a training session or consult with SSU's Director of Online Learning for assistance after completing an Online Course Request form, it seems as if faculty were having trouble executing the information that was learned through the training. For example, a professor of management could be trained on how to use Blackboard Collaborate; however, if the professor does not know, or unable to fathom, how to use the tool within his/her course(s), then the training essentially becomes useless for that professor.

Are online courses actually easier? One of the major concerns that is faced throughout the field of online education is the question of whether online courses are actually easier than traditional courses. From a student prospective, the honest answer to this question would be – it depends. This dependence is derived from how the course is structured, which is typically created by the professor facilitating the course.

Some online courses are much easier than traditional courses due to how the online course is structured. Faculty structure online courses with a variation of discussions, assignments, quizzes, and/or tests. Oftentimes, faculty use the same quizzes and tests that are used in their traditional courses with little to no modifications. However, faculty have to realize that these reused tests are usually posted online, which distance education students will have access to when completing them. In addition, some faculty structure discussions in a way that does not provoke much diversity of thoughts, which lowers

students' ability to think creatively. If a student does not have to think too much about a discussion, the discussion becomes easier to complete.

On the other hand, there are professors who structure online courses in a way that promotes creativity in their discussions, problem-solving in their assignments, and information retention in their tests. These professors are able to execute discussions that are multifaceted in allowing students a wide array of opinions, assignments that are thought provoking in that they require much more than superficial thought or effort, and tests that are more open-ended or application based in that students will know the information and understand how and why it is utilized. These methods can make an online course just as rigorous as a traditional course, if not more complex.

From the faculty perspective, online courses are deemed harder for students; not because of the content, but because of the additional responsibility that is weighed on the student (i.e., time management). However, the additional responsibility does not make an online course harder. Instead, it significantly increases the amount of effort needed in order to be successful in the course. This can be even correlated to a traditional course – what you put into it is what you will get out, which oftentimes means a better grade.

Option One: Status Quo

The first option in solving these issues is for SSU to continue to operate its distance education in the same current state. The distance education policy can continue to be ignored and faculty will be able to continue to facilitate online course with little to no training concerning online pedagogy unless it is desired. Faculty may struggle with effective online pedagogy after voluntarily attending broad training sessions. Students may struggle to grasp online course material and potentially enroll at other institutions with more effective online instruction. Essentially, the needs of the students and the continuously changing market can remain to be ignored. SSU can remain stagnant in its online course offerings and the Office of Online Learning may continue to be reactive rather than proactive in relation to the market in trying to remain competitive with other institutions.

This option appears detrimental to SSU if its distance education and the Office of Online Learning remain in its current state. Faculty members may not be properly trained or developed in the needed way to offer prosperous online courses. Furthermore, faculty may continue to be strained in putting in the extra effort without any additional compensation, which could lead to potential turnover or a complete disconnection from online courses. Students may have tremendous trouble in grasping the course content because of potentially poor delivery and skills/methods of the undertrained faculty. During this time, potential students may be drawn to other institutions because of better diverse course offerings, as well as better trained faculty to deliver better quality courses.

Potential Solutions

Better enforcement of policy and procedures. Another solution to solve these problems is for SSU to better track and enforce its distance education policy. Simply, any Online Course Request form would be able to be cross-referenced with the eligibility spreadsheet in order to approve or deny the request of a faculty member teaching an online course. On the other hand, department chairs and academic deans could be provided a list of their eligible faculty in order to rule out which faculty are not able to facili-

tate an online course. This method may be the least impactful to the flow of the university, however, it is highly effective if executed well.

Expansion of the Office of Online Learning staff to improve training and support.
A second suggestion would be to increase the staff members of the Office of Online Learning at SSU. This expansion may better serve the current faculty in facilitating online courses as well as an expansion of online course offerings. Moreover, the increase in staff may offer a more diverse perspective in designing new training courses.

With training being a major issue, the improvement thereof may significantly change the way online courses are delivered at SSU. In addition, the additional staff may be able to support faculty and students outside of traditional office hours, which may decrease faculty and student stress in the event of technological issues.

