Web-based distance learning has evolved to a point where those operating or contemplating such programs can profit from the experience of its early adopters and practitioners. This study uses as its basis the experiences of institutions—community colleges, large research universities, state/regional systems, and elite private institutions—that have actively pursued Web-based distance-learning initiatives. In doing so, it identifies the key elements required to develop a viable distance-learning program. For those institutions considering how best to approach distance learning, the following analysis furnishes invaluable lessons to help launch a strong program.

This study also serves as a tool for institutions that have already established a Web-based distance-learning program. It will help them audit existing program successes and challenges, and highlight pertinent issues that can be managed more effectively. For these institutions, the experiences of profiled institutions, including Pennsylvania State University, Nova Southeastern University, Dallas Community College, and Regis University, should furnish valuable insights into distance-learning strategies.

Learning to Benefit from Technological Innovation

The 1990s was a period of rich technological change and innovation that affected organizations both large and small. For many businesses, the ability to survive depends in part on their capacity for managing change at multiple levels, from shifts in industry and market dynamics to incorporation of new technology and innovations that redefine the traditional products and services landscape (see Figure 3-1).
For most private and public higher education institutions, the issue is less about survival than about capitalizing on new opportunities to serve students more effectively. Within the higher education community, however, such challenges and opportunities manifest themselves differently, and with varying degrees of urgency, depending on the type of institution. For community colleges grappling with reduced state funding, rapidly growing enrollments, and physical infrastructure constraints, Web-based distance education has been a critical factor. Institutions such as Portland Community College and, in California, Santa Barbara Community College have found that it can help them meet their community service mission. To maximize opportunity and their value to the community, these institutions had to develop strategies and competencies for managing change quickly, and they leveraged technology to do so. Larger public institutions, such as Penn State, the University of Central Florida, and Ohio State University, also moved quickly to the Web to fulfill regional and state mandates integral to their missions.

At many universities, distance-learning technologies initially gained traction in the form of course supplements rather than fully online courses and programs. For these institutions, the early opportunity focused on serving current students on campus rather than prospective students off campus.

The emergence of interactive, Web-based technologies during the latter half of the 1990s transformed the way some higher education institutions serve students. College and university leaders and faculty found themselves facing important decisions concerning the role of Web-based distance learning at their institutions, particularly as e-learning mushroomed from a collection of isolated experiments by tech-savvy professors and departments to a more central element of an institution’s strategic direction.

This environment has driven individual institutions to consider Web-based distance-learning programs for various reasons. Increased competition in the postsecondary market has certainly played a role for some, and distance learning represents an innovative way for these institutions to capture market share and expand their reach to new markets. The desire to explore new pedagogical strategies and techniques, encouragement and/or pressure from boards of trustees, and emphasis on a community and working-adult service mission are key factors driving institutions to develop Web-based distance-learning programs.
Table 3-1 highlights a set of catalyzing events and/or issues that led postsecondary institutions to initiate Web-based programs. These catalysts represent the primary factors driving an institution’s decision making and should be distinguished from secondary and tertiary influences surrounding Web-based distance-learning efforts.

For many institutions, multiple factors often converge to prompt Web-based initiatives, and the catalysts themselves offer leaders insights into the program model(s) that should prove most effective. For example, interviews with postsecondary institutions suggest that institutions seeking to counter declining enrollments initially find the greatest return by offering existing programs to prospective students in new markets. Similarly, institutions with a long tradition of providing distance-education programs, such as Regis University and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), recognize that they need to build a scalable Web-based education model to support significant numbers of students (more than 15,000 students). With either model, Web-based distance-learning catalysts play a key role in establishing a context for institutional efforts.

**Distance Learning Extends Institutional Mission**

The concept of Web-based distance learning as the most recent innovation in a long line of educational technologies is critical to thinking about how best to structure a distance-learning program. Ultimately, by leveraging any one of a multitude of delivery media, any institution can develop a successful distance-learning initiative. However, it is important to use a deliberate process to identify and agree on clear goals and objectives, and then use them to drive the program’s business model.

