

# Online Distance Learning: An Idea for the Times

*A consortium approach extends the benefits of online programs to schools that might otherwise be left out*

By **Tom Kennedy**

Over the past 20 years, independent, nonprofit colleges and universities across the country have relied on adult education to provide tuition revenues—at considerable profit—to subsidize their operating budgets. Recently, however, many of these same colleges have seen static or declining credit-hour generation in their adult programs. This change can be attributed to several factors, including

- increased adult education competition from peer institutions and from for-profits;
- an adult population that has seen work hours increase, putting time demands on them and their families; and
- traffic gridlock in populated areas of the country, which restricts access to classroom courses.

One effect of this situation is an escalating appeal from these institutions for assistance in developing distance learning capacity. At the Regis University Office of New Ventures, we recognized that the time had come for a network of national and international colleges and universities working together to develop and deliver online courses.

## Problem

A recent Sloan study<sup>1</sup> provides strong evidence that small- to medium-sized independent colleges lag behind the technology boom at public higher education and for-profit institutions. In fact, according to Sloan, the growth of online programs now exceeds that of classroom-based adult education.

Although many institutions understand the growth opportunities in distance learning technologies, many lack the resources, both human and financial, to develop and implement effective distance learning programs. Budgetary restrictions inhibit the implementation of online academic programs. Estimates to start a quality program can be as high as \$1 million, with each course costing as much as \$25,000 to \$35,000.

Without existing human resources and financial support, equipping and staffing such a venture often can be overwhelming. Scarce financial and time resources present obstacles that are exacerbated by faculty concerns about mission consistency and the effect on the perceptions of those who came to the institution because of its reputation as a small, liberal arts college that gives personal attention to its students.

Some colleges have turned to online course and platform providers, which can assist colleges in ways they cannot easily do for themselves. Still other institutions would prefer to manage their own programs without involvement of an outside vendor. The result? Hesitation, procrastination, and hibernation.

## Solutions

Like a number of other colleges and universities, Regis University in Denver, Colorado, has developed a wealth of online courses, offered since 1993 to students in the School for Professional Studies. In all, more than 200 undergraduate and graduate courses support nine bachelor's and six master's degrees.

As a pioneer in the field of online education, Regis often is approached by smaller schools looking for advice in developing their own distance programs. For nearly a decade, the Office of New Ventures at Regis has explored online collaborations with other colleges and universities.

Over a six-month period in 2005, the author and two colleagues met with representatives from more than 85 independent colleges to gather ideas, understand problems, and propose possible solutions. Early ideas were abandoned, cultivated, or completely changed as a result of the meetings. For example, we determined that shared courses should not be considered transfer credit. Although it might serve students, transfer credit fails to meet the needs of individual colleges seeking tuition revenue. It also presents a problem to the provider institution because each student would be required to go through its application and enrollment process.

Another initial hurdle was management. Representatives from many schools felt they should be a part of the management process, despite having full-time responsibilities at their colleges. In this scenario, too many managers equaled no managers.

To assist resource-challenged colleges in entering the online market as soon as possible, we considered two potential strategies:

- Purge online courses of all references to Regis and lease those courses to other colleges.

- Allow other colleges' students to enroll in Regis courses as visiting students in a consortium arrangement.

Purging, or cleansing, each course so that another institution could brand the course with its own identification and logo seemed to be an ideal solution for many schools, but the process of doing so would have been labor-intensive. A consortium, with Regis as the "provider," appeared to involve far fewer technological complications. After evaluating a number of options, we established the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities (OCICU), which would be managed by the Office of New Ventures at Regis, with input from participating colleges and universities.

The proposed consortium needed to address two other issues:

- A true consortium would involve several providers, not just Regis.
- All of the resource-challenged colleges had a strong desire to ultimately have their own online courses and programs in the future.

The solution was to recruit several other providers to offer a multitude of courses and academic programs. In addition, the OCICU would make a concerted effort to help consortium members begin to develop their own online programs within a five-year time frame.

One might ask why Regis would reach out and potentially create competitors for its online programs. We considered this question and decided that the negative impact on the Regis academic programs would be marginal. Moreover, the Regis mission can be summed up as follows: We develop leaders in the service of others. Leaders can be defined as individual students or as organizations, including other colleges and universities whose purpose is to extend their respective missions.

## Challenges

The concept of a consortium that functioned without geographic boundaries required a new understanding of the term because proximity of consortium members was not important. The biggest challenges, however, revolved around

academic and administrative issues. Strict adherence to academic guidelines and approval processes was necessary for member colleges to accept online courses and faculty as their own. Faculty at member institutions had to be involved in decisions concerning the consortium to alleviate fears that students would choose consortium courses that competed with the member schools' courses. In the OCICU, member schools have full control over which online courses they make available to their students. Instead of offering the full range of online courses through the consortium, member institutions select only the courses they decide are needed, choosing courses intended only to supplement or complement existing offerings.

