

# *Square Pegs, Round Holes: Distance Students and Campus Priorities in the Academic Community*

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**s universities respond to rapid changes in course delivery methods, economic shortfalls, and a re-examination of who their students are, continuing education (CE) units find themselves with an opportunity to influence significantly the direction of the response. Continuing education has long led the way in reaching out to previously unserved or underserved learners and meeting their distinct needs through innovative scheduling and formats, including distance education, as well as separate processes for registration, fee payment, advising, and other student services. In addition, as the outreach arm of institutions, continuing education units often develop key relationships with entities outside the institution (employers, K-12 schools, government) and have a keen understanding of the larger social, economic, and political context. While historically a fringe campus unit, continuing education has an opportunity to lead change within their parent institutions as online education becomes widespread throughout the campus, the lines between

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traditional and nontraditional students begin to blur, and campus leaders seek other student markets to make up for revenue shortfalls. Traditional students now demand the scheduling flexibility their online peers have enjoyed, and the markets that CE has been serving for years are ones that the mainstream campus is considering. These changes give our units an opportunity to be at the forefront, assisting our campuses as they respond to the many changes occurring in higher education today. At the very least, they signal a need for CE leaders to be mindful of the challenges of closer ties to other campus units.

## **BACKGROUND**

Both authors have spent their careers in continuing education units at large public institutions where nontraditional or distance students are seen as square pegs that must fit into the round holes of campus procedures. Although these institutions have state mandates to perform an outreach mission, CE operated outside of the campus mainstream because it did not educate traditional undergraduate and graduate students or have an obvious role in the institution's research mission.

Our status allowed us to function without a great deal of interference because our mission and day-to-day activities only occasionally intersected with the core functions of our institution. While this independence and autonomy often worked in our students' favor, our fringe status also hindered us in some ways. Campus units were reluctant to change or adapt their procedures in the interest of distance students because our numbers were but a fraction of the number of traditional campus students. For example, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) the residential population is roughly 40,000 while the nonresidential population served by the Office of Continuing Education (OCE) is about 2,600. At Montana State, total enrollment is around 12,000, of which 1,500 are off-campus or distance students. Why should any institution alter the way it does things for only a small minority of its students?

While perhaps not explicitly stated, the assumption was that continuing education units should conform to business processes that had been established for the large body of traditional students, and force our smaller number of "square pegs" into well-established "round holes." In addition, because we used unconventional delivery methods and because we adapted business practices to the needs of distance students, there was perhaps an assumption that we weren't playing by the rules.

The authors had an unanticipated opportunity to alter the perception of the value of our continuing education unit in 2007 when our handling of several challenging issues of student conduct demonstrated to our academic partners that we were ready, willing, and able to uphold academic rigor and standards. At that time, one of us was the Director of Guided Individual Study (GIS) and the other was Assistant Head of Academic Outreach at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where we found that even experienced faculty adopting distance formats for teaching and learning became uncertain about dealing with student conduct, service, and quality issues.

### **PLAYING BY THE RULES**

In the spring of 2007 we experienced an almost unimaginably complex case alleging cheating in one of our courses. We worked through the twists and turns of this case with the help of the Dean of Students Office and the associate dean for student affairs in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS). A few months later we had a little flurry of aggressive or harassing student behavior in online geographic information systems (GIS) courses. As we addressed issues of student conduct new to us, we again turned to campus administrators for advice. The student judicial affairs officer and the same associate dean identified relevant policies, procedures, and precedents.

One of these cases involved a veteran faculty member who had taught in the GIS program for decades. When he learned the University of Illinois student code applied to his distance students, he was ecstatic. Whether in Singapore or Rio, the code of conduct applied to all students, regardless of delivery format. As the college associate dean put it: "All students, regardless of how their course is delivered, are members of our academic community." We stressed to our students and faculty that our programs for distance students that they were all part of the UIUC academic community and subject to its norms and expectations, and we found that the student code had an almost totemic power in stopping civil or aggressive behavior, even online.