Web-based distance learning should be viewed simply as an extension of the institution’s core mission—developing and applying the best pedagogies to educate students. It should extend the institution’s ability to achieve its mission by incorporating evolving and emerging trends and tech-
nological innovations. Web-based distance learning should be an extension of the institution’s faculty-led, campus-based teaching efforts. A key outcome of this mission extension will be a coordinated effort that integrates Web-based distance learning into the campus-based education program. Adopting and applying new technologies to enhance institutional mission is a trademark of successful organizations—a common practice across all markets and industries. For institutions with a history of providing distance learning, Web-based distance learning is simply a new way to serve an existing student base.

**Case in Brief**

At Regis University, the seeds for the institution’s current Web-based distance-learning programs were sown in the early 1970s when the university established its first extension campus sites. During the following 25-plus years, Regis employed emerging, innovative technologies to reach students. These technologies included videocassettes and, through a partnership with Jones Cable, cable television. When the university’s School for Professional Studies discovered the opportunities available with Web-based technologies, the school followed the technology’s evolution and converted its technology-enabled distance-learning programs to the Web.

Institutions that have not been particularly active in distance learning may find it challenging to lay the institutional foundation for a successful Web-based distance-learning program. In these cases, an institution’s strategic planning efforts play a critical role in ensuring that the program developed fits the institution’s overall objectives and capabilities.

**Designing an Appropriate Program**

Developing and managing a successful distance-learning program requires a tiered decision-making process, as illustrated in Figure 3-2. Institutional leaders initially need to agree on critical strategic issues. Then, after evaluating a series of execution-oriented questions that address internal capabilities, they’re ready to focus on the operations of the distance-learning initiative. This process leads to the development of an action plan and a series of discrete activities to drive program implementation and launch.

Most importantly, the set of issues and decisions highlighted in Figure 3-2 should not be perceived as a one-time activity completed by a core group of senior administrators and faculty to launch an institution’s Web-based distance-learning program. Rather, it provides a framework for regular evaluation to ensure that online efforts remain aligned with the critical strategic factors influencing and directing university policy and practice.

**Creating a Distance-Learning Strategy**

Four principal strategic considerations—vision/mission, financial goals, market reach, and brand—are critical in laying the foundation for Web-based distance-learning success. Institutions must address these issues not only during program launch but also at regular intervals to ensure their continued relevance. Below, we consider each one separately.
Vision/Mission
Establishing a link between an institution’s vision/mission and its implementation of a Web-based distance-learning program is the most critical factor for ensuring program success. This link can take many forms, ranging from a presidential address to the university community, to a strategic planning document explicitly highlighting connections between online learning and the institution’s mission statement. For some institutions, serving a local and/or regional community by making educational programs broadly and easily available online functions as an extension of the college’s or university’s fundamental mission and the necessary link for the organization to further commit itself to distance-learning initiatives.

Case in Brief
Implementing online programs to reach the local community is a logical extension of community colleges’ core mission: to provide educational services and workforce development to a vast array of prospective students. Johnson County Community College, based in Overland Park, Kansas, aims to make all of its courses available in an online format within the next three to five years to support the institution’s enrollment growth in both credit and continuing education programs. In general, the college wants to improve the accessibility and flexibility of academic programs and services to students. The college believes that Web-based distance education will enhance its ability to meet its community’s education
and professional development needs and thereby fulfill a key element of its institutional mission.

Regardless of the catalyst, an institution needs a common understanding of distance learning’s importance in fulfilling core objectives, and communicating that vision across the enterprise is critical to establishing an appropriate operational structure. Senior administrators, cross-functional university committees, faculty advocates, or any combination of individuals involved in the consideration and application of Web-based technologies can create awareness and support for Web-based distance learning.

Analysis of notable Web-based distance-learning programs that have struggled often reveals that the connection between the distance-learning initiatives and the institutional mission is tenuous or poorly articulated by senior administrators, faculty leaders, and other key decision makers. Moreover, certain types of institutions may need to admit (to themselves, initially) that alignment between their institutional mission and Web-based programs is not plausible. For highly selective colleges and universities, which serve a traditional, residential student body, Web-based initiatives are more likely to take the form of on-campus course supplements than market-expanding online programs.

Beyond simply linking the institutional mission/vision with a Web-based distance-learning strategy, colleges and universities need to establish a clear vision and a set of expectations for the program itself. The remaining strategic considerations address developing objectives for the distance-learning initiative.

