

The Administration of Online Programs in Statewide Systems: A Case Study of The University System of New Hampshire



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Abstract

As enrollments in postsecondary online programs have grown, many institutions have pursued a more centralized business model that consolidates their online programming under a single executive leader, a statewide system office, or a coalition of institutions that have merged operations and assets. In this study, the researchers used an exploratory case study design--using both surveys and interviews--to investigate how online programs are administered at four institutions in the University System of New Hampshire (USNH). Several findings emerged from the data. First, participants struggled finding a common vocabulary when talking about online programs and the potential benefits of system-level collaboration; second,

administrators frequently prioritized their local program tasks over system-wide collaboration; and third, although there was not a strategic plan in place to help institutions collaborate, participants agreed that such a plan would be valuable.

Introduction

As state-level funding for public institutions has dropped over the last several decades (King, 2013; Legon & Garrett, 2017, 2018), institutions that previously had little need to change their business model have implemented cost-cutting measures and pursued new means of increasing revenue while lowering expenses (King, 2013; Lane & Johnstone, 2013). In light of this trend, some institutions have sought to mitigate the adverse effects of reduced residential enrollment and state funding by expanding their online programming (Essary, 2014; Legon & Garrett, 2017). Since the skills and resources needed to manage online programs are so different from face-to-face programs (Chaney, Chaney, & Eddy, 2010; Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2010), it is important for administrators of online programs to be aware of these differences and equipped to articulate them in strategic planning, resource allocation, and program management (Legon & Garrett, 2017; Maguire, 2007; Rovai & Downey, 2010).

Although previous studies describe how online programs should be administered, very few of these studies focused on how online programs should be administered on a larger scale. While earlier research by Essary (2014) and Vines (1998) offers some insight as to how online programs should be administered in statewide systems, neither study relied on a comprehensive program evaluation model. As administrators of online programs in statewide systems become better equipped to collaborate with other institutions in their system, it is possible that such collaboration will improve the competitiveness of their online program by leveraging increased scale and collaboration (Essary, 2014; Legon & Garrett, 2018).

This study sought to understand how institutions affiliated with a statewide university system administer their online programs. In the following paper, we report the results of a study using an exploratory case study design--using both surveys and interviews--to investigate administrators' perceptions of how online programs are administered at their four institutions in the University System of New Hampshire (USNH).

Theoretical Framework

This study used a case study framework to evaluate how online programs are administered within a single public statewide system. Rovai and Downey's (2010) seven factors of online program analysis helped inform the creation of a survey. An eighth factor called "subsidiarity" (see King, 2013) was also included as an online program factor since Rovai and Downey's (2010) seven factors did not include a factor focused on the level of autonomy needed to administer online programs.

Factor #1: Planning

Rovai and Downey (2010) suggest that the increased level of competition in higher education has elevated the need for effective strategic planning. Before an online program can be created or expanded, a strategic plan must be articulated.

Factor#2: Marketing/Recruitment

Effective marketing and recruitment refers to an institution's efforts to promote its online programs with a predetermined target audience. A budget and dedicated marketing staff are essential resources needed to execute marketing strategies. Rovai and Downey (2010) suggest that a marketing budget is the most often overlooked aspect of entry into the online market.

Factor #3: Financial Management

For some institutions, specific revenue margins are often required to help ensure financial targets are achieved. Rovai and Downey (2010) suggest that institutions carefully consider the length of time it will take for new programs to become profitable since the time of entry to the market, the size of the target audience and the brand of the institution influence the potential scale and rate of growth for the online program initiative.

Factor #4: Quality Assurance

Rovai and Downey (2010) suggest that a quality assurance strategy focus on faculty selection and qualifications, faculty development, and student support services. An effective quality assurance strategy must also be carried out on a regular basis to help satisfy program goals and student needs.

Factor #5: Student Retention

Institutions strive to retain as many students as they can. Since student retention rates are typically lower for students completing online classes than face-to-face classes (Brady, 2001; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2017), student retention is an important factor when managing online programs. Building on the work of Tinto (1987), Rovai and Downey (2010) focus on two different types of support needed to improve student retention: academic and social support.

Factor #6: Faculty Development

Teaching online differs from teaching face-to-face. Poorly prepared faculty can adversely influence online program quality (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Thus, faculty development is an essential component of any successful online program. Faculty development programs often focus on instructional design, pedagogy, online tools, student support, media development, and time management.

Factor #7: Online Course Design and Pedagogys

Successful online programs focus on online course design and pedagogy by aligning course design with learning objectives and the optimal instructional approach to deliver course content. Rovai and Downey (2010) suggest that the primary difference between online and face-to-face course design is that faculty teaching in online programs spend more time designing their online courses compared to face-to-face courses.