Redesign of SSU's distance education. A final solution to the stated issues is more drastic, yet will address the majority of the issues SSU is currently facing. This solution encompasses a complete reformation of SSU's distance education by: 1) creating a full encompassing training program/course that informs and directs faculty on online pedagogy and distance education issues tailored to the SSU culture, 2) rewrite the distance education policy to include mandatory compensated training and how it promotes effectiveness for online courses, 3) gathering more input from faculty who have facilitated and students who have taken online courses to improve training and course offering by administering specifically tailored course evaluations, 4) researching and developing better ways to address whether online courses are a fit for students to pursue, and 5) researching and applying for federal and/or state funds specially formulated for the improvement of the institution's online education.

By creating a training program for faculty and staff to facilitate online courses, it would better prepare, or qualify, them when facing the numerous challenges with distance education. This training course should be taken before a professor completes an Online Course Request form in order to be deemed eligible. Ideally, professors who have never facilitated an online course at SSU should take the training course one semester and then use another semester to design the course.

Although the current distance education policy states that faculty must attend some sort of training session, the policy is not enforced and doesn't dictate which training would be appropriate. By rewriting the policy, the newly designed training course would be the solution to both of those problems. The training course would dictate which faculty/staff member is eligible to deliver an online course as well as dictating the necessary training in order to become eligible. The new policy should address how the new training course is necessary in order to provide exemplary online courses.

By gathering more input from faculty and students, the Office of Online Learning at SSU would be able to mitigate many negative effects that may arise in online courses. These effects could then be intertwined with the new training course. Professors may have trouble delivering course content effectively, which leads to students not being able to grasp information.

Finally, the Office of Online Learning should research and develop methods that would better facilitate the student population's potential success with online courses. Some students take online courses because of the perception that they are easier. However, not all students are well suited for online cours-

es. SSU could utilize SmarterMeasure (2017), which is a tool that assists students in determining their readiness level to take an online or technology-rich course. Seven factors are evaluated, including individual attributes (e.g., motivation, procrastination, willingness to ask for help, etc.), life factors (availability of time, support from family and employers, finances, etc.), learning style (i.e., based on the multiple intelligences model), technical competency (i.e., skills using technology), technical knowledge (i.e., knowledge of technology terms), on-screen reading rate and recall, and typing speed and accuracy. This tool could be used to assist in advising students in or out of online courses. By addressing whether online courses are a suitable fit for students, it may allow students to see the potential issues they may have while taking an online course. This may ultimately reduce the number of "loafers" or those students who take advantage of loopholes. In turn, while students often take these courses for flexibility and convenience, however, students may soon realize how well-developed the courses are, realize the necessary degree of effort needed to be put into the course, and then are able to better retain and apply course content.

A critical part of this recommendation is finding funds to be allocated to faculty who teach online courses. This may be alleviated through grant funding if available. These funds should be distributed into stipends, or course releases, to incentivize faculty to take on the extra time and effort associated with creating online courses.

In a sense, this recommendation can easily be recognized as a cyclical cycle – by improving faculty training and development, it fosters better online courses and potentially increases the number of courses that can be offered online. As a safeguard, the distance education policy must mandate and then be enforced that an initial training course is required for faculty to be eligible to facilitate online courses. Moreover, by gathering input from both faculty and students, specifically inquiring about online courses, training can be corrected to include any major problems and potential solutions.

Conclusion

To conclude, these presented solutions are feasible for SSU and the Office of Online Learning to execute. However, they present challenges within themselves that may prove to be problematic. Nonetheless, a thorough risk analysis must be assessed in order to determine if the potential benefits outweigh the costs. Although feasible, some of these solutions are not the best fit to improve the current situation.

The final recommendation for SSU to improve its implementation and development of online courses was to undergo a full redesign of its distance education. This recommendation included five major components. This recommendation is one that will task a larger amount of time to develop and execute, however, it addresses the primary concerns within SSU's online learning community. The potential outcomes from this recommendation may assist SSU in adapting to the changing student archetype. SSU has to maintain a competitive edge with other institutions while maintaining its well-known student-oriented culture and this recommendation is one of the many steps needed to achieve that goal.

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