

# GAME CHANGERS

## EDUCATION and INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Edited by **DIANA G. OBLINGER**

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Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies

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#### FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to thank the many people who made this book possible, particularly Gregory Dobbin for managing the project and Karen Mateer for her research.

—Diana G. Oblinger

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# Going the Distance: Outsourcing Online Learning

**Susan E. Metros and Joan Falkenberg Getman**

## **Setting the Stage**

ONLINE LEARNING AND GAME CHANGING are rarely synonymous. Online learning evolved from early iterations of distance learning in which educational content was delivered remotely, initially through written correspondence. In the mid-1960s, distance-learning delivery advanced with the advent of analog communication technologies such as radio and closed-circuit television. More recently, educational institutions employed digital telephony, using computers and the Internet, to offer courses to off-campus populations via two-way videoconferencing. Today, with major advances in networking and computing technologies, current modes of online learning link faculty and students both synchronously and asynchronously.

While online learning technologies have advanced dramatically, the quality of the teaching and learning experience online has not. Much online learning still emulates the one-way communication of correspondence and television by capturing the classroom lecture or requiring students to slog through tomes of uploaded written material.

## **Online Learning at USC**

The University of Southern California has been a leader in distance learning since the early 1970s. Established in 1974, the Viterbi School of Engineering's Distance Learning Network (DEN) offers over forty online master's degree programs, graduate certificates, and continuing-education courses. Prior to 2008, all distance-learning programs, including DEN, were designed and delivered

internally by USC personnel. Master's degrees and certificates in gerontology, geographic information science and technology (GIST), pharmacy, and medicine were designed and managed in-house by individual schools and departments and delivered primarily using traditional videoconferencing technologies.

In 2008, USC expanded its online learning options to education students earning a master of arts in teaching (MAT) and, most recently, for master's degree programs in social work, public policy, communications, library and information science, and public health. USC's executive leadership understood that to remain current and competitive, it would need to extend USC's breadth and reach beyond the residential campus. It also understood that it needed to target and attract a new demographic of highly qualified and professionally driven adult learners.

Economically, online learning presented one of few ways left for a university to tap new revenue sources. The provost encouraged deans to talk with their faculty, students, staff, alumni, board of counselors, and professional communities to determine if online learning was an academically and financially viable option for their discipline and their school.

## **Outsourcing as a Game Changer**

Rather than build capacity to offer and operate online-learning programs within the individual academic units or even coordinate full-service support centrally, USC chose to outsource the development and delivery of fully online, Internet-delivered degrees to for-profit vendor partners. The decision to outsource distance learning is a game changer because it not only introduced a new model for the development and delivery of online degrees at a private research university, but it reimagines the actual teaching, learning, and even practicum/residency placement experience. USC's new online programs are technologically sophisticated, exceptionally interactive, and accessible anywhere and anytime. The courses do not solely rely on text-based content, lecture capture, nor high-stakes testing, but instead take advantage of professionally produced, multimedia-rich learning modules that use Web 2.0 technologies, interactive case studies, graphic simulations, live web-based discussions, real-time cohort collaboration, high-profile guest lectures, and group-based projects.

The decision to outsource online learning was not without controversy, especially since the DEN model has been so successful in the past. However, DEN requires a large in-house staff to develop course content and manage the administrative, marketing, technical, and user-support components of the program. It also entails maintaining a customized learning management platform

and dedicated, state-of-the-art studio classrooms. Furthermore, unlike students in other disciplines, engineers are familiar with and at ease with online-learning delivery and often are sponsored by their companies to attend courses remotely to earn advanced degrees.

The argument in favor of bolstering central resources to support online learning was seriously considered but deemed problematic. The USC Information Technology Services' Center for Scholarly Technology (CST) assists the campus community in integrating educational technologies into teaching and learning by offering design and assessment services, learning management system support, training and workshops, and presentations and events. However, the CST's small staff of six instructional technologists and media and assessment specialists is too small to support scores of fully online, full-service degree offerings. The CST does play an essential role of readying the faculty and the institution to participate in an outsourced online-learning relationship (see sidebar).

USC's online master's degree programs offer students the same high standard of academic rigor on which the residential programs pride themselves. The programs are reviewed and approved by regional accreditation agencies and, if applicable, discipline-specific professional accreditation agencies. Students must meet USC's highly selective admission standards and are eligible for the same financial aid and scholarship awards as their residential counterparts. Online students pay the same tuition as residential students; USC does not differentiate tuition for its online degrees. Students are encouraged to be an active member of the tight-knit "Trojan Family" community by joining student clubs and participating in student government and other extracurricular activities. The schools also are exploring ways to remain closely connected to their virtual graduates through on-campus, location-based, and online alumni activities. Interestingly, the vast majority of online students choose, at their own expense, to partake in the campuses' graduation ceremonies.