Factor #8: Subsidiarity Principle

Rovai and Downey's (2010) model does not consider how managing online programs in large-scale contexts influences program outcomes. The subsidiarity principle helps capture this additional variable of analysis and states that administrative issues should be handled by the smallest, lowest or least-centralized competent authority (King, 2013).

Methodology

We set forth to better understand how institutions affiliated with a statewide university system administer their online programs. Since each multicampus or public statewide system differs in

significant ways (cf. Creswell, Roskens, & Henry, 1985; Lee & Bowen, 1971), researchers have suggested that statewide or multicampus postsecondary systems be evaluated as discrete objects of analysis in terms of their structural and organizational characteristics (Creswell, Roskens, & Henry, 1985; King, 2013; Lane & Johnstone, 2013). Informed by the theoretical framework, the following research questions, which take into account institutional differences, guided this study:

1. How are online programs administered by institutions affiliated with a public statewide system?
2. What are advantages and disadvantages of administering online programs in a public statewide system?
3. How do participants prioritize online administration tasks?

A single-case exploratory case study (Stake, 1994, 2006) was conducted to answer these research questions focused on the four institutions that make up the University System of New Hampshire: the University of New Hampshire, Keene State College, Granite State College and Plymouth State University.

Since there was so little prior research focused on the topic of online program management in statewide systems, a Grounded Theory approach was used to accommodate a more flexible and iterative means to identify categories and emerging findings (Glaser, 2017).

Sample

To answer the research questions, this study focused on a group of high-level administrators working at the four previously mentioned institutions and the USNH system office. Overall, 22 high-level administrators were purposefully identified, based on their affiliation with their institution's online programs, to complete a survey; 18 (81.8%) ended up completing the survey. In most cases, participants were directly responsible for the management of their institution's online degree programs or they were in roles such as president, provost or associate vice provost, and indirectly responsible for online degree programs as an executive leader at their institution. After the surveys were completed, interviews were conducted with six high-level administrators.

Overall, participants had been in their current position from 1.5 years to 15 years; the average length of time in one's current position was 4.9 years. However, total experience working in

higher education ranged from 6 years to 39 years; the average length of time working in higher education was 23.3 years.

Data Collection and Analysis

There were two phases of data collection: an online survey and interviews. The online survey consisted of 20 questions and was administered using Qualtrics during the first phase of data collection. Survey questions were closed or semi-closed with some opportunity for respondents to provide clarification or additional commentary using text fields at the end of the survey. Some examples of survey questions are provided below:

- How important is strategy in terms of administering your online program successfully? Does your institution have a strategy for administering online programs? If so, are you familiar with it?
- Are there policies at your institution that influence how online programs are administered? Are those policies supporting or hindering the growth and success of your online programs?
- What improvements could be made across your statewide system to help individual institutions in the system to improve collaboration?
- Do you think there are potential opportunities to collaboratively administer online programs within your statewide system? Do you think the administration of online programs should be more centralized? If so, how?

After administering the online survey, the first author conducted follow up interviews with six additional participants. The interview questions aligned with survey and research questions. Examples of interview questions used in this study are provided below:

- Based on this study's survey responses, the lowest ranking factors were marketing, financial management and local control of decision making. Since marketing is such an essential factor in terms of student recruitment, why do you think it was in the bottom three or eight factors?
- How important is it to have faculty support at your institution for the administration of your online programs?

The qualitative data collected from the surveys and the interviews was analyzed using a constant comparison approach by identifying codes and grouping repeating instances with the same code (Glaser, 2017). Consistencies and discrepancies across coded interviews were considered in light of the identified categories and emerging themes.

Results

In the following section, we report the results from our inquiry separated by the main areas of inquiry.

Administering Online Programs in a Statewide System

We were first interested in better understanding how online programs are administered in a statewide system. Participants, overall, suggested that online programs in the USNH were not administered much different than they might have been at four state institutions that were not within the same state system. For instance, many reported that their day-to-day operations were managed locally with no connection to system-level governance. In fact, most participants found it difficult to think in terms of localized vs. centralized administration; they found the terms themselves inadequate when discussing the administration of online programs. Participants instead liked to think of which elements of administering an online program would be best managed locally vs. centrally. One area that most thought could be centralized was online learning applications, tools, and platforms. Several participants suggested that for improved collaboration to occur between system institutions, tools or platforms would need to be standardized to simplify data sharing and enrollment management. However, several participants noted that while Canvas was the preferred LMS for most institutions in the system, not all institutions had migrated to that platform. Some also questioned whether quality assurance could be centralized; however, it was pointed out that quality assurance at most institutions was aligned with faculty governance and therefore inherently something that must be accomplished locally at each institution.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Administering Online Programs in Statewide Systems