Financial Goals

Nearly every successful business model is predicated on a sound financial model, as the demise of dot-com ventures reminded investors and business executives. An institution’s distance-learning program, like the extension of a business line, requires a commitment to clear financial objectives. This applies to institutions transitioning programs from one distance-learning technology to another (for example, from satellite television to the Web) as well as to those with limited distance-learning experience. For institutions in the latter group, a Web-based program often represents an entirely new “business,” which makes the rationale for establishing an explicit financial model prior to launch even more compelling.

Moreover, the financial goals of the distance-learning initiatives play a key role in informing the operating model an institution will employ. If the institutional goal is to establish a for-profit entity with the hope of perhaps one day completing an initial public offering (for example, New York University’s NYUonline, Columbia University’s Fathom, and University of Maryland University College’s for-profit venture, UMUC Online), the distance-learning program will require a significantly different operating structure than a program launched to enhance accessibility to courses for a local working-adult population. Establishing a business structure that enables an institution to achieve its financial goals is a fundamental challenge and can require innovative thinking that tests the university’s traditional operating philosophy. Ultimately, to be successful, the model that fits with the program’s financial goals must also align with the institution’s mission/vision.

Case in Brief

Fathom Knowledge Network, a for-profit business backed by Columbia University, illustrates the difficulties of aligning for-profit programs and goals with a university’s overall objectives, financial structure, and risk tolerance. Because it draws content from a
consortium of educational and cultural institutions, Fathom is finding it difficult to bridge the gap between the goals and objectives of those institutions and the business requirements of the for-profit model. Faced with these constraints and tied to the objectives of the backing institutions, Fathom has struggled to independently identify and pursue the best business path.

Regardless of the financial objectives of an institution’s Web-based distance-learning efforts, the business plan must reflect a revenue model that investors (board of trustees), decision makers (president, provost, CIO, academic computing leaders, and distance-learning dean), and program participants agree to and sign off on. In all cases, this should include a frank discussion of the time frame required for the institution’s return on its program investment.

Market Reach

The most significant mistake in Web-based distance-learning ventures is assuming that simply because a program is developed, students will come. A root cause of many distance-learning program failures is a poor understanding of the real, as opposed to the perceived, market opportunity. As with any mission, business-line extension, or new business venture, institutions must conduct market research to ascertain the addressable market. NYUonline is one example of an initiative that overestimated the market potential for its online programs, creating unrealistic expectations and ultimately unattainable goals and objectives. Identifying a specific market, as highlighted in the case studies of Penn State, Nova Southeastern, and Cornell University, will enable an institution to conduct market analysis, understand the needs of the space, and design a distance-learning program accordingly.

Case in Brief

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) recognized the importance of conducting market research before launching a Web-based distance-learning program. Institutional leaders knew they needed to focus their offerings by taking into account the competitive landscape and identifying specific market niches in which the institution could deliver a distinctive online solution. RIT conducted market research to determine which of its competencies would attract students in a Web-based format, fully recognizing that other online programs would be competing head-to-head with RIT for students within various academic disciplines. By considering the reach and target of its programs vis-à-vis competitive offerings, RIT believes it has increased its chances for success.

Determining whom to serve with Web-based programs can be a complicated and multilayered challenge. One strategy for framing the issues is to view the various opportunities through the lens of a basic market tool, as shown in Figure 3-3. Using this tool will help institutions address the fundamental strategic issue of whether Web-based distance learning is an avenue for serving existing students with an innovative offering (same market, new program).

Figure 3-3. Market Expansion Framework
or an opportunity to deliver existing offerings to a previously underserved and/or unreachable student population (new market, same program). Institutions should resist the initial temptation to develop a new program for a new market, a strategy that can take an institution into an area with little connection to its core competencies.

Reputation and Brand
For a segment of the higher education community, institutional reputation and brand considerations are of paramount importance in evaluating Web-based distance learning. Some elite private institutions find themselves struggling to reconcile Web-based distance-learning opportunities with the risk of diluting a brand predicated on selectivity and scarcity. The need to protect and/or closely manage the institutional image limits the operational scope of a distance-learning program and affects the operational model itself. Nevertheless, colleges and universities can leverage strong institutional and/or program brand recognition as a cornerstone of Web-based distance-learning success.