### **COMMON GOALS, UNCOMMON RESPECT**

Through these experiences we demonstrated that we cared about academic integrity, student conduct, and civility as deeply as administrators who dealt with students face-to-face. As a result of our work with the associate

dean of LAS, she gained a newfound respect for the continuing education unit. More tangibly, she realized that CE's expertise and resources in online education made it an ideal partner for collaborating on problems such as the lack of capacity in large introductory courses that LAS offered. The LAS dean saw the potential for additional online courses to serve both on-campus and distance students, but realized that her unit did not have the means to develop and deliver such courses. She proposed a full partnership in which the two units would work together to design, promote, and conduct a suite of online and blended courses and degree programs serving both residential and distance students. While this partnership necessitated the melding of two very different cultures, the results in the early stages have been encouraging. We are finding that square pegs and round holes can be adapted for a more comfortable fit.

These developments have raised OCE's profile and enhanced its reputation as a unit that shares the values of those who teach in the classroom. Only two or three years ago, a few busy faculty members might have found time to discuss online course development, but most politely declined. Our activities were not seen as essential to their unit and, frankly, they already had enough on their plates. In 2010, however, more and more faculty and administrators have begun asking for LAS courses to be put online, a recognition not only of the importance of online education in the lives of residential students, but also of the respect of the campus for CE's distance education prowess and its role in the academic community.

### **ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM**

Especially at public institutions, the main campus has looked to continuing education for the enrollment needed to generate state funding and excess revenue to extend department or campus resources. Because of pressures on state budgets from falling tax revenues, public institutions are likely to become more reliant on self-supporting financial models. As departments are forced to reduce the number of sections offered, online sections offered by continuing education attract students, even when they must pay additional tuition. Moreover, within the traditional campus schedule, online tools can facilitate the management of ever-larger course sections. The opportunity to expand capacity despite the limits on existing resources is attractive, as is any shared revenue that may be returned by continuing education. In addition, when academic units see that there is a population of potential distance students they have not been able to reach through campus-based

programs, the CE unit is well positioned to help. Having worked with this audience for decades, we can help others reach these students through marketing and can provide support services in a way that makes sense for this population. Our counsel on the needs of nontraditional students becomes essential.

At Montana State University, the experience and expertise of Extended University have resulted in its assuming responsibility for supporting the learning management system (LMS) for the entire campus. All courses and users are automatically provisioned from the student records system into the LMS, meaning that in the spring of 2009, 11,000 of the 12,000 MSU students are using the LMS in some way, along with 600 faculty members. This rapid and extensive utilization has moved online learning practices into the instructional mainstream, placing more demands on network administration, requiring regular interaction with Banner support staff, thus nurturing new relationships between Extended University and information technology. It also means that many instructors have moved closer to teaching online fully as students exert pressure to adopt online tools.

As the campus seeks our expertise and resources, continuing education units have the opportunity to influence business practices and data systems that serve nontraditional students. In 2007 and 2008, the Distance Learning Advisory Committee at UIUC identified practices in areas such as deadlines for refunds and applying credit taken in non-degree status that worked against the needs of nontraditional students; the committee successfully argued for more accommodating procedures. At Montana State, Extended University articulated definitions of “online” and “blended” and worked with the registrar’s office, administrative computing, and institutional research to implement those definitions through Banner coding. As a result, all students can easily identify online or blended sections in the class schedule, and the number of students in online courses can be reported accurately.

### **NEW CHALLENGES FOR CE**

More than ever, administrators in traditional campus units see ways in which a distance or continuing education unit can support the core instructional mission. This new centrality can be seductive for continuing educational professionals after years of obscurity or benign neglect. There are challenges to be addressed, however, since our relationships with key administrators change as we move to being full partners in online delivery.

We need to maintain our sense of identity and define our own relationships with other campus units. One top-level campus administrator at UIUC advised us not to go to the campus asking who they want us to be—tell them who we are.

We are in a position to help the institution navigate the changes facing higher education today, and we must be proactive in influencing the direction of online education on our campuses rather than reacting to assumptions made elsewhere. In other words, we cannot wait to see how campus units respond to the explosive growth of online education and the blending of traditional and nontraditional students. We must lead them to a comprehensive picture of the possibilities of where we might go as the institution seeks to manage change.