## **Online Integrators**

To date, USC has partnered with two online integrator companies, 2tor and EmbanetCompass, for turnkey support of their current and proposed online degree programs. Both are privately owned and specialize in full-service support for postsecondary online learning degree programs. Full-service support includes needs assessment, marketing strategy, student and staff recruitment, admissions and enrollment support, educational content design and conversion, technology

*Cont'd on p. 235*

## **Faculty and Institutional Readiness: From an Educational Technologist's Perspective**

*Joan Falkenberg Getman, director for USC's Educational Technologies and the Center for Scholarly Technology, leads a support team that is tasked with preparing faculty to teach with technology:*

I lead an educational technology organization that supports instructors who want to teach with technology. Today, in the fall of 2011, I am fairly certain that the instructor who opts NOT to use technology is in a very, very small minority. However, teaching with technology experience definitely evolves along a continuum.

### *The eLearning Continuum*

At one end is the instructor who has a syllabus on his or her course website in the institution's learning management system (LMS)—period. At the other end of the spectrum is the instructor who is responsible for students who only ever connect online. In between those two points is a long stretch of fertile ground where my team and I spend most of our time. While it is not our stated goal, the programs, services, and resources we offer advance the readiness of faculty who choose to move out of the physical classroom and teach in a completely online environment. It is critical that a constant anywhere on the continuum is academic rigor. The X factors are the technologies that comprise the virtual learning environment, the physical distance between students and instructors, and the balance of synchronous and asynchronous activities.

Instructors who teach with technology often begin simply with web-enhanced courses that encourage students to access online resources. Migrating a web-enhanced course to one that is more of a "blended" format leads to more of the course being mediated by technology, but it does not necessarily mean a change in the balance of traditional "seat time." An example of this is the "flipped" or "inverted" classroom in which students are engaged in new online activities and assignments while maintaining the same amount of in-class meeting time. The innovation in the flipped course is that instructors shift the kinds of activities that students do synchronously in the physical classroom and the kind of work they are expected to do online and often by themselves, asynchronously. For example, students might access recorded lectures and self-assessments online, while in-class time is spent on collaborative problem solving or drilling deeper into concepts or

skills that students find particularly challenging. The next significant threshold is changing the amount of seat time and moving the course to a virtual learning environment until eventually you reach the end of the continuum, where the majority, if not all, of the students' experience is online, with a minimal number of face-to-face meetings (if any at all). The number of faculty who teach further along the continuum drops dramatically at an institution such as USC, where the emphasis is on residential instruction.

### *Layering On and Teaming Up*

Faculty tend to be self-sufficient; they are used to teaching in a “closed” classroom and preparing at their own pace with a small, agile group of support providers. An instructor might work alone or at most with one to three other people and campus organizations to teach in a traditional face-to-face course. Even with a field placement, the “support team” might only involve an administrative assistant, a librarian, and—for a technology-enhanced course—an instructional technologist.

As instructors move more of their teaching online, the layers of technology that exist between instructors and students increase. Accordingly, the support team also increases in diversity of skills, services, and size. The ultimate challenge in becoming an online instructor may be that the online classroom is transparent. In addition to using potentially new and unfamiliar technology, faculty are asked to expose their teaching to this large team of professionals and adhere to a very tight schedule. This is especially true when instructors are in the role of subject-matter experts who provide course content that will be transformed and formatted into engaging online material by the vendor's instructional design and production team.

Distance-learning providers offer full-service support from student recruitment to graduation; they provide marketing, content development, student assessment, statistical tracking, and technical support along the way. But regardless of the complex scaffolding and comprehensive support vendors provide, if instructors are unfamiliar with the technology, new to the advantages and idiosyncrasies of a virtual learning environment, and used to preparing on their own, teaching online can be a difficult, time-consuming process for everyone.

This is the place where readiness matters.

It seems that instructors who have taught with any level of technology prior to teaching an online course are better positioned to adapt to the nuances of different distance-learning platforms. These instructors are also

more comfortable with virtual communication and collaboration, enabling them to engage with students more quickly. And in most cases, faculty who have taught with technology have established at least a few collaborative relationships. Educational technology organizations and faculty support providers are well positioned to lay the foundation for a successful distance-learning vendor partnership that produces consistent, high-quality online courses.

### *Standards, Opportunities, and Incentives*

As mentioned earlier, the CST is a small unit situated in the Office of the Provost's division for Information Technology Services (ITS). Upon request, our group will consult with faculty who wish to develop their own distance-learning programs and courses, but we are very clear about the enormity of such an undertaking and the importance of connecting with other support providers to ensure that they have coordinated all the resources, services, and technologies to launch an online offering.

