

Developing a Hybrid Graduate Program

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ABSTRACT

There is a continuing need for flexibility and adaptability in the dynamic world of program development in higher education. Students today have more responsibilities and obligations outside of the classroom. Therefore, educational programs that offer alternative class meeting times and other flexible options are attractive to the nontraditional student. The purpose of this paper is to describe and demonstrate a model for a graduate program delivered by a hybrid, or blended, format. The model will be a master's degree program in exercise and nutrition science where the program is delivered through blending both face to face classroom learning and e-learning teaching methodologies. Challenges of development, lessons learned, and future recommendations will also be presented. This hybrid model is interdisciplinary and can be adapted and utilized across a variety of disciplines.

Keywords: Hybrid, technology, and blended learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Many degree programs are fully online, however, there are specific programs that can benefit from a hybrid or blended delivery format. While a fully online course delivers all lectures, discussions, and activities completely online, hybrid delivery provides an integration of both online learning and classroom learning [2]. Examples from a hybrid program, the Masters of Science in Exercise and Nutrition Science program at The University of Tampa, will be used throughout this paper to illustrate elements of hybrid program, development and delivery.

2. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Masters of Science in Exercise and Nutrition Science (MS-ENS) program at The University of Tampa was developed during the 2012-2013 academic year and offered for the first time in Summer 2014. The program has entry points in summer, fall, and spring semesters and combines the study of exercise science with sports nutrition. The program is delivered using a

hybrid mode which includes face to face meetings on a weekly basis. The program schedule was developed to attract both full time students and fully employed practitioners. Students who enroll for all required courses each term can complete the program in one calendar year. This format allows the nontraditional student an opportunity for employment while concurrently progressing through the program of study.

The program offers twelve courses with nine of these available via hybrid delivery. The three additional face to face courses include exercise and nutrition science laboratory techniques, sports supplements and ergogenic aids, and the final practicum experience. Experiential education opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom are a program focus. Practical application and exposure to insights from qualified experts are provided by visiting instructors and student mentors. The challenges, lessons learned, and future recommendations presented below are based on the experience of this specific program development initiative.

3. CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The University of Tampa is similar to other small universities, and as Gouri Banergee explains, "Many promote themselves as being small and innovative, offering unique educational environments strongly driven by the preferences of students. They attempt to attract students by offering an education that is uniquely personalized and supported by rich interactions with faculty and peers," [1]. Not surprisingly, several challenges were encountered in the initial discussions about initiating the program. The major challenges included the existing and traditional face to face culture at the university, time commitments from faculty, and the absence of a key technology system.

Other than a few summer hybrid courses and a low residency graduate program, the University of Tampa is a small university with a traditional face to face classroom delivery. Introducing a graduate program delivered in a hybrid format created many questions and some skepticism from faculty across the campus. Frequent meetings were conducted to discuss the program development. Additionally, several presentations were held to

educate both faculty and administrators. These discussions, explanations, and demonstrations focused on describing and demonstrating the hybrid format.

Secondly, time commitments from faculty proved to be a challenge. In the article, "Blended Environments: Learning Effectiveness and Student Satisfaction at a Small College in Transition," Banerjee explains that many faculty recognize the benefits of online and blended learning. However, "mastering new technologies, understanding their pedagogical potential and integrating them into existing face-to-face courses is perplexing" [1]. A hybrid course instructor is in-between a traditional face to face instructor and a fully online instructor in terms of time and effort [2]. The dynamics of the course change when designing and implementing a hybrid course as the instructor decides the course activities that will take place online and in the classroom [2]. Therefore, "the instructor of a hybrid course needs to leverage effectiveness, engagement, and efficiency in designing a course that invites learner interaction," [5]. The development of the hybrid courses in the graduate program required a large amount of time. This commitment was in addition to the already existing teaching, service, and scholarly workloads of current faculty. Development stipends were provided. However, consistent with the research, stipends are not effective in changing the burden of learning on faculty with already existing time constraints [1]. Group training sessions and one on one development meetings proved useful for faculty in the creation of these hybrid courses.

Thirdly, the university had adopted a learning management system, however, during the MS-ENS program development, the need for a lecture capture system emerged. With half of the program's course content to be delivered online, faculty needed a system for videoing and capturing lectures for online postings. Pilot testing of two major systems was conducted during the development phase of the program. However, the final decision to adopt one system was not finalized until shortly before the program began. Not having the technology available presented a challenge in developing and completing courses prior to the start of the program. Interim systems were provided, however, the course development process was not completed until the actual adoption of the lecture capture system.

4. LESSONS LEARNED

Several key lessons can be learned from the development of this hybrid graduate program. First, successfully implementing a hybrid program requires support from faculty members, administrators, staff members, and support services [3]. Frequent meetings were held with university, college, and department representatives. Additionally, individuals from the admissions office, the graduate and continuing studies office, and the public information office were included. Gaining support and facilitating constant communication with all groups proved to be critical components of the successful program start.

Secondly, training is a key component of successfully implementing a hybrid program. Training is critical for both faculty and students in a blended learning environment [6]. As Napier explains, "proper training is absolutely necessary for a faculty member to transition from teaching traditional courses to a hybrid course," [7]. For example, many faculty respondents in a study by Kim and Bonk in 2006 reported they expected to receive training and support at the institutional level to prepare them for teaching online [4]. Workshops and certification courses that enabled faculty to learn the blended learning

technologies were a key component in the MS-ENS individual course development.

A teaching institute was offered the summer prior to course development to introduce the faculty to online course design and provide available resources on campus. The hybrid faculty met in groups several times to work on their individual courses. Each faculty member then presented their individual hybrid course design for feedback on the final meeting date for feedback. Student training in the form of orientation was provided prior to the start of the first course. This is a critical step, especially when the students are not familiar with the delivery platform. The orientation also included information on campus resources, where to go for assistance, and troubleshooting for any technology or log in issues.

The final lesson learned is that the program development process took much longer than anticipated. The initial steps involved seeking approval through the curriculum committee and other university committees. This process was more challenging than anticipated due to questions and discussions concerning the hybrid format and program structure. Course development also was slower than initially anticipated as both content hybrid delivery formats had to be developed for each course. As Banerjee explains, the challenges for faculty of technology mediated courses are: "finding the time, creating a balance between the expectations of the students, adhering to the prevailing culture of the college, and their own needs to experiment with new pedagogies" [1].

5. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations for others considering developing hybrid programs emerged from the development of this hybrid graduate program. First, the institutions must have "organizational readiness" and be prepared to provide support at all levels for successful implementation of hybrid programs and blended learning [3, 4, 8]. Thus, institutions need to consider how they will meet training needs prior to online teaching taking place. Frequent workshops to master the technology and an initial blended learning certification requirement are highly recommended. The blended learning certificate can be created and implemented within the institution or accessed from an existing organization from outside the university. Additionally, adequate resources and training for students should be available and accessible.

A second recommendation is to provide a system of peer mentorship for faculty as they begin the hybrid design and development process. This is especially critical in cases where faculty members do not have any online teaching or development experiences. Creating a blended learning community throughout the university would assist with linking experienced hybrid faculty to those who are learning the fundamentals of blended learning environments.

A final recommendation for hybrid program development is to estimate that the program development process will take longer than initially estimated. Additionally, anticipate delays in committee approval, concerns and questions from representatives across the institution, and other unexpected delays.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The development of a program in a hybrid format is an extensive and complex process. The process requires support from across the institution and from all levels of administrators, faculty, staff, and support services. With adequate time, resources, training and support, a hybrid graduate program can become an appropriate and successful format for nontraditional students.

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