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Online Learning at USFSP: A Follow-up Report

March 10, 2015

Background

In the fall of 2010, USFSP hired consultants from Blackboard to conduct a careful review of the institution's online learning efforts and its ability to support its students and faculty in such an endeavor. The Blackboard team provided a detailed report which included a list of recommendations USFSP could use to improve the overall quality of its online courses and program. The following report summarizes discussions with faculty, students, and academic administrators about online learning, a review of five select online undergraduate and graduate courses across the university's colleges of Business, Arts and Sciences, and Education. In addition, this report will provide recommendations to help USFSP continue its current strides toward improving its design, development, facilitation, and evaluation of its online courses and programs.

Method

This report represents a visit to the USFSP campus between February 11, 2015 and February 13, 2015. Interviews were conducted with different constituent groups that included the following:

- Han Reichgelt, Regional Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs (RVCAA)
- Carol Hixson, Dean of the Library
- Academic Deans
 - Carol Hixson, Dean of Library
 - Bill Heller, Dean of the College of Education
 - Olivia Hodges, Associate Dean for the College of Education
 - Gary Patterson, Interim Dean of the Kate Tiedemann College of Business
 - Alison Watkins, Associate Dean for Graduate & Certificate Programs; Kate Tiedemann College of Business
 - Frank Biafora, Dean of Arts and Sciences
 - Susan Toler, Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences
- Online Learning and Instructional Technology Services (OLITS) Team
 - David Brodosi, Distance Learning Coordinator
 - Karla Kmetz, Instructional Designer
 - Otis Wilder, Instructional Designer
 - Angela Janer, Instructional Designer
- Faculty Open Session Participants
 - Patricia Pettijohn, Head, Collection Development & Technical Services, Library

- Martina Schmidt, Instructor, Kate Tiedemann College of Business
 - Christopher Davis, Associate Professor, Kate Tiedemann College of Business
 - Nicole Stowell, Instructor, Kate Tiedemann College of Business
- Students with experience taking online courses
 - Distance Learning Steering Committee members including both faculty and administrative professionals (for committee membership, see: <https://sites.google.com/a/mail.usf.edu/distance-learning-supporting-documentation/dlsc-membership>)
 - Library Leadership Team members (library faculty and administrative professionals)

Institutional Strategy and Organizational Model

Background

The Blackboard team in 2010 identified the following key gaps in USFSP's institutional strategy for an organizational model of online learning:

- Online learning lacks an experienced leader who manages the strategic direction and operations for online learning
- Online learning is decentralized and driven by departmental or college forces which has led to duplication of effort and inefficiencies in the use of staff and provision of services.

Observations from 2015

Online learning has historically been a decentralized endeavor at USFSP among faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Education, and the College of Business. To date, online learning student credit hours (SCH) are generated more often by the College of Arts and Sciences with the Department of Psychology historically offering the most SCH's. The university offers a fully online version of its Master in Business Administration and Master in Digital Journalism and Design degrees. There is also a fully online certificate in Infant Family Mental Health.

Blackboard's consulting team in 2010 noted the following gaps in USFSP's institutional strategy:

- Explicit vision and goals and strategic growth plan for online learning
- A steering team that was limited to only the oversight of the distribution of distance learning funds
- Ad hoc and reactive decision making

USFSP has made some initial steps to be more strategic in its planning of online learning. Before the Blackboard consulting team visit, Mr. Brodosi had served as a media infrastructure specialist for the library for several years. He used his expertise and library video recording equipment and spaces to help faculty record lectures for their online courses. The Blackboard consulting team noted that although David did a great job, a full-time director was still needed to

provide overall leadership for online learning as a whole across the university. A team of three instructional designers were hired in 2011 and an assistant director and a fourth instructional designer in charge of professional development were hired in 2013. In addition, two instructional media specialists for the library joined this growing team and now represent the office known as the Online Learning and Instructional Technology Services (OLITS) department.

The Distance Learning Steering Committee consists of representation from each college, the Library, Student Affairs, Graduate Studies, the Faculty Senate, and Student Government. The original charge of this committee addressed the following:

- Developing a centralized model for distance learning that is equitable across all colleges and USFSP units, cost-effective, and beneficial to students and faculty
- Engagement in a strategic planning process for distance learning to address issues such as compliance, planned growth, and institutional branding
- Developing institutional-wide administrative processes for distance learning including course proposals and awards, staffing, and professional development

The achievement of some of these charges has been met with mixed results. The Assistant Director of Distance and Distributed Learning vacated her position in November 2013. Dean Hixson advertised the position in 2014, three finalists were interviewed and an offer was made and declined. Going back into the applicant pool, an interview was scheduled two separate times for another finalist who ultimately withdrew because of personal reasons. No action has yet been taken to re-advertise the position.

