

A Blended Learning Model for Graduate Business Education

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Abstract

A growing number of higher education institutions are exploring alternatives to traditional classroom teaching methodologies, with the temporal and geographic restrictions they present. While asynchronous and distance learning technologies address some of these restrictions, they present challenges of their own.

This article explores the implementation of a blended learning approach in an evening MBA program which utilizes traditional face-to-face classroom instruction alongside web-based instructional methodology. The use of a blended learning approach is examined in the context of the graduate program as a whole as well as the level of an individual course.

A variety of assessment results are presented to facilitate evaluation of the overall effectiveness of this program's blended learning approach to educational delivery as well as levels of student satisfaction with this particular program. This blended learning graduate program, established in July of 2000, was recently named one of the best MBA programs in the USA by the Princeton Review of US business

schools. Specific challenges in implementing this eLearning program are also discussed.

Introduction

Today's technology-rich environment offers a variety of education delivery models, ranging from traditional face-to-face instruction in a "brick-and-mortar" classroom setting to distance learning approaches in which class participants never meet face-to-face. There are a variety of choices available between these two extremes and a new lexicon of terminology is evolving alongside emerging technologies: e-learning, m-learning, e-mentoring, e-tutoring, web-based instruction, web-enhanced instruction, hybrid courses, blended learning models, etc.

In this paper, the term "blended learning" will be used in manner consistent with a widely-accepted definition by Heinze and Proctor: "Blended Learning is learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning, and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course." (Heinze & Procter, 2004).

This approach to education delivery is also known as a hybrid format, a web-

enhanced format, or a web-assisted format. It combines elements of face-to-face instruction with elements of distance teaching (Lorenzetti, 2004). In the case of the MBA courses described below, the online component is an integral part of the course itself, rather than merely an adjunct to or augmentation of a traditional course.

Graham Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, envisioned the emergence of a combination of online and resident instruction as "the [hybrid courses] single-greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today." (Young 2002.)

Institutional Background

Founded in 1889, Weber State University (WSU) is a multi-campus institution of higher learning based in the state of Utah, USA. The university offers 215 degree and certificate programs, including 6 Masters degree programs. The university and its school of business are fully accredited by the U.S. Northwest Association of Colleges and Schools and AACSB: the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. The current university enrollment is over 18,000 students.

WSU has been offering distance education using various modalities since the late 1960s. A variety of distance learning approaches have been utilized, including correspondence courses, remote classrooms with one-way and two-way video-conferencing capabilities, and online learning.

WSU was a pioneer in the field of online learning, using an in-house, customized online system to launch its online campus in 1997. In Spring of 1998, WSU shared first-place recipient status of the University Continuing Education Association Award for

Innovative Distance Learning (Eisler, Gardner, and Milner 1998.) By the year 2000, WSU Online offered 160 courses each semester with average enrollments reaching over 3,000 students per semester

Surprisingly, the vast majority of these online students were taking classes at one of the university's campuses at the same time as they were taking online classes. Given that WSU is a 'working-class' commuter campus and over half of our students work an average of 30 hours per week, it became apparent that students valued the convenience and flexibility of scheduling that online classes afforded.

WSU Online eventually outgrew the capabilities of its excellent but home-grown online system. The university eventually migrated its online courses to WebCT and currently uses the Blackboard/WebCT 4.0 Vista release.

MBA Blended Learning Model

WSU received approval to begin its Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree program beginning in the year 2000. While the WSU business school had been offering a Master of Accounting degree since 1987, this was its first opportunity to offer a general management graduate program.

As faculty and administrators considered how to best serve the community in establishing its new MBA program, several factors came under discussion. A major advantage was that, as a new program, there was considerable flexibility in designing the MBA courses, curriculum, and delivery system, without fighting the "status-quo." With limited faculty resources and a population of working adults as our intended target market, it was decided that MBA classes would be offered only in the evenings. The program was located and

classes offered at a branch of the campus that offered easiest access to our working student population.

One of the most important early decisions was how best to incorporate e-learning into our curriculum design. Most of the faculty who would be teaching in the new program were already teaching online classes at the undergraduate level, and were familiar with the opportunities and challenges of online learning. After extensive discussion, two of the possible alternative delivery systems were rejected: the alternatives of a 100% online program as well as a 100% in-class program. Lengthy discussions led to a decision to adopt a blended-learning approach to educational delivery, in the hopes of incorporating the best of online instructional technologies as well as the best of face-to-face, in class interactions.

Program Structure and Design

WSU's MBA classes have been structured with approximately one half of the instruction delivered in a conventional classroom setting and the other half through online technology. Each course meets one evening per week over a period of eight weeks.

Over the same eight-week period, students engage in a variety of concurrent online learning activities consistent with the course objectives, such as online discussions, online chat, group project boards, online research tools, online quizzes and examinations, etc.