Outsourcing distance learning frees up campus instructional designers and technology consultants. What it means for my organization is that we do not end up "mass producing" distance-learning course after distance-learning course. Instead, we are able to work at a more strategic level. We focus on increasing faculty readiness by providing opportunities for exploring pedagogical strategies, gaining firsthand experience with different technologies, and developing a shared vocabulary. We also support institutional standards for academic rigor.

We have contributed to institutional readiness by taking a subset of questions from a form required for regional accreditation approval. The form is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Distance Learning template and must be completed by the university prior to offering a fully accredited online degree program. By asking schools to respond to select questions very early in the process of deciding whether to offer an online degree, faculty can determine if their proposed course and curriculum are ready to go online and if they can offer an educational experience that meets the same academic standards as the residential program. The "readiness" checklist is designed in such a way that the information faculty provide will go toward completion of the final WASC application if they continue to move ahead in the process.

The University Committee on Curriculum has also asked us to collaborate with it in developing a syllabus "template" that accounts for traditional courses as well as the courses that have varying degrees of online

components. It is designed to address the nuances of teaching and learning online—from the technologies students are expected to use to describing the different online locations they will need to access during the course (e.g., the course website, web conferencing information, blog, etc.). The expectation for the template is that it will guide instructors to think about their course activities, assignments, assessments, and communications so that students can expect the same quality whether the course is online or residential.

One of our most interesting and rewarding activities is managing our faculty incentive program. With generous funding from the Office of the Provost, the Center for Scholarly Technology is able to award several different kinds of teaching-with-technology grants. One example is the C3 (Course Continuity in a Crisis) program, which asks faculty to create a “Plan B” assignment and at some point in the semester to announce a mock campus closing that requires the instructor and students to meet online. There are two requirements: (1) the instructor must use Blackboard (USC’s current LMS) for the course website, and (2) the instructor and his or her students must use the technologies that will support their Plan B assignments early in the semester to gain experience with them prior to the “campus emergency.” In many cases, instructors have created assignments that could potentially contribute to the community’s documentation of or recovery from a crisis situation. Program evaluations indicate that instructors and students underestimate what it takes to go from meeting face-to-face to gathering together online. This opportunity to experience online teaching and learning with support for alignment of teaching strategies and technologies surely contributes to faculty readiness to teach a distance-learning course.

infrastructure and delivery hosting, assessment tools, and comprehensive training and community support services. Both vendors require a contractual commitment for at least 8–10 years or longer and are based on a tuition-split financial model. All course content remains the intellectual property of the university, and all academic decisions remain the strict province of the university, under the auspices of the faculty, its governing boards, university curriculum committees, and appropriate administrative officials.

An essential component of an institution/vendor partnership is clearly defining and delineating the roles and responsibilities of each partner early in the relationship. The contractual agreement captures much of this division of labor, but there are additional duties that must be assigned to either the institution or vendor (Table 1).

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities

**I. PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

**1. Needs Assessment**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and help survey target audiences and provide data on competitive programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct a needs assessment to analyze market to determine audience viability and program profitability</li> </ul>

**2. Business Planning**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jointly participate in developing the business plan</li> <li>Jointly establish a revenue pro forma and associated budget</li> <li>Negotiate and ratify the contract</li> </ul>	

**3. Marketing and Promotion**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approve recruitment/marketing strategy and plan</li> <li>Approve and collaborate on website design, social media site, and other marketing collateral</li> <li>Monitor marketing practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and execute recruitment/marketing strategy and plan</li> <li>Develop and manage a marketing website, social media site, and other marketing collateral</li> </ul>

**4. Curriculum, Course, and Content Design and Production**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess faculty readiness</li> <li>Design the curriculum and courses</li> <li>Obtain all internal curriculum approvals</li> <li>Approve all content conversion</li> <li>Ensure faculty are available to consult on courses and serve as subject-matter experts (SME)</li> <li>Review and approve synchronous course components and asynchronous course content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide faculty with instructional technology design support</li> <li>Convert course content to online format</li> <li>Procure copyrights</li> <li>Advance funding for faculty SMEs (vendor specific)</li> <li>Build and test synchronous course components, develop and produce asynchronous course content</li> </ul>

## 5. Teaching

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine appropriate faculty configuration for program</li> <li>• Hire additional faculty</li> <li>• Supervise teaching</li> <li>• Evaluate quality of instruction and make improvements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in identifying prospective instructors</li> </ul>

