

Tulane University School of Continuing Studies: Case Study in Online Quality Improvement

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BACKGROUND

Online asynchronous courses constitute a significant portion of Tulane University's School of Continuing Studies (SCS) curriculum. During fall 2010, online enrollments accounted for more than one-fifth of the total: 538 out of 2,516. The 24 online courses were just over 14 percent of the courses offered, meaning that their average enrollment levels were higher than those of face-to-face courses: 22 students per course compared to 14 for the latter.

The online courses at SCS have the following characteristics:

- A director who oversees all courses in a program area provides oversight for each online course in the program areas of applied computing, business studies, and media arts.
- Instructors who teach an online course are responsible for developing it.
- Adjunct instructors teach most online courses.
- The withdrawal rate from online courses is higher than the withdrawal rate from face-to-face courses.
- Based on the student evaluations of teaching survey data collected each semester, the quality of online courses varies.

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Online instruction is sufficiently important to the School of Continuing Studies that it merited special attention in the form of a two-year review to ensure its quality.

ONLINE COURSE QUALITY REVIEW

As part of the preparation for the institution-wide accreditation renewal from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the Dean of SCS asked for a comprehensive analysis of online instruction: curriculum, faculty, and student-centered learning outcomes, goals, and assessments. In particular, the review needed to ensure consistency in the online courses offered, screening (if necessary) of students, and delivery of this type of instruction. A full-time member of the SCS faculty working half time on the review conducted the Online Course Quality Review from August 2009 through July 2011 with the following initial goals:

- evaluating the quality of all SCS distance education courses;
- developing and implementing standard quality features and metrics;
- providing SCS distance education instructors with best-practice guidance and resources, instructional technology mentoring support, and e-teaching training opportunities;
- promoting collegial interactions among e-instructors; and
- facilitating the dissemination of information related to new e-learning practices and technologies.

Over time, the review identified and implemented different administration-centered and instruction-centered quality enhancement measures. As all of the initial objectives were addressed, the focus of the initiative shifted to how to better meet several of the key objectives, including improving faculty e-instruction training and networking opportunities. For example, although 68 percent of the online faculty said they were either definitely or very likely to complete at least one Sloan-C online faculty training workshop at the start of the initiative, fewer than a third participated in a workshop. An even smaller percentage of the online instructors participated in the Skype-based networking sessions scheduled. Thus, during the last six months of the initiative, the focus shifted to developing and testing alternative means for engaging a larger portion of the online instructors in networking and e-teaching enrichment activities.

ADMINISTRATION-CENTERED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

SCS Online Learning Student Guide

One of the first products of the review was the *SCS Online Learning Student Guide*,¹ envisioned as a way to help students evaluate whether online learning is right for them, the expectations in an online course, and the technology and academic resources available. The guide answers student questions on essential e-learning topics such as the necessary equipment and software, the meaning of different e-learning terms, the copyright of online course-related materials, and the provisions of the Tulane Honor Code.

Course site template

Prior to the review, the level of course-site development varied greatly, and few instructors took advantage of the ability of the Blackboard learning-management system to provide a variety of resource materials for students. Through a focus group, we included students in the review of early versions of the template. The final version is the one that received the highest student reviews for its features and functionality. The template² includes a site banner with a coordinated color scheme for the navigation panel as well as a significantly expanded navigation structure that features two main sections: “Required Materials” and “Extras and Help.” The former is for instructor uploads (course materials and assignments) as well as links to the individual course site pages for the following:

- announcements;
- Tulane Honor Code;
- syllabus and policies;
- required text;
- discussion board;
- instructor contact information; and
- My Grades [list].

The “Extras and Help” section includes links to pre-developed course site pages:

- technical help 24/7 contact information;
- *SCS Online Learning Student Guide*;
- plug-ins links;
- study skills;
- student services contact information; and,
- Blackboard user manual.

Online faculty communications and networking

SCS deans and program directors hold regular faculty meetings to communicate new policies and school- and institution-wide news. However, more than half of the SCS online faculty live outside of the commuting area and cannot attend the meetings. Also, while policy changes are conveyed to faculty whenever enacted, there was no comprehensive, regularly updated list of the standing policies for online faculty to reference. Accordingly, one of the objectives of the quality improvement initiative was to summarize and regularly distribute reminders of the essential SCS online instruction policies, including the following requirements for instructors:

- Use the myTulane Blackboard system to deliver their online course only.
- Use and require students to use the Tulane e-mail system for all correspondence concerning the course (in accordance with provisions of the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act).
- Provide for asynchronous learning activities and assessments, and use real-time activities and assessments exceptionally or only when absolutely essential; if mandatory real time activities and assessments are a part of an online course, the schedule for real time activities and assessments has to be included in the Schedule of Classes.
- Provide a window of 48 hours for students to take online tests and other types of assessments.
- Respond to student e-mail inquiries within 48 hours or sooner during periods of time when student assessments are due.
- Provide e-learning activities that promote interactivity between students as well as between students and the instructor.

Faculty receive e-mail reminders and periodic e-mail newsletters with announcements, updates, and online instruction “how to” information). We also arrange Skype conference calls so that instructors can network among themselves.

