

Kansas State University: Creating a Virtual Faculty Consortium

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Introduction

CHANGE IS RAPID and seemingly accelerating in our world. The changes often require degrees or certifications not currently provided by higher education institutions. Change in traditional institutions of higher education, including creation of new degrees and certifications, is a slow process leading to long delays in meeting the educational needs of society. From a university perspective, some of these educational needs emerge and then fade. If an institution responds and creates faculty positions to offer such a degree or certification, it may find itself with significant problems and costs to utilize the faculty hired. Even in the event the degree is viable long term, institutions may be reluctant or unable to hire the needed faculty members.

There are often one or a few faculty members at an institution who are qualified to offer the needed education, but not the critical mass needed to offer a degree or certificate. One solution is to create a virtual faculty. A virtual faculty is a faculty formed from faculty members teaching in a set of academically similar institutions. A virtual faculty allows the institutions to respond rapidly—without taking on the risks of hiring a critical mass of faculty at a single institution—to deliver the new degree via the Internet. It also solves the challenges of having faculty members whose expertise is no longer needed by the institution.

The idea for creating a “virtual faculty” arose in the mid-1990s when there was a need for new knowledge offerings in engineering, agriculture, and human sciences to include courses, certifications, and master’s degrees at Kansas State University. We have established virtual faculties in all these areas, with the first in the human sciences. The university had a few qualified faculty

members, but far fewer than the set of faculty members needed to offer degrees in the identified areas of gerontology and tourism. Hiring more qualified faculty in those areas was not feasible. It was recognized that a virtual faculty depended upon Internet capability sufficient to provide courses at a distance from the institution and a course or learning management system capable of allowing faculty members to provide high-quality teaching, as well as faculty members willing to experiment in this new mode of providing instruction.

By the late 1990s, the mechanisms for combining faculty members from various institutions to form a sufficient number of complementarily skilled teachers arose. The penetration of and increase in Internet capability and the introduction of learning or course management systems at a number of like institutions in the Midwest were the needed resources. Both Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, for instance, were successfully delivering degrees over the Internet in the late 1990s. A logical extension was to form an agreement with a number of other similar institutions to share faculty members to form the critical mass of faculty members required. The concept of a virtual faculty was discussed with Kansas State University's IT grant writer. She worked with administrators from the College of Human Ecology to understand their views on offering the degrees in gerontology and tourism with a virtual faculty.

There was a very positive response from the dean, who had been meeting since the early 1990s with other deans of human sciences in the Midwest and had already formed an alliance—the Human Sciences Alliance—one of the purposes of which was to help stimulate and promote distance learning. The alliance was approached with the idea, and members were receptive to the concept of creating a virtual faculty. Under the leadership of a team from Kansas State University, planning funds were obtained to create the policies and procedures and to form an organizational structure. The entire planning process—informal and formal—took under two years. The formal discussions to create the organization consisted of multiday planning meetings with representatives from the institutions in the alliance. An organization to implement the policy and manage the requisite processes was created in 2002.

The facilitating organization is today called the Great Plains IDEA (Interactive Distance Education Alliance) and is physically located at Kansas State University (<http://www.gpidea.org>). Great Plains IDEA facilitates as a second virtual faculty providing degrees and certificates in agriculture (<http://www.agidea.org>), and the university participates in a third virtual faculty providing nuclear engineering education (<http://www.big12engg.org>).

Challenges and Solutions

Two major planning conferences for the initial human sciences effort took place involving the chief academic and financial officers; deans of human sciences, continuing education, and graduate schools; and academics from thirteen Midwestern land-grant institutions (<http://www.hsidea.org/about>).

Two major challenges and several minor issues arose, including which institution would count the student in its head count and which institution would grant the degree. It should be noted that it was never a consideration that Great Plains IDEA would offer the degree or certification. The institutions were all regionally accredited research institutions, and a degree from any of them was perceived as having significantly greater value than a degree from a consortium or alliance of institutions. It was decided that the earned degree would be offered by the institution providing the major professor or advisor to the student, and that institution would have to formally accept the student into the consortium program and could include the student in its head count.

The two major challenges were establishing a common tuition (credit-hour cost) for students in the programs and residency for the master's degree program. It was very important that students would pay the same tuition for every course they took, regardless of which institution was offering that course. Establishing this would mute the issue of in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, and it also eliminated a factor in the student's financial-decision process.