## 6. Host Sites and Field Placements (Program Specific)

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in identifying host sites</li> <li>• Approve hosts sites and field staff</li> <li>• Approve student placements</li> <li>• Orient field staff on program's curricular components</li> <li>• Manage, monitor, and assess field staff/student relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and secure host sites</li> <li>• Search for and place field staff</li> <li>• Identify and secure student placements</li> <li>• Orient and train field staff on using technology platform</li> </ul>

## 7. Training and Support

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide faculty and staff with pedagogical and readiness support</li> <li>• Provide students with academic and career advising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide faculty support for teaching online</li> <li>• Orient and train faculty, students, and staff on using technology platform</li> <li>• Provide 24/7 student technical support</li> </ul>

## 8. Student Evaluations

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jointly establish metrics and design surveys and assessments</li> <li>• Jointly improve program based on findings</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze, interpret, and disseminate evaluation results</li> <li>• Secure IRB clearance and design research studies (optional)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer online student formative and summative evaluations</li> <li>• Participate in research studies (optional)</li> </ul>

Table continues →

Table 1. **Roles and Responsibilities**, *continued*

**II. ADMINISTRATIVE**

**1. Leadership and Strategy**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide program's strategic vision and direction</li> <li>• Establish a plan that clarifies the program's goals, project scope, governance, timeline, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute to the planning efforts</li> </ul>

**2. Accounting**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oversee the financial components of the program</li> <li>• Collect tuition and fees and pay vendor partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide enrollment projections and cost accounting</li> </ul>

**3. Recruitment and Retention**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jointly develop and implement a recruitment and retention plan</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish admission requirements</li> <li>• Monitor and audit recruiting processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit qualified students</li> </ul>

**4. Academic Approval and Accreditation**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate, coordinate, and complete regional and professional accreditation approvals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather relevant data and resources</li> </ul>

**5. Admissions, Registration, and Fees**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review applications and make admission decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hire, train, and retain a staff of admissions counselors</li> <li>• Prepare qualified candidate application dossiers for institution's review</li> </ul>

## 6. Financial Aid

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jointly counsel prospective students on financial aid information and options</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administer financial aid programs and disperse funds</li> </ul>	

## 7. Program and Partnership Evaluation

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jointly establish metrics and design surveys and assessments</li> <li>Jointly improve program based on findings</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perform mid contract vendor-performance review (vendor specific)</li> <li>Administer evaluations, interpret and disseminate evaluation results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track longitudinal data on student satisfaction and program performance</li> </ul>

## 8. Policies and Legalities

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comply with institution's policies and guidelines</li> <li>Comply with local, state, and federal laws and rules including FERPA, HIP-PA, HEOA, ADA, etc.</li> <li>Abide by laws/policies pertaining to recruiting and enrolling international students</li> <li>Monitor and report on all levels of government activity related to online learning</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay state authorization fees and other related expenses</li> <li>Execute the clauses in the contract that require the vendor to audit specified operations (SAS 70 audit, "ethical hack," penetration testing, and other independent reviews)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek and maintain state authorizations</li> <li>Provide periodic reports on contractually specified auditable operations</li> </ul>

## 9. Credentials and Graduation

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confer degrees</li> </ul>	

Table continues →

Table 1. **Roles and Responsibilities, *continued***

**III. STUDENT SERVICES**

**1. Academic Advising and Career Counseling**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jointly provide students with career counseling and placement options</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with academic advising</li> <li>• Identify and counsel students on probation or with conditional status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with nonacademic advising</li> <li>• Use LMS platform's analytics to monitor student progress and identify students at risk</li> <li>• Gather and share labor market statistics for career counseling</li> <li>• Provide online tutoring tools/services (optional)</li> </ul>

**2. Student Health**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide access to health-education resources</li> <li>• Provide elective health-insurance options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use technology platform to encourage and promote healthy behaviors</li> </ul>

**3. Student Culture**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify ways to build community and include online students in campus-based extracurricular activities</li> <li>• Include online students in university communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide social networking tools so that online students can participate in campus-based communities and extracurricular activities</li> <li>• Provide tools to support communication</li> </ul>

**4. Special Needs**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and address special needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide an ADA-compliant platform and tools</li> <li>• Develop technologies using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework</li> </ul>

## 5. Bookstore and Library Resources

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide resource ordering information</li> <li>• Identify and provide access to library resources and e-reserves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate library resources into LMS platform</li> <li>• Provide online access to bookstore and other resource sites</li> </ul>

## 6. Testing and Grades

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace online high-stakes testing with other forms of assessment</li> <li>• Submit final grades to registrar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide process for verifying students' identification</li> <li>• Provide secure online tests and assessments environment. If necessary, arrange for exam proctoring</li> </ul>