Another challenge we faced related to technology issues and administrative procedures of each institution. Provider schools use a variety of course management platforms, resulting in the potential for students at member schools to be unfamiliar with the platform for a given course. To address this problem, OCICU requires provider institutions to offer an orientation and a sample course online.

A more significant challenge focused on the administrative procedures at the home institutions. Registrars, financial aid offices, and business offices were initially apprehensive about the consortium arrangement until they understood that students register and pay for each course at the home institution and that the institution "owns" the online course.

One of the greatest challenges we faced was communication between member colleges and the provider institutions. Key individuals at each institution must be kept informed on matters that affect them directly or indirectly. We found that the most effective approach to ensuring adequate communication is to designate a liaison at each college to handle the communication efforts, with New Ventures as the coordinator and manager.

## Financial Aspects

The OCICU costs \$3,500 to join, plus an annual fee of \$1,000. In order to maintain an active membership, each member school is required to generate

a minimum of 15 enrollments annually. Members pay provider institutions \$600 per student for undergraduate and \$700 for graduate courses (three credit hours each). As the manager of the consortium, New Ventures receives 20 percent per course enrollment. These fees were determined after ascertaining provider schools' expenses and estimating the potential volume that could be generated from member schools. Each member school charges its regular tuition for an online course, which might be \$1,200. Member institutions have no direct expenses, however, because the provider college pays for faculty and related expenses.

One of the great advantages of the OCICU is that general members do not need to allocate additional personnel to run the program. Member schools can simply assign a point person (the liaison) to coordinate and communicate with existing offices at their institutions and with the consortium.

Provider institutions have a greater need, however, for administrative support from their schools. That's not to say they need additional personnel, but the point person needs a team of support people from a variety of offices, including faculty support. Once again, communication and collaboration are vital to ensuring high-quality service to OCICU member schools.

## Status and Academics

Once the model for the OCICU took shape, the consortium grew rapidly, attracting colleges eager to participate in the program. The first two member schools to join were Culver-Stockton College in Missouri and Cabrini College in Philadelphia. Other early members included Loyola University New Orleans and the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore. At the time of this writing, there were five providers (Regis University, Colorado; St. Leo University, Florida; Southern New Hampshire University; Robert Morris University, Pennsylvania; and Chapman University, California) and 61 members. Most of the providers and members joined the consortium in the past 12 months. We anticipate that by the end of 2006, the OCICU will offer

approximately 500 courses to the membership. We also expect an enrollment of 500 students from member schools and for that number to double next year.

For Loyola University, the launch of the OCICU was particularly timely. Loyola signed on in 2005 to offer online courses to students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. "The consortium allowed our displaced students to continue pursuing their degrees and to stay connected with Loyola until they could return to New Orleans," said Marcel J. Dumestre, dean of City College-Loyola University New Orleans. Although the consortium is geared primarily toward the adult population, Dumestre noted that in the fall 2005 semester, 29 traditional-age students participated in OCICU online courses from different parts of the country.

New Ventures handles tracking and billing and manages the consortium, relying on the advice of member institutions. New Ventures has a staff of six with extensive adult education experience, including academics, advising, and administrative systems. The consortium receives direction from several advisory groups, primarily composed of the first 30 member schools, the first five provider universities, and an advisory committee that includes presidents from the following schools: Alvernia College, Pennsylvania; Acadia University, Pennsylvania; College of Notre Dame, Maryland; Culver-Stockton College, Missouri; Heritage University, Washington; St. Leo University, Florida; and The Sage Colleges, New York.

Providers adhere to online quality standards that are the norm for the industry and are being approved by the provider institutions.


## Future Plans

Membership in OCICU is limited to colleges that are independent, not-for-profit, two- and four-year institutions. There are limits to the number of members the consortium can accommodate while guaranteeing appropriate levels of quality and support.

OCICU's goal is to have 80 member schools by the end of the 2007 academic year, with six major providers. Beyond

that, the consortium hopes to grow to include 10 major providers and at least five minor providers, with member institutions numbering 100.

The consortium represents a low-risk, cost-effective method for member institutions to offer their students access to a multitude of online courses. It also provides a network of similar schools to which member institutions can market their own unique online courses, while

the consortium handles the administrative overhead. 

## Endnote

1. E. I. Allen and J. Seaman, *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005* (Needham, Mass.: The Sloan Consortium, 2005).

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