Each institution approaches these challenges in unique ways depending upon local structures, historical relationships, and financial models. However, there are some key strategies that we can all use. For example, we need to enhance support services to keep distance students engaged and to rid ourselves of common assumptions and misconceptions (“distance students never finish their courses,” “the quality of online courses is not as high as face-to-face”). In addition, we need to stress that online students are subject to the same conduct code as residential students, which in itself increases our legitimacy. In other words, we need to remind campus units that just as all students are members of one academic community, all administrative units have the same instructional mission, and by working together we carry out our common mission more successfully. As we build these new relationships, we need to make it clear that we are trying to achieve the same goals as the rest of the institution. We are not the competition, and our efforts will not cheapen the university’s brand.

What is the alternative to being proactive? What could happen if we allow our campuses to decide how we fit into this new world of higher education?

One danger is becoming distracted from our access/outreach mission. There is a tremendous tension here—with online education taking off, some campus forces want to co-opt our mission and focus on traditional students at the cost of those at a distance. In tough financial times, attention naturally shifts inward, and the centripetal force exerted by campus administrators seeing the value of providing online opportunities for all faculty and students, can pull a continuing education unit away from its outreach mission. One line of thinking foresees total erasure of the dis-

inction between on-campus and off-campus students enrolled in online courses: If both types of students take the same courses and need the same services, why do we need a separate distance or continuing education unit to serve them? The answer is that if all students were served equally well by a single registration process, for example, a separate one for distance students would never have developed. The for-profit online institutions that specialize in serving nontraditional students understand this and enroll an ever-larger proportion of the online market.

As at Montana State, continuing education at UTUC has been asked to help with online development because we are one of the few repositories of experience. We want to work with campus as it gives us increased legitimacy, but we need to hold on to our core mission of serving those outside of the traditional framework. Therefore, we must continually remind those we work with on campus that distance students have unique needs that cannot be accommodated by policies and systems designed for the traditional masses on campus. We have to keep repeating that the courses the campus wants to put online for residential students should be offered to off-campus students as well, and vice versa. It's not necessarily that opposition exists, but distance students have been so far off the radar screen that faculty and administrators need to be convinced or reminded that there is another audience to serve. It is only when we point out that distant students can bring in additional revenue that administrators look up and take notice.

Another danger is that the campus will innovate us out of existence. One of us recently faced this. When the continuing education unit was reviewed as part of campus-wide effort to identify cost savings, the outcome was a recommendation that continuing education be merged with other units responsible for educational technology support and faculty development. The gap between the missions of those units and CE's focus on program development and delivery to off-campus students was ignored. The report showed that reviewers were cognizant of only one or two minor functions of continuing education. If the recommendation were followed, continuing education's program development efforts would be dispersed and assumed by other missions, with any minor cost savings more than offset by the loss of revenues from nontraditional students turning to other institutions that focus on their needs.

It may seem that we are trying to have it both ways when we claim that a distance learning unit is obligated to follow the rules by applying the established student code of conduct in online and other nontraditional

settings while simultaneously arguing that distance learning professionals should also work to modify business practices to serve distance students effectively. But closer examination reveals that we are not just picking and choosing which rules to follow.

The student code of conduct derives from core values of the academy—academic integrity, respect for the work and opinions of others, free inquiry in a tolerant environment—so enforcing it in online courses for distant students simply reaffirms those values and integrates all students into a single academic community, as our college associate dean envisioned. The same integration happens when distance-learning units defer curricular decisions and teaching assignments to academic departments: We support the core values and mission of the college or university. By enforcing the conduct code and allowing academic decisions to be made in academic departments, we gain credibility. We can thus dispel the too-common assumption that the continuing or distance learning unit doesn't follow the rules by following the most important rules of all.

But business practices are clearly another matter. It is not a core mission of a university to collect or refund fees or to pay instructors, to name just two examples. Those processes are necessary to the smooth functioning of a large enterprise, so they have been standardized. But teaching and learning are not affected by, for example, whether a student pays by credit card or whether a drop form is presented in person.

The credibility gained by enforcing authentically academic values and policies can make it easier for us to gain the cooperation necessary to modify standardized business practices that are irrelevant to academic values. By living with and upholding “one-size-fits-all” core academic values and articulating the congruence of the on-campus and off-campus missions, we provide the leadership and gain the credibility needed to re-shape the edges of “round hole” business practices so that “square peg” distance students fit naturally into the academic community. 🌐