## 7. Alumni and Lifelong Learners

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage alumni relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use LMS platform to build and maintain an active alumni community</li> <li>• Assist in mining relevant alumni data</li> </ul>

# IV. TECHNOLOGY

## 1. Technology Infrastructure

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If internally hosted, provide a robust, secure, and scalable LMS platform and network connectivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If externally hosted, provide a robust, secure, and scalable LMS platform and network connectivity</li> <li>• Provide and test business continuity and disaster-recovery plans</li> <li>• Comply with the institution's information technology protocols and policies</li> </ul>

Table continues →

Table 1. **Roles and Responsibilities**, *continued*

**2. Technology Support**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If internally hosted, provide 24/7 technical support for students, faculty, and staff</li> <li>• Establish service-level agreements (SLAs) based on industry-standard requirements for externally hosted services</li> <li>• Track technology issues/solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If externally hosted, provide 24/7 technical support for students, faculty, and staff</li> <li>• Abide by SLAs based on industry-standard requirements</li> <li>• Report and mitigate major issues/solutions</li> </ul>

**3. Distance-Learning Facilities**

Academic Institution	Vendor Partner
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If required, provide video conferencing, classroom space, and staff support</li> </ul>	

The deans, in consultation with their staff and faculty, choose which vendor they prefer to work with and the Office of the Provost negotiates the contract on their behalf, with direct input from Admissions and Planning, Academic Operations and Strategy (Budget), Information Technology Services, and general counsel. The school's choice is usually based on a variety of variables—how quickly it is willing to build program capacity and how big it wants the program to be; the complexity of the technology platform; its faculty's predisposition toward programmatic innovation; the strength of the support structure; the terms of the agreement; and sometimes just the personality fit.

One of the biggest advantages of outsourcing online learning is that the vendor partners invest a generous amount of capital funding up front, assuming the majority of financial risk. They also have the ability to retain an agile and talented workforce with expertise to support the full spectrum of designing, marketing, programming, delivering, and assessing online programs. Furthermore, they recruit year-round and can "staff up" to offer prospective students multiple start dates to accommodate their work schedules and often help them complete a degree quicker than if they enrolled in the residential option.

2tor is relatively new to the market; USC was its first client in 2008. 2tor conforms to a business model based on partnering with a limited number of carefully screened, preeminent universities to offer one-of-a-kind, large-enrollment online degree programs. To date, it has partnered with only two other

institutions in addition to USC and promises exclusivity in the marketplace, agreeing not to partner with any other institutions to offer the same degree. 2tor is headquartered in New York City with offices in Maryland, but each of its programs is assigned its own dedicated local community manager with a sizeable staff. Both of USC's programs that have partnered with 2tor have over fifty staff colocated with university staff in the Los Angeles area. One of 2tor's advantages is that it has built and perfected an innovative and robust LMS based on Moodle's open source architecture. This "learning platform" incorporates dynamic Web 2.0 technologies with a Facebook-like social networking interface. 2tor states that it makes an up-front minimum investment of over \$10 million in each program; a large portion of that funding is invested in marketing and recruiting, technology infrastructure, and providing students with customized, just-in-time support.

EmbanetCompass has been in business since 1965 and has 34 academic partners and supports over 107 academic programs at a wide variety of higher education institutions. The Compass-Knowledge Group, a pioneer and provider of distance-learning services to nonprofit higher education institutions, merged with Embanet in 2010 to create EmbanetCompass. Different from 2tor, EmbanetCompass professes to be "LMS-agnostic" and develops high-quality, professionally produced content, available through the institution's internal LMS or on one of EmbanetCompass's hosted, fully functional LMS systems. EmbanetCompass provides the institution with a local community liaison and an instructional technologist, but supports the program with assigned staff from its headquarters in Toronto. It provides upfront funding to the university to provide faculty with incentives to serve as subject-matter experts, working with its staff to convert traditional courses to an online format. EmbanetCompass prides itself in offering a unique and robust support network that includes enrollment advisors to guide students through the application process, student-services managers to serve as personal advisors, program facilitators to help with matters involving course content and requirements, and technical support staff available 24/7.

There are a limited number of other companies offering online-integration services. Deltak, established in 1996, and the Learning House have both been in business for almost a decade. Deltak offers end-to-end support for over seventy degree and certificate programs, partnering primarily with small and mid-sized nonprofit postsecondary institutions. The Learning House, recently acquired by Weld North Holdings LLC (Weld North), has helped more than ninety institutions successfully launch and maintain their online programs. Also working primarily with independent small and medium-sized colleges and universities, the Learning House provides a package consisting of six core

services, each designed to support unique aspects of implementing and managing online degree programs. The core services include curriculum and course development, program marketing and enrollment management, technology infrastructure, faculty and staff training, technology support, and consulting.

