Implementing a Hybrid Graduate Program: Lessons Learned One Year Later

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ABSTRACT

Development of any graduate program is an extensive and timely process. Once the development phase is complete the program continues into the implementation phase. The implementation phase of a hybrid delivered program can present with many challenges. The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation and challenges of delivering a hybrid graduate program. This is a follow-up paper to "Developing a Hybrid Graduate Program," [4]. This follow-up will provide information from both a faculty and graduate student perspective. Challenges of implementation, lessons learned, and future program delivery recommendations will also be presented.

Keywords: Hybrid, implementation, and blended learning

1.   INTRODUCTION

The offering of degree programs in a blended learning format has become more popular in recent years. Following the initial development phase of a new program, a unique set of challenges is present during the implementation phase of a new program. Throughout this paper, examples from the University of Tampa Masters of Science in Exercise and Nutrition Science will be used to illustrate challenges, lessons learned and recommendations for hybrid program implementation.

2.   PROGRAM AND STUDENT DESCRIPTION

A variety of delivery options are available today for utilizing technology to deliver an educational program. With these delivery options, there is a wide variation of terminology that exists with regards to distance education. Terms including virtual, distributed, remote, blended, e-learning, web-enhanced, Internet-based, and hybrid are used throughout disciplines to describe delivery methods [1].

The University of Tampa offers a Masters of Science in Exercise and Nutrition Science (MS-ENS) program. The program is delivered with a hybrid format and allows students to complete the full program in one calendar year. The first cohort of students entered in the summer of 2014 and recently graduated in the summer 2015 term [4]. The challenges of implementation, lessons learned, and future program delivery recommendations are presented below. These implications are based on the experience of both faculty and students in this specific program delivery model. This information can also be generalized to academic programs in other content areas.

Program exit surveys were administered to all graduating students. Thirty-one graduate students including thirteen (42.0%) females and eighteen (58.0%) males completed the exit survey during the Summer 2015 program session. Of the students who completed the survey, 25 (81.0%) of them were between the ages of 22 and 30 years old. All graduated during the summer 2015 term. More than half (58.0%) of the students worked part-time and another 39.0% worked full time during their year in the MS-ENS program.

The majority of students were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with course availability (96.7%) and course quality (96.8%) in the program. When asked about faculty availability, 96.8% of the students were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'. However, only 10 (32.3%) of the students were 'very satisfied' and 21 (67.7%) of the students were 'satisfied' with faculty teaching. The majority of the students were 'very satisfied' with the availability of their advisor (64.5%) and the contact with their advisor (58.1%). Finally, most (64.5%) of the students were 'very satisfied' with the quality of advising they received while in the program.

When asked about their plans following graduation, students responded with a variety of answers. Twelve (38.7%) of the graduates indicated work in a related field and 6 (19.4%) indicated research or further graduate school following graduation. Two (6.4%) of the graduates were beginning related internships and 11 (35.5%) were in the process of looking for work but did not have definite plans. Graduates of the MS-ENS program were also asked about changes or suggestions for program improvement. These responses are presented throughout the remainder of this paper.

3. CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTATION

During the first year of the MS-ENS program, several challenges were encountered with program implementation. These major challenges included adaptation to a hybrid program delivery model, consistent communication and availability of resources.

First, adaptation to a hybrid delivered graduate program requires time and adjustments from the university faculty and students enrolled in the program. As mentioned in the article, "Developing a Hybrid Graduate Program" [4], The University of Tampa traditionally offers face to face courses. Therefore, there was initial skepticism from faculty on campus about a hybrid program format. In the year since the program started, the campus has seen a great amount of progress in supporting the hybrid teaching arena. The MS-ENS program is the first hybrid program offered on campus. There are new courses at the undergraduate level in addition to other hybrid graduate programs across campus under initial stages of development. Adaptations in place at the University level include consistently offering a New Teaching Institute to educate and train faculty members who are teaching hybrid courses. A stipend continues to be offered to faculty who develop and teach a hybrid course for the first time. A process has also been implemented for approval of hybrid courses through a university standing committee called the Hybrid Course Review Committee. Faculty members teaching hybrid courses along with representatives from Educational Technology and the Office of Graduate and Continuing Studies office are actively involved with the committee work. The committee includes a committee chair along with a Hybrid Course Review Coordinator who coordinates the reviews of newly developed hybrid courses. Demonstrations of hybrid courses from experienced faculty and presentations continue to take place throughout the academic year to educate and inform other faculty on campus.

Secondly, communication in several areas has proven to be a challenge of program implementation. Many departments and offices are involved across campus for a new graduate program, especially a newly delivered hybrid program. As implementation of the program was under way, maintaining communication with all offices involved including graduate advising, graduate admissions, and other administrative offices became a unique challenge. This also proved to be a critical component of the successful running and implementation of the MS-ENS program.

