Implementing Hybrid Education: Short-Term and Long-Term Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Implementation of any graduate program is a timely process. Hybrid education provides another layer of complexity when starting a program. Both short-term and long-term considerations are critical during the implementation phase. This paper will discuss the short-term considerations including faculty, communication, and resource availability. Long-term considerations presented include adaptability, continued communication, and continued allocation of resources. Lessons learned and future recommendations of implementing a hybrid delivered graduate program will be discussed.

Keywords: Hybrid education, communication, and resources

1. INTRODUCTION

Implementation of any graduate program requires extensive planning and time. Adding the hybrid component to a developing graduate program provides an additional level of understanding, knowledge, and resources. Short-term and long-term considerations of implementing a hybrid graduate program will be discussed throughout this paper. Also, lessons learned and future recommendations will be presented.

2. PROGRAM HISTORY

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 was first offered during the Summer 2014 term. The program can be completed in one calendar year and is offered using a hybrid model. The program is delivered using a hybrid model where students meet weekly on campus and complete other course requirements via an online format. This schedule is attractive to both full time students and fully employed practitioners in the field.

Nine of the twelve required courses are offered via hybrid delivery. The exercise and nutrition science laboratory techniques course is offered fully face to face during an intersession term. The remaining two courses include a practicum experience and a comprehensive exam. The program has a focus on experiential education both inside and outside of the classroom. Visiting instructors who are qualified experts in their field of study provide educational opportunities during scheduled courses and field experiences. The considerations, lessons learned, and recommendations presented below are a result of the implementation of this program [8].

3. SHORT-TERM CONSIDERATIONS

Short-term considerations with developing a hybrid graduate program include faculty, communication, and resource availability.

Faculty

The initial consideration of faculty is critical to developing a successful hybrid program. It is important to first consider how many faculty are involved in the hybrid education process. The other factor for assessing faculty is to determine the level of hybrid teaching experience and training needed. In the article on blended environments, Banergee 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," [2]. Faculty are time constrained at many smaller institutions and find difficulty in creating balance between student expectations, college culture, and new pedagogies [2].

Specifically in the MS-ENS program, the commitment to be involved in the program is in addition to the already existing teaching, service, and scholarly workloads of current faculty. Development stipends are an incentive and are provided to compensate faculty for development and approval of hybrid delivered courses. However, hybrid course development takes time. A portion of the time for development is dedicated to training. A New Teaching Institute (NTI) was established to provide a standard training module for all hybrid faculty. While this training continues to evolve, it has proved to be a positive experience for all individuals and groups involved. Group training sessions and one on one development meetings also proved useful.

Communication

Communication is a key component of both the short-term and long-term success of a hybrid program. Support and "buy in" from all levels at the University is critical. As explained by Kenney and Newcombe, "Successful implementation of a hybrid approach requires that many players in addition to individual faculty members be on board including colleges, departments, support services and infrastructure," [3]. Communicating the program background, purpose, design, and method of delivery is essential to gaining the needed support.

For the MS-ENS program developers, these key areas included the admissions office, the graduate and continuing studies office, and the public information office. Facilitating constant communication while gaining support was critical to the successful program start [8]. While the program began in the Summer of 2014, program development and fostering communication started at least a year in advance. Communication was maintained with these offices through scheduled meetings and program updates.

Resource Availability

Available resources for hybrid program development includes both training and support services. It is recommended to initially determine what resources and support already exist and then develop a resource plan.

A training and resource plan is critical for both faculty and students in a blended learning environment. As Napier explains, "proper training is absolutely necessary for a faculty member to transition from teaching traditional courses to a hybrid course" [6]. Also, successful course development is dependent on training the instructor on appropriate technologies. Options for teaching the technologies include a required workshop or certification for each hybrid faculty member [5]. The workshop could be administered online or in a face-to-face format. As indicated by Kenney and Newcombe, "online learning is best understood when instructors have a chance to engage in the experience themselves through online workshops conducted by qualified trainers," [3]. They also explain the importance of interacting with other participants during the online training. The training and learning process should be "collegial". Confidence increases, energy maximizes, and mistakes are minimal when working with and interacting with other faculty in the same process, [3]. Kenney also recommends organizing a blended learning support group with the university or other universities to provide peer support among faculty members [3].

Student resources and support services must also be available. College students in today's society are often tech savvy and want to assist with self-education [7]. However, the assumption should not exist that admitted students in a hybrid education program also have critical technology skills [4]. As Amrein-Beardsley et al. indicates, technology should not be an obstacle for students accessing course materials and resources [1]. The comfort level that students have with the learning technologies is key to their learning satisfaction [5]. Liu identifies several strategies for student learning comfort in a blended learning environment. These strategies include a student orientation with a combination of face-to-face and online components. The orientation concept creates a social space for the students and instructor, assists in students becoming familiar with the campus and program, and also allows for training of the learning management system [5]. Readily available assistance from the instructional technology departments is critical. Extended hours and walk-in hours at the student help-desk are important for assisting students [5].

The MS-ENS program requires students to attend a face to face orientation the week before classes begin. This graduate student orientation is presented by the Office of Graduate and Continuing Studies. The orientation provides information on campus resources and troubleshooting for any technology questions. Following the general orientation, each program presents a break out session to students. Ultimately, the resource availability and information has an impact on the success and comfort level of the students in the program. Additional training during the face-to-face class time and tutorials for students will assist in decreasing technology concerns and increasing student focus on course content [1].