Cases in Brief
As a for-profit spin-off of Cornell University, eCornell cites the strong brand recognition of its parent institution’s schools—the School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the School of Hotel Administration—as a key factor in the success of its online certificate programs.

Bismarck State College, one of 11 schools that make up the North Dakota state system, has parlayed its well-respected programs in power/process plant technology and electric power technology into a robust online education program. Bismarck’s online degree-granting program has quickly become the leading Web-based option for the U.S. energy industry, predicated in part on the strength of the college’s traditional face-to-face program.

Most importantly, senior administrators and key decision makers should recognize that strong reputations are not the exclusive province of elite institutions, especially at the level of specific academic programs. A community college or midsized public institution may possess as powerful a brand appeal on a local or regional level as the so-called medallion institutions have on a national or international level. Institutions of any size and competitive standing may be able to leverage their reputation to increase enrollments through Web-based programs.

Creating a Roadmap
Senior administrators and other institutional decision makers must make a commitment to evaluate Web-based distance-learning efforts within the context of the four strategic considerations just discussed. There are no right or wrong answers. Across the spectrum of each dimension—mission/vision, financial goals, market reach, and brand—there are many options for institutions seeking to structure an effective distance-learning program. In fact, it is imperative that each institution craft its own solution, one that accounts for the key dynamics and issues on campus.

The first step in establishing consistent institutional Web-based distance-learning goals and objectives is to be explicit about each of the strategic considerations. The result will be a roadmap that will determine the path of the institution’s distance-learning initiative and guide the establishment of operational processes and execution plans. For those institutions managing existing programs, assessing the four critical factors will ensure that the Web-based distance-learning program is viewed and applied consistently across the organization.
Assessing Internal Competencies

Examining a distance-learning program in terms of the four strategic considerations enables institutions to outline a set of high-level program objectives that will have to win institutional support. Reviewing next the issues of implementation will help colleges and universities determine whether they are prepared to act on their vision.

There are six operating areas to evaluate prior to launching a Web-based distance-learning program: leadership/management, capital financing, technology management, marketing, partnership ability, and institutional flexibility. Evaluating these factors helps reveal the execution details instrumental in driving a successful implementation. This evaluation and audit of key institutional competencies is the second step in the tiered decision-making process shown in Figure 3-2. At this point, the organization begins to shift from strategy development to program plan and execution.

Leadership/Management

Colleges and universities should pay particular attention to the caliber and quality of their Web-based distance-learning leadership and management team. Distance-learning leaders, be they administrators, department chairs, or faculty members, play a pivotal role in validating an institution’s online efforts. Key attributes of successful leaders include the ability to

◆ foster program support and commitment across the institution;
◆ mold a Web-based distance-learning program that capitalizes on the institutional culture and vision;
◆ develop an entrepreneurial spirit around Web-based initiatives; and
◆ build a strong staff and program structure that earns the confidence of faculty, administrators, and other partners.

Leaders must also address the four strategic considerations and build support for institutional decisions among administrators, faculty, and staff. These efforts most often succeed when leaders incorporate key university constituencies in the evaluation of the strategic considerations. Eastern Oregon University and eCornell, two organizations highlighted later in this study, both cited the distance-learning organization’s leadership as essential to their success.

Financing

One myth about Web-based distance learning is that it is not as capital intensive as other strategies for extending an institution’s reach. Most colleges and universities maintain a sizable physical plant that requires ongoing maintenance and repair. The initial cost and constant maintenance and support of the distance-learning infrastructure also represents a significant capital expense. Therefore, determining both the amount of start-up capital available for the program and the institution’s access to funding for annual and/or future program needs will influence the program’s structure and scale.

A college- or university-wide distance-learning initiative that delivers multiple certificate and degree programs to a regional audience will have different faculty development, course production, student services, and infrastructure implications—and therefore costs—than a single department or school initiative. At Nova Southeastern, senior administrators developed a rigorous business plan evaluation process with heavy emphasis on accounting for the costs, projected enrollments/revenues, and break-even time frame for prospective online programs.