We were interested in identifying what participants thought were advantages and disadvantages of administering online programs in a statewide system. It became clear that for many, a statewide system was a vague concept, one that almost seemed more of an idea than

a day-to-day reality, more theory than practice. Further, as mentioned earlier, many did not see their institution as really doing anything differently in terms of the administration of online programs as other institutions might that were not in a statewide system. Therefore, given this, many struggled with thinking in terms of advantages and disadvantages and instead focused more on opportunities but mostly challenges with collaborating or centralizing the administration of online programs in the USNH statewide system.

Some participants did identify a couple of advantages or opportunities, such as being on a common learning management system or common student information system as mentioned earlier. Others pointed out how they felt that greater levels of collaboration could strengthen all member institutions. In fact, one participant stated,

“We need to identify who the real competition is. There are some effective ways we can collaborate. Need to focus on growing revenue. The only way we can do this is by working together. We need to start with the question: do we believe in a statewide system? ... Tapping into online revenue to augment residential outreach is important. We’re in a new era. It’s harder and harder to enter into these new markets, so we need to be more strategic about it.”

Another participant specifically highlighted that centralizing online program administration is the best approach to “create a consistent experience for the student, the faculty, and the administration.”

However, despite advantages like these, the majority of participants stated that their local day-to-day priorities superseded all other considerations, including thinking about system collaboration or centralization. This is largely and likely due to the fact that local control was already an established feature of the current online programs and cultures at each institution; in fact, most of the existing online programs were not even centrally administered at their own institutions. Thus, most participants had not yet explored or even considered the benefits of a different model that might rely on increased centralization. One participant explained,

“I think it's hard for people who are administering online programs to prioritize some of these other factors when the most pressing issues are securing faculty support and so on.”

One of the biggest challenges or obstacles participants identified was summed up by one

participant as “program cannibalization, balkanization, and politics.” In other words, this participant believed that there is a correlation between negative outcomes such as program cannibalization and ceding local control of online programs to a more central group of stakeholders. This sentiment was connected to all areas of potential collaboration, not just administering online programs. In several instances, study participants could not articulate why they might want to potentially partner with other system institutions in the first place. Others mentioned that it was simply too difficult to connect with their peers from other institutions in the first place and whenever they did, it was too challenging to collaborate. Some pointed to previous attempts to partner with other USNH institutions that were not well received.

One of the main issues or obstacles with collaborating with other institutions came down to finances. As funding for higher education has decreased and competition has increased (largely due to the increase in online programs), institutions are weary of doing anything that might cause them to have less funds to run their programs. In fact, one respondent commented:

“I am not optimistic for USNH collaboration around the administration of online degree programs. The main obstacle, in my opinion, is the current financial struggle felt by higher education in NH and more broadly. Every partnership would result in a division of an ever-shrinking pie.”

Thus, fear of jeopardizing their financial status has been keeping programs from finding ways to centralize parts of program administration that could reduce certain operational costs.

Another obstacle or challenge was a fear that partnering or centralizing online programs might compromise an institution’s brand. In fact, the majority of UNH participants--that is, those who work at the state’s “flagship institution”--were concerned about compromising, or what they saw might be watering down, their brand. Ultimately though, when the participants were asked whether they would consider collaborating with other institutions within the system, the majority indicated they would if there were guidelines or a clear strategic plan in place to assure their institution’s unique strengths could be leveraged and the outcome of the collaboration would not endanger their finances or reputation.

Prioritizing Online Program Administration Tasks

Recognizing that some features or factors of online programs could be more easily centralized than others, we were interested in how participants prioritized or ranked each of the administration tasks or factors mentioned earlier in this paper. Participants were given each of the program factors and asked to rank them in order from highest to lowest priority based on how important each factor is relative to administering online programs successfully.

Participants rated strategic planning, faculty support, and quality assurance the most important and then local control of operations, financial management, and marketing the least important (see Table 1). However, during the interviews, many respondents clearly prioritized local operational goals over system-level goals. Participants also pointed out that the factors used in this question were difficult to define. In the end, those who were interviewed generally prioritized the most immediate factors such as faculty support, quality assurance, pedagogy and student retention when they talked about administering online programs, and placed less emphasis on characteristics such as marketing, financial management and local control.