The traditional concept of residency for a degree was defined initially at most institutions in terms of the amount of time the student resided on the campus. The residency requirement had to be met for the degree to be granted by that institution. Later this was implemented in terms of the number of courses that had to be taken at the institution. The extension of that concept to courses taken over the Internet had been accepted at some institutions, but the concept of having a virtual faculty offer a degree went well beyond that. A virtual faculty whereby the student could, in theory, take just one course from the institution granting the degree simply did not meet the traditional meaning or impact of residency.

In 1989, the University of Phoenix established its online degree programs. One of the goals of this university from its establishment was to provide degrees that met the current needs of business and industry. During the organizational meetings of Great Plains IDEA, the deans of the graduate schools of participating institutions were aware of and supported these goals. Their discussions focused on the necessity to move past the traditional residency concept in order to meet the current educational needs of society. Residency, a concept that had been established when localized and printed knowledge

was the norm, no longer seemed necessary with current communication technology. They also felt that since the institutions considering this virtual faculty concept were similar in educational mission and accreditation status, the need to ensure a student had taken the required number of courses at their institutions in order to meet residency requirements was no longer necessary. Finally, it was clear to the graduate deans that if their institutions were to be responsive to working professionals, online graduate degrees had to be a part of their offerings. The deans agreed to attempt to change residency definitions on their campuses.

Residency is in the purview of the graduate faculty of the institutions, and the process to effect change had to be initiated in each institution. Ultimately, the residency obstacle was overcome for all degrees offered by the Great Plains IDEA consortium. At many of the institutions, the concept of residency for graduate work was removed completely. Removing residency at the graduate level has had a stimulating effect on the offerings of distance-delivered degrees.

The second major challenge was the issue of offering the courses for a degree with a common tuition independent of the institution at which it is offered. Tuition in some institutions was set by a state agency, and this made it very difficult to change tuition for specified degrees. The variation in the tuition per credit hour varied significantly among the thirteen institutions. In order to allow each school to be compensated at its own tuition plus its costs, the chief financial officers had to agree on a process to establish that alliance program tuition each year. In addition, the cost of administering the program had to be recovered. Strong leadership among the chief financial officers resulted in a process to determine annually a common tuition that met all institutions' requirements.

Organizational Structure

It was determined that an organization governed by the alliance institutions would be created to facilitate administrative and academic processes such as student acceptance into each program, enrollment, and to account for the tuition and fees and redistribute them in a fashion that met the legal conditions for tuition at each institution in the consortium.

The basic principles of organizational structure were to maintain institutional control of all operational issues of the facilitating organization and faculty control of all issues related to academics (http://www.hsidea.org/PolicyProcedure/Appendices/appendix_c2.pdf). Institutions choose which

programs to offer, there is a core curriculum but course names and such can vary among institutions, all courses are regular university courses, and all faculty are governed by the institutional guidelines but are given de facto faculty status in program-participating institutions. Financial accounting and program and teaching assessment are facilitated by the alliance organization.

Conclusion

The primary goals of this effort are to be more responsive to the educational needs of the nation while providing a more flexible environment in which to offer and subsequently drop degrees when no longer needed. These goals have been met. Great Plains IDEA facilitates the offering of thirteen degrees and certifications in human sciences (established 1999), with eleven of the thirteen institutions participating. AG*IDEA (established in 2007, <http://www.agidea.org>) offers ten degrees and certifications. And the number of degrees, certifications, and member institutions is growing. Great Plains IDEA currently encompasses institutions in seventeen states, from Texas to North Dakota and from California to Florida. Great Plains IDEA has helped other groups form alliances that facilitate virtual faculties, including in the field of nuclear engineering. The initial thirteen institutions have grown to nineteen, and there are a number of institutions wishing to join.

The concept of a virtual faculty is but one way traditional universities can respond to what is seen as their increasing responsibility to meet the rapidly changing educational requirements of the world. Collaboration with segments of industry may become commonplace, thus providing additional faculty members for the collaborative teaching of a course from qualified professionals in the specific industry. If this is to occur, additional traditional barriers may have to be broken—beginning with the professional titles of these individuals, for example. Change is in the future for higher education institutions. Institutional change must at least maintain the quality education traditional universities provide.

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