Technology Management

Technology considerations for managing online courses and programs grow exponen-
Partnership Ability

Previous partnership experience and an institution’s willingness to develop new partnerships with other organizations can figure prominently in driving Web-based distance-learning success. It isn’t necessary, or even recommended, that an institution manage every aspect of a distance-learning program internally. Partnering with technology vendors, service providers, content providers, and consultants can relieve some of the program execution burden. Some firms, for example, work with a host of public and private institutions to provide services ranging from complete outsourcing of distance-learning program development and management to more targeted services such as content development and help desk solutions.

In addition, distance-learning leaders will have to partner internally by working closely with schools and colleges, academic and administrative deans, and faculty members to support content and program development, new business processes, and so on. Institutions should assess their partnering proclivities as a prelude to gauging their potential success in managing the complex web of relationships that constitute an online initiative. Regis University’s experience with Bisk Education represents one type of successful partnership, while Penn State’s World Campus offers an example of effective intra-institutional partnering.

Institutional and Faculty Flexibility

The best-laid distance-learning plans can go awry if the institution doesn’t have the capacity to accept and adapt to change. A Web-based distance-learning initiative can be a threatening prospect to individuals and constituencies across the enterprise. Colleges and universities must demonstrate their flexibility through a willingness to com-
mit the necessary resources for online learning and to gain faculty members’ acceptance and support for Web-based initiatives.

As a Web-based distance-learning pilot or college-specific program expands beyond its initial scope, the institution must be willing to allocate sufficient human, financial, and technical resources to support program growth. Equally important, an institution may need to simultaneously build out and integrate new service organizations to match the rapid scaling of its Web-based efforts. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), to manage the growth of the university’s online learning efforts, senior academic and IT administrators established a center for distributed learning, a research initiative for teaching effectiveness, and a course development and Web services unit. UCF’s willingness and preparedness to establish these units played a key role in the success of the institution’s on-campus and distance-learning Web-based programs.

Support from an institution’s administrators, faculty, staff, and board is critical for launching a distance-learning program. Gaining the commitment of these groups and marketing the program across the institution is an ongoing process. Institutional leaders must carefully and honestly assess the faculty’s acceptance of Web-based distance learning as a credible instructional modality. At most institutions, faculty play a critical role in providing the intellectual capital required for Web-based programs—that is, course content, quality assurance, and often course delivery (teaching time and energy). Ensuring the faculty’s willingness to support the program, contribute scarce time and resources, and adapt to a new style of teaching and learning is important. Respected early online distance-learning champions and innovators often convince skeptical colleagues of online education’s merits and opportunities. Antagonistic faculty members can present serious obstacles to the success of Web-based initiatives, and institutions must be prepared to address this issue. The profile of Eastern Oregon University in the latter half of this study discusses specific strategies for rewarding and involving faculty in Web-based distance learning.

**Organizational Models**

Using the strategic considerations and operational areas to develop a set of guidelines makes an institution aware of its strengths while revealing potential challenges. With this process complete, the stage is set for determining which business model is appropriate for the distance-learning program.

Among the hundreds of initiatives launched by colleges and universities, four primary models have emerged for designing the relationship between an institution and its Web-based distance-learning program. The core benefits and challenges associated with these models apply to all institutions, even as individual colleges and universities modify these generic models to meet their specific needs and environmental issues.¹

**Model 1: Distance-Learning Division**

In this model, shown in Figure 3-4, the distance-learning (or continuing education) program is treated as its own cost center.

![Figure 3-4. Distance-Learning-Division Model](image-url)
and has indirect links to the institution’s academic units. The distance-learning unit works directly with the schools and academic departments to develop courses, and it manages many of the infrastructure, student services, and technology issues. Traditionally, course content and quality assurance remain the responsibility of the academic departments. Institutional examples include Eastern Oregon, Penn State, and Bismarck State College.

Benefits
- The institution creates a degree of autonomy for the distance-learning unit while retaining oversight of Web-based efforts.
- The unit creates a focal point for coordinating enterprise-wide online education efforts.
- The distance-learning unit is often allowed to reinvest a portion of the net income generated back into the program, enabling the group to upgrade and expand faculty and student services, technology, and so on, to support and drive program growth.

Challenges
- The unit requires strong leaders with the ability to bridge the gap between the traditional academic and the distance-education arenas. The ability to coordinate and placate numerous constituents is critical.
- The program depends on its peer academic and administrative departments (and often faculty teaching resources) for course content. It has no academic authority and limited incentives.
- Growth of the Web-based programs may place pressure and strain on the academic and administrative resources available to support expansion.