For faculty training purposes in the MS-ENS program, the initial communication was with the Educational Technology office. Previously a stand-alone office, Educational Technology is now housed under the Center for Teaching and Learning. The training provides both consistency and quality in hybrid teaching and learning across the university. The Educational Technology office developed the NTI which is required of faculty who plan to teach online. Offered two to three times a year, this training provides faculty with an opportunity to learn the process of hybrid course development while at the same time working on their individual hybrid course. Over time the NTI training has evolved and includes face-to-face as well as online components. Time is allotted during the training for faculty interaction and feedback. Faculty and staff from the Educational Technology office facilitate the training and peer mentoring is a key component of the training modules. Following the training, individual assistance is encouraged if faculty have course specific questions.

4. LONG-TERM CONSIDERATIONS

Long-term considerations when developing a hybrid graduate program include adaptability, continued communication, and resource allocation.

Adaptability

Adaptability is a key consideration of implementing hybrid education. Successful hybrid programs require time and adjustments from university faculty and enrolled students in the program.

The MS-ENS program continues to evolve over time. Over the first four years of the program both faculty and students had to adapt to changes. For example, initially the program began with one section of each course being offered. Early in the semester it was determined that a class size of 50 graduate students produced too large of a course section for quality learning. The program began without the addition of any new faculty resources. The program faculty had to adapt while teaching the large course section during the first semester. Additionally, during the first year the program was delivered with current full-time faculty teaching overloads in addition to adjunct faculty who were hired for special topics and expertise courses [9]. Both students and faculty had to adapt for the first semester while changes were implemented for the next term.

Also, there was initial skepticism about hybrid delivered courses and programs across campus. Since the development of the first hybrid courses, support has continued in the hybrid teaching area. The MS-ENS program was the first fully hybrid program to be developed. Since the program start, a variety of other courses and programs have been developed. A process of reviewing hybrid courses is in place with the creation of a university standing committee called the Hybrid Course Review Committee. The committee includes a committee chair and a Hybrid Course Review Coordinator who coordinates the reviews of newly developed hybrid courses. The committee is comprised of faculty members who teach hybrid courses and also representatives from the Educational Technology and the Graduate and Continuing Studies offices [9].

Continued Communication

While initial communication is a short-term consideration, continued and consistent communication is critical for sustaining the hybrid program and curriculum. Maintaining communication with all involved departments across campus is important. For the MS-ENS program, communication has continued with the graduate advising office, graduate admissions, graduate and continuing studies, and other administrative offices. The program director is involved in the Graduate Council on campus. This interaction is with the Associate Dean of Graduate and Continuing Studies, the other graduate program directors in addition to the Dean of each of the four colleges on campus. The communication is important to provide consistency in graduate policy development across campus. Additionally, any graduate program concerns are discussed during these meetings. It is also important to have continued communication within the program. The ENS program faculty along with the department chair meet on a regular basis to discuss program changes. More frequent

communication is maintained through email and one on one meetings.

Resource Allocation

While resource availability is important in the short term, the allocation and sustainment of resources is critical as hybrid programs expand. Growth in program enrollment and technology requirements all need to be considered as resources are allocated.

Growing hybrid education includes increasing the number of courses and ultimately the number of programs offered in the blended learning format. Due to the time involved in training and developing, many institutions offer incentives for faculty to develop and teach hybrid courses. However, Banergee explains that often, "Expertise is limited, instructional designers are few and far between and although institutional support for online learning has increased, when support is available, it is in the form of stipends and course release," [2]. While monetary incentives are desirable, they are often ineffective because the burden of learning remains with overloaded faculty [2]. Faculty teaching in the MS-ENS program received a development stipend for each course once the course was completely developed and offered during the semester. While the stipend was attractive, this opportunity did not allow faculty any additional time. Growth in program enrollment requires additional faculty for teaching and additional funding for training faculty. Since the start of the Ms-ENS program, three new full time faculty positions have been added. The addition of these faculty members has provided consistency and expertise to the MS-ENS program.

Resources at the institutional level are necessary for growing and sustained hybrid program success. These resources include support in the form of instructional designers, support staff in the Educational Technology department, and also technology resources. The Educational Technology department has provided support to the Ms-ENS program since the inception. Additionally, in recent years a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has been developed. Currently, the discussion at the institutional level centers around how to add additional support staff in the Educational Technology department and how does this fit into the larger organization of the CTL. Also, technology resources including lecture capture systems and video capabilities need to be considered. These systems become an essential piece of hybrid course delivery, however, they are often expensive and require a license agreement.

5. LESSSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned considering development of a hybrid delivered graduate program are discussed below. First is that the program development process takes much longer than anticipated. Delays in development can occur at any stage of the development process. Curriculum committee approvals, lack of communication with the university, and the need for additional faculty training are all possible reasons as to slowing the development process.

Also, establishing a standing committee provides credibility to the hybrid course development process and course offerings. After establishing the committee, an organized system for hybrid course approval is critical. The HCRC was developed and utilized during the MS-ENS program implementation phase. The committee continues to be utilized for additional courses and program approvals across the university.

The next lesson learned is that training for new hybrid faculty is critical. The training needs to be consistent and available so that faculty can plan around their already full schedules of teaching, service, and scholarship.

Finally, feedback from students and faculty is helpful for program direction and future changes. Utilizing both formal and information feedback proves to be important for program success. It is necessary for program directors and program faculty to listen to concerns of students and also consider comments in student perception surveys following course delivery.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendation for the initial development and long-term implementation of a successful hybrid program.

Provide flexibility in the development process.
Continue enhancing training procedures.
Maintain consistent contact with all involved departments and offices.
Gain support from the institution for hybrid program support.
Establish a peer mentoring system for faculty.
Anticipate delays in the development process.

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