The MBA program's state-of-the-art classrooms are equipped with white boards as well as computer projection systems. Faculty can bring laptops or can use a computer that is already linked with the classroom's audio-visual technology. The

building and its classrooms offer secure Wi-Fi connections for students, faculty, and staff. A dedicated MBA computer lab was established to serve the graduate students in the program.

MBA courses are grouped into three categories: "foundations" courses for students entering without undergraduate degrees in business, "required" courses that all MBA students must take, and "elective" courses from which MBA students may choose. The comprehensive range of courses offered cover all of the areas required to maintain the business school's AACSB accreditation at the graduate level.

Because the university devotes all of its MBA resources to the evening program, it can offer required MBA courses twice each year, with foundation and elective courses available once each year. Courses are offered Monday through Thursday evenings on a year-round basis.

Students can enter the program on a year-round basis and attend full time (2 classes each 8 weeks) or part time (1 class each 8 weeks) as they choose. Students are free to move back and forth from part-time to full-time based on their work and family commitments. In the event of an extended absence due to family or work commitments, students can "stop out" for one or more 8 week terms and resume their studies upon their return.

Course Example

MBA students typically begin their graduate studies with a course entitled "Tools for the Effective Manager." Part of the course description is as follows: "This course is designed to be taken at the beginning of formal course work in the MBA program. Students will explore various aspects of moral reasoning and apply these

concepts to common ethical issues faced in business. Students in this course will be introduced to analytical, communication, and technological tools used throughout the program.”

Course sessions make use of several guest speakers, including a former vice-president of Nike who speaks about teamwork, a former business professor and university president who addresses issues on networking and career development, and a former business dean and university provost who discusses issues around leadership styles. Students work in small groups to discuss ethics cases and to explore aspects of psychological type, based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator administered in class.

Online work includes discussion of ethics readings and cases. This provides students with ample time to read and reflect on various real-world ethical dilemmas faced by managers in the workplace. Students post their comments in an asynchronous online discussion, and have the ability to comment on the comments of others. This allows the small-group weekly discussions of ethical issues and cases to continue throughout the following week.

Students have had the option of completing a group project or conducting an executive interview as part of the course requirement. Those who complete the group project can communicate with one another using online discussion tools, with a separate area for discussion postings available for each team. Students complete a comprehensive final exam using ChiTester, the university’s computerized testing software.

Program Results: Growth

The WSU MBA program has grown from an entering class of 40 students in July

2000 to over 220 students in 2007. We have an applicant acceptance rate of approximately 70% and have seen our average incoming Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) score increase from 530 to over 580 during that period.

In 2000, our MBA program consisted of 12 classes, all of which were taught using the blended-learning approach described above. We now offer 25 MBA blended-learning MBA courses along with a “study-abroad” MBA field experience course. In recent years, groups of our MBA students have visited Cuba, Europe, Mexico, and China.

Program Results: Learning Outcomes

Numerous assessment measures were put into place at the inception of the MBA program. Current assessment measures include MBA-specific course evaluations, graduate exit surveys and exit interviews, annual student focus groups, student employment interest surveys, exit employment surveys, embedded course assignments and examinations, and standardized testing using the Educational Testing Service (ETS) MBA Major Field Exam.

All graduating MBA students take the Educational Testing Service’s MBA Major Field Exam. The ETS MBA Major Field Exam provides an overall composite score for each student as well as details on their performance in five areas: Marketing, Management, Finance, Managerial Accounting, and Strategic Integration. WSU MBA students were in the pilot group that first began using the exam in 2002.

Our MBA student’s overall ETS class scores have ranged from the 80th percentile (top 20% in the USA) to the 99th percentile at the high end (top 1% in the USA). We believe that this consistently high level of

performance validates our blended learning instructional model and serves as evidence of the quality of our MBA program and its graduates.

Program Results: Student Satisfaction

During the 2006-07 academic year, MBA students were invited to rate their satisfaction with the quality of their education, instructors, student life, career services, and other measures of student satisfaction. The anonymous online survey was conducted by the Princeton Review. Based in part on student satisfaction scores collected from over 19,000 students, the WSU MBA program was named one of the Top 290 Business Schools by the Princeton Review. While the 2008 report does not provide a specific ranking of the business schools overall, our listing based on the Princeton Review's external review of MBA student satisfaction data is encouraging.

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges faced in delivering an MBA using a blended learning approach has been preparation of the eLearning component. Although all but two of the courses are taught by full-time university faculty, there is some turnover in the faculty teaching in the program. New faculty typically need to be trained in WebCT and determine how best to deliver various components of the course. Other challenges include maintenance of online learning quality standards and embedded course-specific assessments to insure that quality expectations are achieved.

Concluding Remarks

The WSU MBA program recently underwent a program review through the Utah State Board of Regents. The findings of the independent review team were mostly

positive, with some concerns noted regarding the rate of program growth relative to current faculty resources. The review team noted the high level of student satisfaction with the blended-learning approach used in the MBA program, along with high levels of student performance on the annual standardized ETS MBA Major Field Exams.

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