Model 2: For-Profit Spin-Off
With this model, shown in Figure 3-5, the distance-learning program is divested from the institution and operates independently. Start-up capital is provided by the institution (for example, eCornell), by a third party, or by a combination of the two. Although independent, the distance-learning entity works closely with the institution’s academic departments to develop content and has a responsibility to meet the financial expectations of the capital provider. Institutional examples include eCornell and the now-defunct NYUonline.

Benefits
- The ability to attract and hire skilled business professionals and to tap external capital resources helps spur the creation of independent ventures.
- The distance-learning venture secures the degree of flexibility needed to move quickly in response to market events and avoids the extensive decision-making process in place at most institutions.

Challenges
- Difficulties can arise in managing and maintaining the relationship between the for-profit spin-off and the institution.
- As with the distance-learning-division model, the program depends on the institution’s academic departments and perhaps faculty teaching resources for course content, lacks academic authority,
and has limited incentives. Its independent status exacerbates these difficulties.

- The institution and/or the independent venture must develop a model with explicit revenue and performance targets to determine program success.
- Where appropriate, it is critical to ensure that the institution’s goals and expectations are sufficiently aligned with those of the distance-learning venture.

Model 3: Enterprise Model

In the enterprise model, shown in Figure 3-6, the distance-learning program is incorporated into the institution’s central administration. Integrated into the fabric of the university, the distance-learning function serves as a centralized support unit for sharing best practices across the institution. Shared resources may include faculty training and development, student services, and program evaluation. As with Nova Southeastern, there is still opportunity for individual schools or departments to leverage their relationship with students by driving course development and managing budgeting decisions. Institutional examples include Nova Southeastern, Temple University, the University of Central Florida, and the University of Baltimore.

Benefits
- Strong senior leadership can ensure that the distance-learning program aligns with the institution’s vision and mission. In fact, of all the models, this one should result in distance-learning efforts that most closely align with institutional objectives.
- Prominent administrative location of program resources can create visibility for online efforts.
- Institutional technology competencies and financial resources can be leveraged for use with distance learning across the entire enterprise.

Challenges
- Strong leadership is necessary in central administration to maintain control and coordinate enterprise-wide activities.
- The distance-learning program is more dependent on the institution’s decision-making processes.
- Web-based distance-learning efforts must be accepted as an important component of the institution’s academic efforts.

Model 4: Single School or College

The single-school model, shown in Figure 3-7, aligns the distance-learning program with a particular school or college in the institution. Often, if support isn’t widespread across the institution, one school or department may drive the distance-learning initiative to avoid potential conflicts that could arise from an enterprise-wide imple-
Strategies for Supporting Off-Campus Growth

Vol. 3, 2002

In this model, the academic unit initiates the distance-learning program, and its mission and vision drive program development. Institutional examples include Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business and Regis University’s School for Professional Studies.

Benefits

◆ The target market is usually clearly identified through the sponsoring school or college, and the individual school’s brand strength can be leveraged in the distance-learning program.
◆ The program enjoys more institutional flexibility by avoiding extensive institution-wide decision-making processes.
◆ This additional flexibility also lets the school engage in partnerships that might not be possible at a broader institutional level.

Challenges

◆ Conflicts with the overall institution’s vision/mission may arise even if the distance-learning program is closely aligned with the goals of the school or college.
◆ Multiple schools may decide to establish their own programs, creating a disjointed approach to distance learning across the institution.
◆ Without a deeper commitment from the institution, an individual school’s limited financial and/or technical resources may prevent the distance-learning program from providing sufficient services or scaling to meet market demand.

Fundamental Structure

These four models provide the fundamental structures for a distance-learning program. Each program, however, maintains a unique operating philosophy and structure to meet specific institutional needs. Looking more closely at detailed examples will make it easier to understand the decisions institutions make and the challenges they face in managing Web-based distance-learning initiatives.

Leading Implementation Issues

This study has outlined key strategic considerations and internal competencies that institutions must evaluate to determine the most appropriate organizational structures to support Web-based distance-learning initiatives. These strategic business decisions are not wholly divorced from critical implementation issues, however. Even as administrators, faculty, and staff establish an appropriate model and identify key business processes for Web-based distance learning, a significant amount of work remains to effectively implement or reform a program and ensure its long-term viability.