Table 1: Online Program Factor Ranking

Discussion

Three major findings emerged from the data. We will address each one briefly below.

Common Vocabulary and Confusion about the System

The first major finding was that the majority of participants lacked a common vocabulary to speak about online program management and the benefit of being a member of a larger system. This disconnect was evident in comments gathered during both surveys and interviews that suggested that each institution, despite valuing them, lacked a strategic plan for their online programming. Consequently, it's possible that although study participants were ranking strategic planning as the most important factor needed to successfully manage an online degree program, it's possible they were instead interpreting that term to mean

something else, such as the ability to execute on decision making in an autonomous and strategic manner. Although there are some relatively new resources available to help standardize the factors or characteristics of a healthy online degree program (e.g., such as the Chloe Report or UPCEA's Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Leadership), these reports focus primarily on factors that are peripheral to the essential features of the online program itself (e.g., leadership).

Local Priorities First

The second major finding was that participants valued or focused more on local operational priorities than system or community priorities. This was most pronounced for participants who were most directly responsible for their institution's online programs. Although it is understandable that local priorities would trump the needs of the system, the majority of participants rarely mentioned system-level or societal needs (e.g., reducing student indebtedness or improving access for rural populations). Because of this disconnect between system-level goals and local operations, very few responses pointed to the broader needs of the audience such as reducing student debt or improving access for nontraditional students who would benefit from a fully online undergraduate degree. Since there was no strategic plan specifically for online programming at any of the system institutions or at the system itself, the majority of decisions regarding online programming were operational in nature, that prioritized local tasks or initiatives over community-level goals. This disconnect was also evident at UNH where online undergraduate classes help improve access for currently enrolled residential students who replace in-person classes with online classes rather than offering full programs for students at a distance. Comments about the potential benefits of intra-system collaboration that might facilitate increased access for nontraditional students and lower enrollment costs were minimal. This disconnect resembles Maguire's study (2007) where faculty didn't feel like they had been engaged in the process of policy development and strategic planning, which left them focused exclusively on their most immediate responsibilities.

Principles for Intra-System Collaboration

Although the majority of study participants acknowledged that a strategic plan for online programs would help them improve collaboration among other system institutions, several participants offered suggestions about how such collaboration should occur after there was agreement about roles, finances, and timelines. The most salient suggestions came from one of the university presidents:

- **Step one:** Identify which institutions are authorized to offer which programs in order to minimize overlaps. Unless programs are mapped to market segments, institutions should consider consolidating them to some degree.
- **Step two:** Work toward a common LMS that would allow students and faculty to migrate more seamlessly across institutions.
- **Step three:** Develop faculty. Instructional design and faculty development are two sides of the same coin. The system can help develop faculty that can then help cultivate students into lifelong online learners. College age students will spend the next 40 years working in many different roles. They will keep coming back for continuing education (especially online) if it is convenient, high quality, and meets their needs.

Conclusion

The results of this study align closely with earlier studies focused on program administration (Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Moreover, the themes that emerged point to many of the administrative challenges identified in the literature, such as policy (Maguire, 2007), scale (Essary, 2014), format (Discenza, Howard, & Schenk, 2002), accreditation (Gaskell & Hayton, 2015) and strategic planning (Berge, 2007) that are often more difficult to manage in larger online programs (Essary 2014; Maguire, 2007). Although the challenges in administering online programs in statewide or large systems is evident, this study also identified potential benefits of increased centralization and/or collaboration among institutions who already offer online programs within a larger system or organization.

Although the results of this study may not transfer to larger statewide systems, it is possible that the conclusions reached in this study transfer more readily to statewide systems in nearby states or in states that share similar organizational features such as size, budget or audience.

Future studies could explore the relationship between leadership and program outcomes since

the type of leader managing online programs plays such an important role in outcomes and shaping the strategic direction of the online program (Legon & Garrett, 2017). Additionally, as the issue of scale or size takes on greater importance with institutional mergers, increased consolidation of functions within statewide systems and the ongoing success of large online programs such as Southern New Hampshire University and Arizona State University, it will be increasingly important for administrators of these larger online programs to understand how scale impacts quality and other program characteristics (Essary, 2014; Legon & Garrett, 2018). Lastly, since online programs are often expanded with the intent of serving a larger audience, the issue of social responsibility could also be explored in relation to the mission of statewide organizations and their unique position to meet social needs (Zimpher, 2013) since this study found that many study participants lacked the motivation to connect their local efforts into the larger system based on a distrust of the system and a strong preference to prioritize program factors that most clearly benefited the local institution.

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