Two other contenders include Bisk Education and Colloquy. Bisk consults with universities to expand enrollment, increase revenue, and advance their mission through the development of online programs; it also works in tandem with its University Alliance division, which facilitates the delivery of these programs, overseeing marketing, recruitment and enrollment, program delivery, and support. Colloquy, a wholly owned subsidiary of Kaplan, Inc., subscribes to a proprietary 360° methodology that professes to address each step in the distance learning process including insight, design, marketing, recruiting, and student success services.

SunGard Higher Education's Online Learning Services, while not a full-service provider, assists institutions in evaluating, building, or enhancing their fully online or hybrid-degree and non-degree programs. It will assess and document technical and operational readiness, design academic programs for online delivery, support students and train faculty, and manage the institution's technology infrastructure.

Pearson eCollege, The New York Times Knowledge Network, and other publishing companies have considered the online integrator market, but to date have concentrated on developing and distributing online courses and educational content, providing virtual tutoring services, and marketing LMS and content-repository solutions.

A new addition to the market, Educators Serving Educators (ESE), a division of Excelsior College, is an innovative not-for-profit corporation that works with accredited, higher education institutions to develop and deliver online programs and courses. Employing a different type of model, ESE "teaches you to fish" so that an institution can gain the experience and skills to establish and maintain its own online learning unit. ESE specializes in assisting institutions that serve individuals traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

## **Online Learning at USC**

The University of Southern California's online learning programs are under the umbrella of USCNow, a portal to USC's online professional master's degree programs. USCNow provides web access to all of USC's online programs. In addition, the site provides prospective students up-to-date information on admission and enrollment, financial aid, technical requirements, and international

student requirements. Current students can find out more about registration and academic and career advising.

USC's Rossier School of Education was the first school to enter into an outsourced agreement, partnering with 2tor, to launch a master of arts in teaching (MAT) degree. The target audience for the MAT@USC degree was traditional preservice teacher candidates, who typically enroll within five years of graduating from their undergraduate institution, and career changers, who often enroll ten or twenty years after their undergraduate experience. Rossier previously offered a residential MAT program that, in 2008, served approximately eighty students. The MAT@USC was launched in June of 2009 and in two and a half years has grown from approximately 80 residential students to enroll over 1,500 online students. Faculty were concerned that the popular online program might cannibalize and decimate the residential program, but just the opposite happened. Because of the growth and visibility of the online program—and the fact that USC negotiated the rights to use the online content in the on-ground courses—the residential program enrollment has increased.

One of the more innovative online components of the online MAT degree is the way in which students complete their fieldwork and the guided practice required for teacher certification. USC, in partnership with 2tor, has built relationships with thousands of schools across the world. In the traditional student-teaching model, a student is assigned to a local classroom and supervised and evaluated by that class's teacher. During the fieldwork phase of the online degree program, students are still placed in local classrooms, but USC provides them with a digital video camera so that they can record their teaching. They upload the recorded segments to share not only with their supervising teachers, but also with USC faculty, guest experts, and their student cohort peers—greatly expanding the circle and quality of feedback.

Rossier has since launched a second MAT degree with a specialization for teachers of English to speakers of other languages (MAT-TESOL). The school continues to work with 2tor on other specializations within the MAT degree and on a fully online master of education (MEd) degree (see Figure 1).

With the success of the MAT@USC degree, the USC School of Social Work chose to partner with 2tor and within one year has created the first fully online, evidence-based master of social work (MSW) degree with close to a thousand students enrolled from across the country and internationally. Taught by renowned faculty and leaders in the field of social work, the MSW@USC curriculum mirrors the academic rigor of the on-site program. Available through the school's Virtual Academic Center, students participate in various web-based learning activities and hands-on supervised traditional field instruction in their local communities. Professionally produced case-study vignettes allow students

Figure 1. The MAT@USC Web Portal



Figure 2. An Enhanced Faculty Lecture from the USC's School of Social Work's MSW@USC Online Degree Program



to observe a "client's" behavior. Faculty lectures are recorded in front of a green screen so that they can be graphically enhanced (see Figure 2).

The School of Social Work is currently collaborating with USC's Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) to develop social worker/virtual-client clinical simulations. ICT is a leader in producing virtual humans, computer training

Figure 3. The USC's School of Social Work's MSW@USC's Virtual Client Clinical Simulation



simulations, and immersive experiences for decision making. Online students engage with the ICT-produced artificially intelligent interactive agents (see Figure 3). The technology provides students with a chance to advance practical interviewing skills with realistic client interactions. The virtual clients can speak, express body language, show emotion, and offer immediate feedback.

The USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism chose EmbanetCompass as its online integrator partner and, in the fall of 2011, launched a fully online master of communication management (MCM) degree. The on-campus communication management degree program is designed for recent college graduates and working professionals who want the traditional graduate school experience of attending classes at USC's urban Los Angeles campus. The online MCM degree is different in that it is designed for mid-career professionals whose work schedules preclude them from enrolling in an on-campus program. By using the latest online education technologies, the same USC Annenberg faculty who teach in the on-campus program are able to teach these nontraditional students. Students have access to course materials at their convenience, paired with the opportunity to interact online with other students and faculty to complete assignments and participate in class discussions. The program is hosted on EmbanetCompass's Moodle platform and makes extensive use of multimedia-based content and Google Apps e-textbooks that allows faculty and students to dynamically update material

Figure 4. An E-Textbook from the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism's MCM Online Degree Program

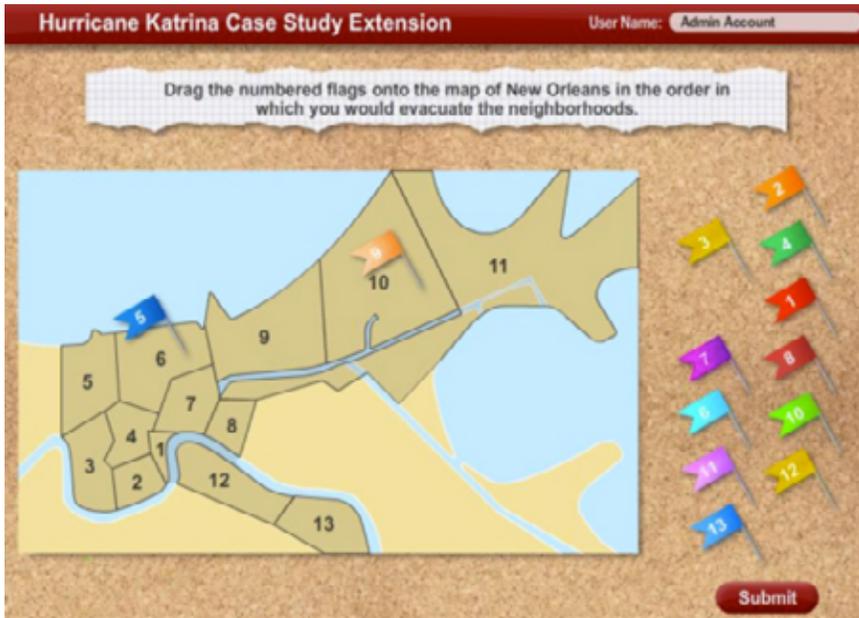
The screenshot shows the e-textbook interface for CMGT510. The main heading is "CMGT510: Attitudes, Values, and Behaviors". Below it, the page title is "Perceived Susceptibility and Perceived Severity". The left sidebar contains a navigation menu with items like "Home", "Students' Blog", and various course modules (M01 to M06). The main content area includes a search bar and a paragraph explaining the concepts of perceived susceptibility and severity. Below the text is a flowchart diagram illustrating the Health Belief Model. The flowchart starts with "Perceptions & modifying factors" leading to "Demographic, Sociopsych and Structural Variables". This leads to "Perceived seriousness & susceptibility", which then leads to "Perceived threat". "Cue to action" also leads to "Perceived threat". "Assessments" and "Cost / benefit analysis" lead to "Likelihood of action". A box on the left lists "Age, race, ethnicity etc. Peers, personality, social pressure etc. Prior contact, or knowledge about the disease." pointing to "Demographic, Sociopsych and Structural Variables". A box at the bottom lists "Media campaigns, lay advice, reminders from G.P., magazines, articles etc." pointing to "Cue to action". A box at the top left lists "How dangerous is it?" and "Will I get it?" pointing to "Perceived seriousness & susceptibility".

and examples together (see Figure 4). Students also are invited to attend special programs on the USC campus in Los Angeles during the course of their studies and are encouraged to participate in USC's campus commencement when they graduate.

In the fall of 2011, the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy also partnered with EmbanetCompass to launch a fully online master of public administration (MPA). MPA is a unique and multidisciplinary environment within the Price School that integrates all the major disciplines bearing on management and leadership in today's modern interconnected socioeconomic and political environment. The program connects cutting-edge research to the practice of public policy and management, equipping students with the skills required for the challenges and opportunities of the ever-changing nature of public administration. Similar to the on-campus program, online MPA students choose a specialization in local government or nonprofit management. The Price School also hosts the degree on EmbanetCompass's Moodle platform and students learn through authentic case studies and other interactive exercises (see Figure 5).