Although OLITS provides centralized access to lecture capture equipment and spaces, instructional design support, and faculty development in topics that including online teaching, instructional design, and instructional technologies, there is still duplication of online learning personnel and resources at the university. Specifically, the College of Business has two half-time employees who provide instructional design and technology support to its faculty and the Department of Journalism and Media Studies Digital Journalism and Design has Videoworks, a course creation studio for its Master of Digital Journalism and Design program. Although it was helpful in the past for the College of Business and the Department of Journalism and Media Studies to have their own resources to help develop the university's online fully online programs, such a decision should be revisited to ensure university resources are more efficiently used across the institution.

USFSP has recognized the importance of ensuring all of its course content is accessible to students with disabilities. The Distance Learning Accessibility Committee created a checklist that faculty and instructional designers can use together to assess the accessibility of a particular course. In addition, the Distance Learning Captioning Pilot involved studying the use of vendor-created captioning and their benefits to students for an online Introduction to Psychology (PSY 2012) course and an online Law and Business I (BUL 3300) course.

Recommendations

- Identify an internal or external candidate who could serve as the director of online learning and lead the OLITS team
- Compare the educational requirements, salary, and experience of the director of distance learning job description with USFSP's current description to determine if any changes to the job advertisement are warranted prior to new recruitment for the position
- Remove redundancies in online learning support within academic departments and colleges and move staff who support online learning from these areas to OLITS
- Research options for creating captions and use the most cost-effective option to ensure captioning is available for all fully online courses

Financial Model

Background

The Blackboard consulting team in 2010 identified the following gaps in USFSP's financial model for online learning:

- Revenues and costs for online learning are not linked to a formalized budget
- A strategic plan does not guide the use of spending for online learning across the institution

Observations in 2015

The use of distance learning fees at USFSP is dictated by the state of Florida that prohibits the distribution of funds to pay for instructional salaries. Instead, such funds can support efforts to support distance learning activities other than instruction. Dean Hixson provided access to a detailed spreadsheet which provides an overview of how distance learning fees are used to support different budget items. She should be commended for her thorough tracking of how distance learning fees are used across the institution. Dean Hixson distributes the distance learning fee funds to cover OLITS team member salaries, equipment used to support online teaching, and teaching and research assistants that faculty can request to assist with their online teaching courses, especially sections of 26 students or more and 56 students or more for graduate and undergraduate courses, respectively. In addition, colleges receive 10% of the distance learning fee funding they respectively generate in student hour credits. This amount can be used to support professional development activities of faculty related to online learning.

Recommendations

- Reassign the management of the online learning fee budget to the director of online learning once he or she is hired
- Determine how distance learning fee spending can be used to develop new online degree programs and certificates to assist USFSP's efforts to expand its reach to new students
- Evaluate how well distance learning fee spending has benefited the overall quality of online teaching and learning

Faculty and Program Development

Background

The Blackboard consulting team in 2010 identified gaps in faculty development and online program development that included the following:

- No formal standards or measure of course design quality are used
- Faculty development opportunities focus on technology skills
- Online courses are overly reliant on the use of lecture capture and not instructional design and pedagogy
- No specific pathways for faculty to become increasingly competent in good practices in online course design and facilitation
- No formal process to prepare entire programs for online delivery

Observations in 2015

The OLITS team has provided faculty with many opportunities to meet with them for individual or small group consulting appointments as well as workshops. The team has used surveys to assess faculty interest and availability for faculty development experiences at the university.

Since last year, the team has scheduled 69 workshops on topics that include:

- Canvas Learning Management System and its features
- ADA Accessibility
- Blackboard Collaborate
- Google Apps
- Instructional Design Strategies
- Quality Matters Reviews

Although the results of the Faculty Library Satisfaction survey for 2013-2014 indicated that 98% of faculty were satisfied with distance learning course support (instructional design, studio, digitization), the OLITS staff indicated they feel their services are underutilized by faculty. Specifically, the OLITS team recently shared that an ongoing challenge for them is that faculty either attend in low numbers, cancel an appointment without prior notice, or do not attend at all. Low faculty participation is due, in part, to a lack of requirements and incentives to motivate faculty to attend OLITS-led workshops. Faculty are not required to complete a certain amount of training to be eligible to teach their first online course nor to maintain their eligibility to teach online. The OLITS team shared that veteran online faculty members have resisted the idea of mandatory faculty development given they have taught online courses at the university for several years.

USFSP has used incentives in the past to encourage faculty to attend faculty development workshops. For example, previously faculty could receive a stipend if they agreed to submit their course for an official Quality Matters peer review to help improve the instructional design of their course. The OLITS team shared that after the award of this incentive was suspended two years ago, faculty attendance significantly dropped.

USFSP is a current subscriber of the Quality Matters rubric, a tool designed to help faculty align their online and blended learning courses to good practices in instructional design. To date, there are 5 USFSP courses that are QM certified with two additional courses currently under review. USFSP should be commended for helping faculty gain recognition for ensuring the instructional design quality of their courses. However, a dean shared that there is no formal and systematic process across the colleges that is used to review and improve the instructional design of existing online courses. In addition, another dean shared that she feels that online courses could utilize a varied set of technologies and resources so instructional content is not just limited to the use of lecture capture. It should be noted that other instructional technologies are available and are widely used by many faculty.

