D

istance learning, once synonymous with correspondence study, has been transformed by the Internet, with innovative faculty and “new” students the primary drivers of that change. Traditional, campus-based institutions have expanded their divisions of extended study and continuing education to include this new delivery system, or they have initiated new entities to offer these learning opportunities. This research study focuses on just those efforts, systematically analyzing the challenges of organizing and implementing Web-based distance learning. Institutions initiating new efforts and those expanding or auditing their current programs will profit from this analysis. Similarly, as institutions plan to expand their Web-based activities to blended courses and programs to reach new audiences, to supplement brick-and-mortar capacity, or to modify classroom delivery, this in-depth study will prove useful.

With this study, the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) continues to respond to the interests of its subscribers, as well as to those signaled by the general EDUCAUSE membership, by presenting this analysis of the support for Web-based distance learning. ECAR was established to serve those interests by creating research to support decision making by users and managers of information technologies in higher education. This study, in the spirit of those on outsourcing, wireless technologies, and enterprise resource planning, provides readers with examples, guidelines, strategies, and tactics for improving institutional efforts in critical areas. In this instance, the study reflects the growing criticality of Web-based learning and draws on the experience of many institutions to suggest appropriate structures and tactics for supporting that delivery system.

ECAR supports its mission through a research agenda and symposia intended to convene researchers and practitioners for the consideration of significant topics. ECAR research includes

- research bulletins—biweekly executive analytic treatments of management and technology issues;
- case studies—detailed analyses of campus-based activities designed to offer insight into decision processes, pitfalls, and effective practices; and
- research studies—substantial and rigorous analyses of problems and technologies of enduring interest.
This study reflects ECAR research on the strategies for supporting off-campus growth through Web-based distance learning.

ECAR has sought prominent and effective research organizations and individuals to address the problems of interest to higher education administrators and executives. Eduventures surfaced as one of these research organizations, with particular expertise in the analysis of new initiatives in higher education. Their analysts track the beginnings and growth of new institutions and spin-off entities while monitoring growth areas in education. They particularly track and analyze financial patterns, population shifts and growth, and institutional strategies to support growth and financial success. Their many reports issued to their own clientele reflect very broad contact with institutions and vendors in the higher education segment.

**Methodology**

The current study’s methodology differs somewhat from that of other ECAR studies. Rather than relying on a broad survey of distance-learning practices—a familiar methodology, particularly in this subject area—this study is based on qualitative studies of practices at a significant number of institutions. Interviews rather than surveys were used to determine the strategies and tactics that characterized the institutions’ (mostly) successful efforts. Interviews for the case studies typically involved several people at each institution. In addition, analysts relied on discussions with people from industry to confirm interview information as well as to provide outside views concerning the success of the various programs the study examines. The result is a study with a very substantial emphasis on qualitative factors: what works in the institutions, what processes and tactics lead to successful programs, and how institutions can avoid the factors that led to some very well known collapses of virtual-learning initiatives.

This study does not, of course, deal with the drivers of the new distance learning: students and faculty. To succeed, leaders of Web-based distance-learning programs must recognize that supporting the faculty who deliver these programs with incentives and adequate technology, and providing services to the students who are the ultimate consumers of these offerings is essential. To properly support off-campus Web-based learning, institutions must recognize that the current learning environment is far more dependent on managing faculty and serving students than in the past. The success of the University of Phoenix, no more than that of the University of Central Florida or the Penn State World Campus, rests on that recognition.

Off-campus Web-based learning requires structural, financial, and political support, all aimed at moving the institution forward within its mission and in ways attractive to the primary constituencies. This study helps us understand how to achieve these goals.

**Growth through Web-Based Learning**

For many institutions, from small community colleges to large universities, Web-based learning represents the fastest area of growth. But not every institution has initiated a successful program, modified its video-based program to online learning, or transformed a division of continuing education into an online learning unit. Effective growth in quality, integrity, or revenue requires significant planning and monitoring. During interviews with nearly 40 institutions chosen to reflect the diversity of such off-campus programs, the strategies for maximizing distance-learning opportunities became clear. The interviews revealed the
Strategic Considerations and the Internal Competencies Required for Success

Although four strategic considerations—mission, financial goals, market reach, and brand—are significant, a thorough understanding of the mission and its extension to new audiences is the key to success. When institutional leaders foster an understanding of the mission and consider technology as a way to expand that mission to other areas, audiences, or markets, the institution’s identity is preserved. Institutions that depart from their mission to seek other markets often find themselves without support either inside or outside.

The study clearly suggests successful strategies for achieving financial goals, market reach, and brand. Such enterprises, whether publicly funded, cash funded, or supported by some combination of the two, still require both capital funding to begin and operating funds to survive. The case studies and other interviews confirm the need for ingenuity, innovation, and careful business plans. The analysis rightly focuses on successes rather than failures, but it is clear that those few institutions that saw Web-based programs primarily as an opportunity for significant new revenue often had little or no experience with such entrepreneurial activity. As with an absence of mission clarity, a disregard for the functions and capabilities of the traditional institution has led to some failures.

Market reach and brand are additional elements of success. Not surprisingly, recognizing the value of the traditional market and brand can lead to success with new programs and new students.

Beyond the strategic considerations lie the institutional capabilities for implementing those strategies. The various factors are familiar, although implementation requires not only leadership skills but also support from within the institution. The interviews and case studies show that such buy-in or sponsorship is a necessity. For example, one of the case studies is an institution in which extension of the mission includes overall faculty participation. In another case study, the conflict between on-campus faculty in the residential program and faculty involved in off-campus work may become a serious problem.

Organization models offer alternatives to placing the off-campus entity within the institutional structure. The alternatives rest on more than mere organizational shuffling, because leadership and financial issues alone may determine what is possible. Faculty culture and participation may also determine what model is acceptable or advantageous. Those who have followed the fate of some well-known examples of distance-learning initiatives can name the enterprises that dissolved because of faculty issues.

While governance in the academy is changing, in many institutions faculty participation in decision making hasn’t changed significantly. In those institutions, matters of mission, budget, leadership, and curricular oversight rest in no small measure upon faculty support.

Acknowledgments

This ECAR study of the strategies for supporting off-campus growth through Web-based learning is the result of collaboration between ECAR (Richard Katz, Diana Oblinger, and myself) and Eduventures, a leading independent research organization dedicated to the coverage and service of learning markets. Eduventures specializes in emerging trends and key industry metrics and provides research, advisory services, and conferences to clients. The Eduventures team was led by Adam Newman, director of the research group, with significant participation from Sean Gallagher, analyst, and Abigail Callahan, director and senior ana-
lyst. The Eduventures team provides a highly informed view of the world of higher education and thoughtful analyses of what leads to quantitative success. Their strong relationship with institutional leaders facilitated the interviews that form the backbone of this research study.

Many participating institutions and corporations must be acknowledged for their willingness to share their time and information. The academic community can often be characterized by its willingness to share information that benefits not only other institutions but also students. Our friends at corporations supporting the move to Web-based education have been no less generous with their time. Many of the individuals listed in Appendix A were willing to describe the successes and problems they encountered so that others might benefit.

The EDUCAUSE staff continues to support ECAR in every way. The extent of that support properly varies with the type of research and study, but the staff’s willingness to stand ready to help those of us in ECAR to fulfill our mission never varies. In this instance that support has been primarily in the production of the final version of the study. Their counsel and advice, as well as their expertise, contributed immensely to making this work available to our readers.

Robert C. Albrecht