Although the structure and challenges of distance-learning programs differ from one institution to another, colleges and universities must nevertheless contend with a core set of issues. The guidelines presented in this section are intended to drive decision making on those key implementation issues.

◆ Keep academic decisions within the faculty and academic departments. The role of the distance-learning program is to facilitate outreach by designing, developing, and marketing courses for Web-based delivery. At the same time, the most significant hurdle to developing distance education is the fear that the pedagogy and quality of the teaching and content will be diminished through online delivery. By ensuring that key academic decisions remain with the academic departments, programs mitigate this concern and avoid potential conflicts.
The following chapter explores eCornell’s Web-based distance-learning model, which provides faculty with key resources to create courses and also ensures that faculty have final approval of course content. By supporting the academic departments and faculty with instructional designers, graphic designers, writers, mentors, and training programs, the distance-learning unit can monitor quality and manage general content without threatening the pedagogical integrity of the institution’s offerings.

✦ Establish appropriate incentives to facilitate faculty commitment and involvement.
The role of faculty must be a major consideration in the development of a high-quality distance-learning initiative—indeed, independent of the model, structure, and nuances of individual programs. Appropriately designing incentives is a key step in recognizing the time constraints and burdens that developing distance-learning courses can place on faculty. While most programs recognize the benefits of having on-campus faculty involved in the development of off-campus courses, these programs should also acknowledge that this model constrains existing resources. Aligning incentives—such as bonus programs, technology training stipends, additional compensation for overload teaching, and mentoring programs—with potential faculty concerns can alleviate many of these issues and encourage greater faculty participation. The Eastern Oregon University case study explores this issue in detail.

In addition, it’s possible to inadvertently create a tiered class of faculty by using different faculty and setting different expectations for the distance-learning program. Such a development may well indicate a divergence from the institution’s culture and mission. It’s necessary to consider these implications when designing a program and determining the faculty model and role.

✦ Develop a clear process for transitioning courses and/or programs to a Web-based format.
Penn State’s success in course development stems in part from its ability to create a structured process that begins with establishing a business plan. While course development evolves and improves with experience, the earlier a clear plan is in place, the easier it will be to set expectations with faculty, instructional designers, and programmers to ensure that deadlines are met and academic quality is maintained. It is essential to build strong working relationships with faculty to support this phase of program development. Faculty need to understand what their involvement would mean in terms of time and impact on other institutional commitments.

✦ Implement extensive student support systems and services.
Institutions must recognize that the student is the customer and ensure that each student receives the right mix of services to feel connected to the institution. Early anecdotal evidence from institutions and e-learning vendors with a Web-based distance-learning model indicates that robust student services help improve online retention rates and academic performance. While more detailed research is needed in this area, institutions committed to Web-based distance programs must account for heightened student demand for services. For-profit institutions such as Strayer University and the University of Phoenix have excelled at providing student services and use this competency to differentiate themselves from competitors and attract large student populations.

Institutions also cannot afford to underestimate the challenges associated with integrating students into the systems and processes of the institution from both an infrastructure and a logistics perspective. Replicating campus-based student services,
including the registrar, library, computer support, academic advisement, tutoring, and so on, requires significant planning and integration, and is a key differentiator among distance-learning programs.

◆ Measure and track program effectiveness. From the inception of online distance-learning efforts, institutions should develop and implement systems to measure and track program success. While the key performance indicators may evolve over time, building a distance-learning culture that bases decisions on data rather than anecdotes is imperative. Program data and analysis can be shared with program investors, supporters, and participants to build acceptance and deflect criticism. Additionally, these measurement efforts will help guide process and product improvements as the program matures. Since the inception of its online learning efforts, the University of Central Florida has captured key performance indicators and has also established a research initiative for teaching effectiveness. This unit evaluates the impact of the university’s Web-based efforts.

Endnotes

1. These models do not account for the various online distance-learning consortia and virtual universities that have developed in the past several years. Many institutions are involved or are considering involvement in these initiatives as an adjunct to their existing distance-learning activities. These entities possess a distinct set of benefits and challenges and are outside the scope of this study. The issues raised by the four models, however, occur in various consortia and partnership arrangements.