Recommendations

- Develop and launch a certification program for new and existing online faculty composed of specific workshops and instructional design consultations to help ensure the quality of online courses designed and facilitated
- Schedule OLITS team visits to each college's faculty meetings throughout a given semester to promote upcoming faculty development opportunities
- Conduct an internal review of all online courses within an academic program every 3-5 years using the Quality Matters rubric and process
- Provide appropriate incentives (e.g., release time, conference travel support) to faculty to encourage them to submit their courses for an official QM review

Student Support and Engagement

Background

The Blackboard consulting team in 2010 found the following gaps:

- Lack of services for fully online students
- Lack of student engagement planning to benefit students in online programs
- Limited orientation to online learning

Observations in 2015

A recent OLITS survey indicated that students have enjoyed taking online courses. Students did indicate in the survey that their courses could benefit from more interactions with their faculty members. During the February 2015 site visit, four USFSP students discussed their experiences with online learning at the university. They agreed with this survey finding and recommended more touch points with their online faculty members throughout the semester to help them prepare for upcoming assessments. In addition, the student group shared the following recommendations:

- Video content organized into shorter segments
- Access to all material (e.g., PowerPoint slides) presented during a video recorded lecture
- Better organization of course content
- More constructive feedback

- Occasional online meetings in real time
- Ability to review answers given on any online exam question
- Access to an online writing lab
- Access to more course options across modality (face-to-face, blended, online)

USFSP is in the process of creating a portal for online learning students. The document titled “Proposal for a USFSP Online Student Support Portal” was reviewed and describes the university’s plan to create a site that provides helpful information to both prospective and current students enrolled in online courses. This portal will integrate with other university systems and is targeted to be available by the end of 2015.

The Library Leadership Team described how they have supported students enrolled in online courses. Services include interlibrary loan, UBorrow, in which students can receive unmediated access to a common list of books across Florida libraries, and the “Ask the Librarian” service, an online chat service in which students can talk with a librarian in real time.

Recommendations

To help prepare students to be successful in their online courses, USFSP could do the following:

- Develop online tutorials (e.g., time management skills, basic functionality of Canvas) designed to help students be successful in their online courses
- Encourage faculty to create short videos that help orient students to course materials, assignments, and assessments and describes how Canvas and other instructional technology tools will be used to support and manage the course.
- Assess student ease of use and satisfaction with the proposed online student portal once completed and use such feedback for its continued improvement
- Research and investigate the feasibility of adding an online proctoring (e.g., ProctorU) option for students

In addition, USFSP should consider the following recommendations shared by the library leadership team:

- Develop a policy that guides the university’s sharing of library resources with out-of-state students
- Train undergraduate and transfer students during the university’s new student orientation program on the library’s resources and Canvas for online students
- Provide better clarity for both students and faculty in terms of what offices (e.g., OLITS, other library departments, individual colleges) support online learning and how they do so
- Provide online students with both live and recorded access to special talks and research-related presentations to help students engage in the intellectual life of the university

Program Delivery and Management

Background

The Blackboard consulting team in 2010 found the following gaps:

- Limited monitoring of student enrollments, retention, and other measures of student success
- Staffing of online courses is decentralized and remains with the departments or colleges
- No clear growth targets are articulated or communicated across the institution
- Online sections are similar to on-campus sections in that both types of courses can have large enrollments and teaching assistant support

Observations in 2015

The scheduling and staffing of online courses continues to be decentralized. Dean Hixson and the OLITS staff track student credit hours (SCH's) on behalf of the Colleges. USFSP does continue to offer large online course sections especially at the undergraduate level that can be as large as 100 or more students. Instead of breaking these courses into small sections, a faculty member can request the use of a teaching/research assistant to help with the management of the course. Such assistants are paid using distance learning fees.

It is unclear if there are key differences in how students perform in online compared to face-to-face sections of the same courses USFSP offers. A dean shared he was unaware of such comparisons at the university. Mr. Brodosi mentioned that OLITS only recently received the ability to review such data provided by the Registrar's office. Given that student success and retention will continue to be important to all institutions of higher learning as they compete for students, USFSP will need to evaluate their online student performance and develop and pilot intervention when there are gaps.

Recommendations

- Compare student success and retention in all courses, regardless of modality
- Review examples of intervention strategies used at similar institutions to help improve retention and student success in online learning courses when gaps are identified
- Discuss growth targets for each program and evaluate current methods to recruit and retain students in ways that align with such targets

Summary

USFSP has made progress in identifying how it can improve the overall quality of its online learning courses and programs. A foundation toward improvement has been paved and additional work will be needed to enhance the advancements USFSP has made since Blackboard's consulting visit in 2010. Although USFSP has made efforts to strengthen its approach to faculty support with the creation of the OLITS team, the operational management of

online learning continues to be decentralized. Such a model can be effective. Specifically, USFSP must create a unified vision and a strategic plan for online learning so that the university exerts a more concerted effort to build online courses, programs, and student services of the highest quality.