The final challenge of implementing a hybrid graduate program is resource availability. Resources can be in the form of technology, space, and faculty among others in a hybrid delivered program. Adequate technology and technology support is critical for a successful hybrid program implementation. As mentioned in, "Design and evaluation of two blended learning approaches: Lessons learned" [2; 3] one key factor in successful blended learning is determining course contents that are best delivered online versus a face to face format. Resources in the form of technology must be present to provide quality online content in hybrid learning environments. A lecture capture system made it possible for faculty to present course information in the appropriate format for course delivery. The adoption of a lecture capture system was finalized for the university and the MS-ENS program. However, this was not an official available resource until shortly before the start of the program. Since the adoption, faculty have used this resource as a method of course information delivery.

Space and faculty are also critical resources for the successful delivery of a hybrid program. When the MS-ENS program began, one section of each course was offered. It was quickly noticed that this produced too large of a course section for quality learning in a one year program. Locating a classroom space for almost 50 students in each course section was a challenge on a campus where the student to teacher ratio is consistently low. Additionally, the program was implemented initially without the addition of any new faculty resources. Therefore, asking faculty, both full-time and adjunct, to teach one large course section was a challenge. This led to a final challenge of lack of faculty resources. During the first year, the program was delivered via current full-time faculty teaching overload courses and the hiring of adjunct faculty for special topics and expertise courses.

4. LESSONS LEARNED

After the first full year of implementation, several lessons across multiple areas of the university were evident. First, the development of the Hybrid Course Review Committee (HCRC) as a standing university committee provided credibility to the offering of hybrid courses. An organized system for hybrid course approval has also proved beneficial in decreasing skepticism about the hybrid mode of delivery. While the committee members continue to educate individuals across campus, there has been an increase in support from both faculty and staff. The HCRC has also connected and worked with other entities on campus including the newly defined Center for Teaching and Learning. The course approval process and forms were developed over the entire 2014-2015 academic year. While time consuming, this proved to be a critical step in acceptance of hybrid courses and programs across many areas of the university.

Secondly, continued training for new hybrid faculty is a critical component of effective program delivery. The New Teaching Institute has been implemented and offered multiple times for faculty who are new to hybrid teaching. Since the start of the MS-ENS program, more interest has been shown from other faculty outside of the program who want to pursue hybrid course teaching and hybrid program development. A standard training protocol for any new hybrid faculty member has been set up and implemented. This has proven to be a positive learning experience for all individuals and groups involved. It is highly recommended to continue this training experience for consistency and quality in faculty development of hybrid teaching and learning.

Thirdly, feedback from graduating students and faculty can be extremely helpful for program direction and future implementation. While all of the MS-ENS students were informed of the hybrid program format, many still indicated on their graduate program exit survey the need to see their professors in a face to face environment. Formal feedback from students in the form of course evaluations and the program exit survey provided faculty opportunities for improvements and changes in their courses. Also, informal conversations with students throughout the year also provided insight into how the students felt about the program experience. It is important to understand both the student and the faculty view of how the program is delivered. While many students were positive about the online interaction, students also indicated they found the face

to face class time beneficial and critical to their learning experience.

5. FUTURE PROGRAM DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for continued program implementation and delivery can be taken from the exercise and nutrition science hybrid graduate program. The first is having the flexibility to change as program implementation occurs. The MS-ENS program administered a program exit survey to all graduating students. Based on feedback from this survey and informally from students, several changes were made to the program. One change suggested from multiple students was to move one intersession class to a full length semester session due to the depth and breadth of the class content. Based on the student and faculty feedback, this change was made and will be implemented during the current program cycle. Secondly, as mentioned above, the program began with one large section of each course. The MS-ENS program leadership quickly realized this format was inadequate for quality learning and made adjustments. Since the fall 2014 semester, two sections of each course have been offered.

It is highly recommended to continue the training procedures that are in place for new hybrid faculty who are pursuing hybrid course and program development. Also, refining the process of hybrid course approval is recommended. This will again assist in alleviating skepticism across campus from faculty who do not have a hybrid or blended learning environment background.

Finally, maintaining constant and consistent contact with all offices involved in the program development is critical in the implementation phase. Regular face to face meetings and communication via technology are helpful. There will continue to be unique circumstances and challenges as the MS-ENS program continues to grow and provide a quality hybrid educational experience to students.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Following the development phase of a program, the implementation phase of a hybrid delivered program will include challenges and learning opportunities. Regardless of a good plan for the program, there will always be unexpected challenges and unique circumstances that evolve. Having the flexibility to make changes as the program grows and utilize necessary resources will assist with growing a quality educational experience for students.

7. REFERENCES

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