

IMPLEMENTING AN MBA ON THE INTERNET: INSOURCING DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHING AND OUTSOURCING WEB HOSTING

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ABSTRACT

The University of Dallas (Texas) (UD) began offering graduate credit-bearing courses on the Internet in the fall of 1997. