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E-learning programs bring new challenges and opportunities to community colleges. This chapter identifies twelve maxims for developing and sustaining a successful program, and illustrates the ways in which one community college has applied them.

Twelve Maxims for Creating and Sustaining a Successful E-Learning Enterprise

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Open any journal or educational Web site, and you will likely find some reference to e-learning or distance learning. The demand is growing, the tools for creating and offering distance classes are improving, and the hype is reaching fever pitch. But so are the questions: about accountability, about costs, about outcomes, about competition, and about how e-learning fits into the traditional higher education landscape.

In 1998, St. Petersburg College (SPC) in Florida launched Project Eagle (http://www.spcollege.edu/eagle), a federally funded, multiyear strategic initiative to increase community college students' access to four-year degrees and workforce training through distance education. Although the college experienced its share of setbacks, "aha!" moments, and surprises along the way, it has enjoyed spectacular success in building its eCampus and has come to appreciate that certain fundamental steps must be taken to achieve success. The twelve maxims described in this chapter provide a template for building and sustaining a successful distance learning program. SPC's experiences will serve as a guide for other community colleges working to create and maintain their own distance learning enterprises.

Maxim One: Verify Centrality to Mission

The first maxim, a necessary precondition for all others, is that e-learning must be integral to the institutional mission and have full executive support from the board, the president, and key administrative leaders. If distance

learning is viewed as secondary to the college's core mission it becomes harder to succeed when tough decisions need to be made.

The first steps to take in implementing an online learning program are including e-learning and a clear direction for its execution in the college mission statement and ensuring support by the leadership. At SPC, two specific references to distance learning were added to a 1998 revision of the mission statement, and e-learning was presented both as a way to enhance access to traditional programs and as an outreach mechanism for specialized areas of expertise.

Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) note that 33 percent of online students are enrolled in for-profit institutions. To compete with these institutions, community colleges must recognize e-learning as central to their mission. Once they do, community college e-learning programs will more easily reach a critical mass of classes, programs, and services. SPC has focused its mission on e-learning and has built a leadership team that understands how to support this mission. As a result, SPC's first online program, in veterinary technology, is now available nationwide.

Maxim Two: Build Institutional Commitment

E-learning is only one of the many good ideas and institutional priorities vying for attention and resources in community colleges. Because it tends to be the "new kid on the block," extra efforts to demonstrate its institution-wide benefits are necessary, and large numbers of faculty and staff should be included in the planning and implementation phases. In addition, e-learning leaders should be deliberate and intentional about sharing the credit and resources gained from online initiatives.

For example, e-learning leaders must show that online and face-to-face instruction can support each other, and that gains made through distance learning can be shared throughout the institution. SPC looks first to existing faculty to teach its online courses, and shares e-learning lab fee revenues with each instructor's home department. As one of the college's provosts stated, "eCampus stands for everyone's campus." Making friends, forging alliances, and navigating institutional politics and processes become extraordinarily important as enrollments in e-learning classes grow.

Maxim Three: Recognize Pedagogical Differences

Just as video cameras were first used to film plays, and ATMs were first used inside banks during normal business hours, e-learning began as the electronic equivalent of a traditional classroom. However, it is no longer acceptable to take existing face-to-face course material, post it on a Web site, and call it an online course. Simply bolting "new technologies onto a fixed plant, a fixed faculty, or a fixed notion of classroom instruction" (Twigg, 2003, p. 28) ignores the pedagogical differences inherent in the e-learning environment and how this difference can affect student outcomes.

The expected outcomes for SPC's online courses are just as high as they are for face-to-face classes; it is only the delivery method that changes. Johnson (2003) notes that "knowledge and skills about effective pedagogy, and when and how to use them" are strong indicators of success in e-learning (p. 149). To be effective, online classes must be planned and organized in advance and crafted with exceptional clarity. Expectations, including the minimum hardware requirements and expected level of student computer skills, must be clearly defined up front. As well, instructors should ensure that content and online communications will be readily accessible to students long before the class even begins.

Successful e-learning instructors must also consider issues in sharing content, either whole courses or learning objects that can be inserted into courses to illustrate or reinforce a concept or lesson. Good online content, including the packaged variety, is ubiquitous on the Net. Through Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Open Courseware Initiative, more than five hundred courses are now freely available (http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html). Textbook manufacturers are also scrambling to provide electronic supplements to their traditional wares to take advantage of the growing e-learning trend, and private companies are providing content-rich packages well beyond the scope of what individual institutions can afford to produce.

Good content is necessary, but it is far from sufficient in providing a good e-learning experience. Equally important is how the content is organized, delivered, and personalized by a dedicated faculty member. Once an online class begins, the role of the faculty member changes from lecturer to navigator and course manager. The professor's primary task becomes facilitating students' learning and motivation, and fostering interaction among students. Clear and constant communication and feedback are necessary, because online learning is passive unless it is organized appropriately and energized by the instructor. Students in online classes can access information quickly, leaving more time "to organize the information in their minds, think, and allow learning to take place. The key is to allow time for processing and provide assignments that encourage and check metacognitive functions throughout the assignments" (Lynch, 2002, p. 12).

Changes in faculty-student interactions are also necessary as conventional office hours give way to virtual office hours, e-mails, and discussion posts. Following in the footsteps of institutions like Athabasca University (http://www.athabascau.ca/misc/expect/index.htm), SPC developed a statement of rights and responsibilities for students, faculty, and staff to address standards for online interactions as well as issues such as academic honesty and online civility.

The tools to achieve pedagogically sound and educationally robust curricula are good and getting even better as learning management systems, software, and student and faculty access to broadband communications expand and mature.

Maxim Four: Invest in Instructional Development and Training

Effective online instruction is fundamentally different from face-to-face instruction, and traditional faculty training does not prepare instructors to navigate this new medium. Community colleges must invest in comprehensive instructional development, redevelopment, and training initiatives. Before teaching online, SPC faculty must take an online course focused on both online pedagogy and the e-learning management system. After completing the course, they are paired with a team of technology-focused curriculum designers and Web design specialists to develop a course based on content and elements of interactivity. Faculty learn basic skills from these technology experts, such as zipping files, creating PDFs, or performing other file management functions. They may also be given an extensive review of the new tools they can use in their courses. For example, SPC's online speech class called for students to present their speeches "live" to other students and the instructor. To fulfill this requirement, students used Click-to-Meet Web conferencing software to present their speeches in real time.

SPC's development team assists faculty in mastering both the pedagogical and the design skills they will need to successfully teach online. The team also counsels instructors in techniques for overcoming the workload inherent in an environment where every student in the class is actively involved. Training is accomplished one-on-one, through targeted workshops and an active online faculty listserv. In addition, SPC offers "cloning" classes—duplications of courses taught by other instructors—and arranges for experienced faculty mentors to guide new faculty the first time they offer an online course.

Maxim Five: Establish a Single Point of Contact

Originally, distance learning at SPC was spread throughout separate departments as early adopters began setting up the Internet equivalent of garage bands for specific programs. Today, however, a single point of contact is essential to address the growing number of student inquiries, program complexities, and standardization of tools and policies required to operate efficiently. For SPC, this has meant the creation and promotion of a central eCampus, with its own identity and staff, to be the gateway to all e-learning curriculum, information, and services.

Key to this "one-stop-shopping" approach is the eCampus Web site, a portal through which all student traffic flows (http://e.spcollege.edu). The site provides electronic access to eCampus staff through e-mail and live chat, and to specialized services such as cyberadvising and "Ask-a-Librarian." A single point of contact provides clarity and efficiency for both the institution and students. However, a centralized eCampus can be a double-edged sword if departments and other institutional entities perceive

a rapidly growing online program to be a threat to their autonomy. When community college administrators begin to centralize operations for efficiency, they should communicate with faculty and staff often and in multiple forums to explain and respond to questions, issues, and problems.

Maxim Six: Provide a Full Range of Electronic Services

Musical producer Phil Spector became famous in the 1960s for his "wall of sound," where vocals were surrounded by lush, multilayered instrumentation. This analogy works for successful e-learning programs; students have come to expect a full array of electronic educational services to support and improve on traditional academic and student support services.

These services, such as financial aid and cybertutoring, should be accessible from a distance, but they should also be available on-site for students who prefer that option. For example, a college might stream its awards ceremonies to allow distance learners to attend through interactive videoconference.

At SPC, a "clicks supported by bricks" model is employed: eCampus works closely with the physical campus, and faculty and staff are dedicated both to online and to technologically enhanced face-to-face learning. eCampus staff also coordinate with outlying physical campuses to give online students at each site access to personnel and support services to assist them with their online study. These "wall-of-sound" services are the same ones that face-to-face students currently expect. Thus, providing electronic services for online students may also help a college to attract and retain traditional students.

Maxim Seven: Develop a Robust Technical Infrastructure and Support Network

Imagine offering classes on campus until 10 P.M., only to have the facilities staff turn off the lights at 9 for some "routine maintenance." The equivalent—network interruptions—happens all too often in online classes. E-learning students work at all hours; some have enrolled in distance courses specifically because they could not do the work during conventional hours. Behind the servers and the software there must be an understanding of the nature of online learning and the demands of this different educational method on staffing, hours, and the expertise needed to maintain the system. Increasingly, e-learning requires sophisticated learning management systems and tools. These systems have care-and-feeding requirements that must be fulfilled by staff or outsourced.

Not everyone thrives in an e-learning environment. Meyer (2003) cited evidence that students with certain learning styles and behavioral types are more successful in online classes, as are students who are highly

motivated and have good organizational and computer skills. Successful institutions recognize the attributes and differences students bring to the learning environment, and provide them with self-assessment tools. If you believe the popular press, traditional students are coming to college already computer-savvy and equipped, ready to download class materials, view video lectures on their PDAs, and take exams on their cell phones. But most community college students face a variety of scheduling and other life challenges, and those enrolled in online classes face technical challenges as well. Whether the issue is having the necessary e-literacy skills or the right computer and software tools, most students, traditional and non-traditional, still need some assistance in making the transition to an electronic campus.

Institutions must recognize and provide the resources to address these infrastructure and support issues. Some challenges may be handled by the instructor during the courses themselves: by providing clear and detailed instructions about how to access and use tools, creating a rich interactive environment in which to ask questions, or providing a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section. To supplement online resources, institutions frequently provide a "help desk" to answer students' questions and supply them with various self-diagnostic tools. It may be challenging, however, to find the funding and staffing necessary to keep a help desk open for extended hours. Creative approaches like Rio Salado's round-the-clock online tutor service provide useful models (http://www.rio.maricopa.edu/services/student/support/tutoring).

Maxim Eight: Engage in Ongoing Marketing and Market Research

Just as there is a different pedagogy involved in teaching online students, marketing and market research are different in this environment too. A community college's Web site is critical for collecting and providing information to prospective students. SPC also uses strategies to get more exposure on popular search engines, and works with companies and discipline-focused agencies to advertise its e-learning opportunities.

After students visit the eCampus Web site, they should be able to understand the specifics of SPC's operations, programs, and services. Under the heading "Is eCampus right for you?" students can take a model course and thus become familiar with the learning tools they will use if they enroll. Also, front and center on the first page of SPC's Web site is a visitor survey designed to get baseline data on those exploring the site. eCampus also publishes a demographic profile, a student survey of instruction, focus group data, a bimonthly international e-letter on best e-practices, and periodic research briefs. These informational and research initiatives give community college scholars and practitioners a better idea about what is effective and where to improve.

Maxim Nine: Embrace Accountability and an Ongoing Quest for Quality

Questions about the quality of distance learning continue to surface, primarily from those who have not yet experienced it. And, to be fair, there may be quality problems in online classes, just as there are in face-to-face courses. Not getting back to students in a timely fashion in an online course is as unacceptable a practice as using the same lecture notes for twenty years in a face-to-face class. For the foreseeable future, however, the bar will be set higher for the higher-profile online classes.

E-learning programs should study their outcomes and engage in deliberate and ongoing program assessment and enhancement. Students should be given the opportunity to rate online instruction, and changes should be made based on their feedback. Courses should also be reviewed on a regular basis to make sure that information is current, that links work, and that institutionally determined objectives are met. Colleges should also track retention rates, set benchmarks, and monitor grade distributions.

At SPC, online courses are subject to a rigorous review every three years, and the educational technology staff works with departmental faculty to develop and maintain template or model courses that sustain high quality standards. Overall satisfaction with this process is high, and students indicate they are very likely (6.22 on a 7-point scale) to take another online course at the college.

Maxim Ten: Be Realistic About Costs

It is no surprise that fulfilling these maxims requires a significant financial commitment. Although community colleges will incur additional expenses for items like hardware and software, technical support, instructional support, and administrative infrastructure, they will create savings in physical plants and utilities. Many students are also willing to pay an additional fee for online learning, and this can go a long way toward underwriting the additional costs. Interestingly, the increasing infusion of technology into traditional courses, along with the rapid growth of blended classes, means that institutions are investing in some of the items essential for a distance education program even if they do not currently offer significant online options.

A number of models can be used to determine online program costs. For example, the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) has developed a Technology Costing Methodology (http://www.wcet.info/Projects/tcm/index.asp), and Morgan (2000) created an interactive tool to determine costs (http://thenode.org/networking/july2000/briefs.html). Despite the availability of these tools, community college administrators should be aware that few distance education programs make money.

Maxim Eleven: Do Not Make It More Complicated Than It Really Is

Although the first ten maxims certainly highlight the challenges facing institutions and their e-learning programs, colleges should not succumb to "paralysis by analysis." Because e-learning is new and different, there is an unfortunate tendency to look for new ways of operating when existing systems would work just fine. Take, for example, the issue of academic honesty. An online instructor at SPC confronted a student who had clearly plagiarized in a class assignment. He was surprised that the student was "truly and genuinely clueless" about the need to cite sources. The student's response: "I did the same thing in my face-to-face class last semester and got a B!" Academic honesty is a problem not only in online classes but across the academy.

Similar issues arise in the area of student evaluations. The same instruments used in traditional classrooms can measure satisfaction in an online course, with a few additional questions to address pedagogical differences. The processes for program review, student appeals, performance standards, and so forth can be adopted or adapted without extensive rework.

Maxim Twelve: Recognize the Rapid Rate of Change in E-Learning

The reality of e-learning is that in the six months between the time this chapter is edited and the date this volume is published, new technologies will be in use at community colleges. Similarly, looking back over SPC's educational e-practices publications from just a year or two ago, much of what were then innovations are now either givens or have been surpassed by other developments. The pace of change, especially in online education, is accelerating at a dizzying rate. Like runners on a treadmill where the speed continuously increases, distance education institutions have to speed up just to stay in place.

Community colleges must also pay attention to the changes in e-learning enrollment. At SPC, the number of online course sections increased from seventy-five to nearly five hundred between the fall of 1999 and the fall of 2003, and student enrollments grew from under twenty-eight hundred to over twelve thousand during the same period. Thus, both staffing and targeted funding were increased to support growth and changes in eCampus operations, and more importantly, to reward and sustain other departments across the institution that support e-learning.

Online learning is a wonderful way for students to take advantage of a community college education, including general education, vocational training, and workforce retraining. But that option requires commitment, resources, and energy, as well as the realization that ongoing improvement and rapid change go with the territory.

Integrating the Twelve Maxims

This chapter outlines how St. Petersburg College has followed the twelve maxims to create and maintain a successful e-learning program. Although each maxim is important on its own, they are also inextricably intertwined and together provide an integrated blueprint for the comprehensive, multi-layered regimen required to develop and sustain a successful program. More information about SPC's experience, including forms, procedures, and best practices, are available on the SPC Project Eagle (http://www.spcollege.edu/eagle) and eCampus (http://e.spcollege.edu) Web sites.

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