USC also engaged EmbanetCompass to provide à la carte recruiting and

Figure 5. An Online Case Study from the USC Price School of Public Policy's MPA Online Degree Program



marketing services for the USC Davis School of Gerontology and the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences' Geographic Information Science and Technology (GIST) program. USC developed, delivers, and maintains these online programs in-house. EmbanetCompass conducted market assessments and, based on their findings, rebranded and repositioned the programs, resulting in significant increases in enrollments.

## Challenges

Outsourcing online learning is not without its challenges and detractors. There are tensions between the seemingly entrepreneurial goals of the administration condoning new kinds of partnerships and traditional academic values. The university leadership has met with faculty and alumni to address concerns ranging from instructors being replaced by technology to traditional on-campus programs degrees losing value.

Another problem that surfaced was the need to quickly identify and hire highly qualified instructors to teach in online programs that were expanding much more rapidly than the university and vendor partners ever anticipated.

Schools had to increase staffing to meet the influx of admission applications and to support the unique academic and social needs of nontraditional students interacting with the university from a distance. Admissions and Planning had to reengineer online processes to streamline access.

The line between online and “on-ground” students is blurring as faculty want their on-campus students to have seamless access to the vendor partner’s technology platforms and online educational content modules. While beneficial to students, it plays havoc with traditional university policies and complicates internal and other required tracking and reporting procedures.

This highlights a bigger issue. Programs are hindered by university policies and procedures established exclusively for a time when the only delivery modality was face-to-face in the lecture hall or classroom. What constitutes seat time? Who owns course content? What activity, transportation, or health care fees should be levied upon a student who may flip between online and on-ground or may never set foot on campus?

Finally, the technology is not always facile and reliable. Online programs don’t need to conform to fifteen-week semesters with specific start dates, yet it is not easy to reprogram an institution’s student information system to support more and varied start dates, especially when the government’s financial-aid award dates are static. Some of the programs had major issues with network bandwidth, especially during synchronous course sessions when students relied on the wireless connectivity in their homes. The program leaders had to reduce section size and require hard-wired Ethernet connections. In some cases, the vendor partners initially miscalculated the amount of support faculty would need to redesign their courses and to teach in an online environment.

## **Conclusion**

Developing and delivering a full-service online learning program is a big job and most institutions are not equipped to do it on their own. If a school chooses to throw its hat in the ring, an important success factor is strong executive-level support. A less obvious predictor of success is faculty engagement and readiness, which can be fostered and encouraged with opportunities and incentives to teach with technology beginning with their campus-based courses. This proactive approach also builds collaborative partnerships that ease the instructor’s transition to the teamwork involved in distance learning.

It is important to keep an ongoing dialogue with the academic community. The Center for Scholarly Technology publishes a quarterly newsletter with

online learning updates, and the university convenes an online learning council made up of directors of online learning and curricular deans both from schools with active programs and schools considering establishing programs.

Finally, the partnership with the vendor goes beyond the business-as-usual relationship. The vendor's staff are agents of the university and represent themselves as university employees whether they are recruiting prospective students or resolving technology issues on a Help Desk call. It is essential that the institution partner with a company that it trusts, respects, and is comfortable working with over the many years of the contract and beyond.

## Additional Resources

- USCNow: <http://uscnow.usc.edu/>
- USC Center for Scholarly Technology: <http://cst.usc.edu>
- 2tor: <http://2tor.com>
- EmbanetCompass: <http://www.embanet.com>
- Deltak: <http://www.deltak-innovation.com>
- The Learning House: <http://www.learninghouse.com>
- Bisk Education: <http://www.bisk.com/about-bisk-education>
- Colloquy: <http://www.colloquy360.com>
- SunGard Higher Education's Online Learning Services: <http://www.sungardhe.com/Solutions/Online-Learning-Services>
- Pearson eCollege: <http://www.ecollege.com>
- The New York Times Knowledge Network: <http://www.nytimesknownow.com>
- Educators Serving Educators (ESE): <http://www.eseserves.org>

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**Susan E. Metros** is Associate Vice Provost and Associate CIO for Technology Enhanced Learning at the University of Southern California. She holds faculty appointments in design, education, and communications. Her research focuses on leadership, visual and multimedia literacy, and the role technology plays in transforming education to be interactive and learner-driven. **Joan Falkenberg Getman** is Director for Educational Technologies and the Center for Scholarly Technology (CST) at the University of Southern California. Getman's experience includes video production, curriculum development, and evaluation-driven strategic planning. Her research focuses on authentic learning, assessment, and strategies that enable learners to be visual storytellers.

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