Online faculty resources site

To improve faculty communications, SCS developed an e-faculty Blackboard

organizational site, SCS Online Learning Faculty Resources, which is a clearinghouse for e-instruction policies and best practices. More specifically, the site includes orientation materials for new online faculty, a listing of all relevant SCS policies, and additional assorted pedagogy-related resource materials. The site also provides orientation and background materials on the use of 3D virtual world platforms in online learning as well as information on SCS's new 3D virtual world e-campus, the Tulane SCS Metaverse.³

Mentoring

The mentoring help available to faculty ranges from informal troubleshooting to more formal reviews of course sites. The latter can include an analysis of the presentation of course materials and the use of the platform. In one case, the review of an online course that received low student evaluations revealed a confusing distribution of course materials pertaining to different assignments. Students attempting assignments in this course had to search through multiple sections of the course site to find all of the relevant materials. When the faculty member followed the reviewer's suggestion to group all of the materials related to a given assignment in one place, the next round of student evaluations was significantly higher, going from an overall average student rating of 2.86 to 4.44 (out of 5.0).

Online course performance metrics

To develop and implement standard quality features and metrics, SCS tabulated the withdraw rate, student evaluations, and grade distributions for each class and compared them to the same metrics for the available face-to-face courses. In general, the online courses had a higher withdrawal rate than identical face-to-face courses. However, while there were some especially high levels of withdrawals from certain courses as well as some low student evaluations of teaching, there was no correlation between excessive withdrawals and low student evaluations. More usable data resulted from an upgrade of the student-records system, but the new data meant that the first year of the initiative could not be compared to the second year.

INSTRUCTION-CENTERED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

Sloan-C workshops

SCS purchased a Sloan-C College Pass⁴ as an economical and convenient way to keep faculty updated on new online instruction methods and platforms. The pass makes available 100 workshop seats to be used during a

calendar year for a fixed price. The available online workshop topics include “Getting Started: The First Step Towards Online Teaching,” “Academic Integrity in Online Education,” “Great Web 2.0 Tools to Improve Learning,” “Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Second Life [3D virtual world platform use in online learning],” “Video and Audio Tools for Teaching and Learning,” “Copyright Compliance for Online Educators,” and more.

Headsets

Interested faculty were given noise-reduction headsets for the online workshops and for narrating PowerPoint slides, screen capture video clips, and other materials requiring audio.

Technology Fair and learning management system training events

A late addition to the original set of objectives, the SCS Faculty Technology Training Fair was conceived to generate interest in the Sloan-C workshop series (see above) because only a small number of online faculty expressed an interest in participating in the Sloan-C workshops. At the fair, other innovative online teaching pedagogy and technology was demonstrated and tutorial summary handouts were provided. As a small incentive and thank-you for attending, all faculty members received a computer flash drive storage device. SCS also held a second faculty training event, “All About Blackboard.” The workshop included two sub-workshops, one covering the basic features and the other, the advanced features of the Blackboard learning management system.

INITIATIVE RESULTS

What worked

The two-year Online Course Quality Review and Improvement initiative had a significant impact in many areas:

- SCS online course sites had not only a more uniform appearance but also a consistent core of student resources and functionality.
- Faculty had a central place for finding policy materials, announcements, and e-instruction tutorial materials.
- Faculty and courses benefited from informal individual mentoring and formal course review.

- Students had access to new resources such as the SCS Online Learning Student Guide and academic and technical support information.
- SCS improved its identification and collection of important performance metrics.

What didn't

Most of the positive impacts were felt on the administration side of quality improvement rather than the faculty / instructional side. In hindsight, that was probably to be expected, given the high number of adjunct faculty and faculty who live outside the New Orleans commuting area. Adjuncts often have time constraints if they are teaching at multiple institutions, and even with free time, distance from campus can be an obstacle. Participation in at least one Sloan-C workshop was limited to one-third of the online faculty, although those who did participate found the training worthwhile. The technology fair, though widely attended, did not spur interest in the workshops, which was its objective. The two Blackboard workshops attracted only one online faculty instructor, and novice users who participated found that the discussion of platform features was too expansive in comparison to their intended use. As for the two Skype-based conference calls, the survey of faculty interest and availability in Skype networking indicated a much larger pool of faculty than the actual number who participated.

More analysis is required to address the issue of low faculty participation in training workshops and networking. There is apparent faculty interest, but we need to look more closely at the following:

- Customized online workshops that can be completed within a more flexible timeframe than the Sloan-C offerings.
- Alternatives to Skype conference calls for networking, including the Tulane SCS Metaverse 3D virtual world platform.
- Types of incentives to motivate faculty to learn new e-instruction practices, from mandatory participation to monetary incentives.

CONCLUSION

Although the SCS Online Course Quality Review and Improvement initiative formally ended in July 2011 after two years, efforts to make online courses better for students and to provide instructional opportunities for faculty are ongoing. Online learning supports the School of Continuing Studies' mission to make higher education available in the communities served by providing flexible, asynchronous learning opportunities. Using the myTulane courseware platform, students connect with their instructor and classmates in course-specific digital classrooms and are able to overcome constraints of time and place. Online education is often the preferred method of learning for many since it enables students to learn at their peak learning time, study at their own pace, focus on the specific course content that is the most difficult or interesting, and even have more contact with the instructor and classmates since the course discussion boards are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Our students have embraced online learning, and we anticipate that it will continue to make up a larger portion of our curriculum, although it will probably not replace face-to-face courses. Rather, what our experience suggests is that to ensure the integrity of our courses, we need to find ways to motivate faculty to use and keep up with the technology that is available. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. The SCS Online Learning Student Guide is online at <http://www.scs.tulane.edu/online/SCS%20Online%20Learning%20Guide.pdf>.
2. Link to tour of an SCS course site at <http://www.youtube.com/user/KayMayako#p/a/u/1/icsrWExoQLE>.
3. Video clip tours of the Tulane SCS Metaverse are available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1T8G2f4TEg and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wnzjfk36EM>.
4. The Sloan-C College Pass is profiled at <http://sloanconsortium.org/workshops>.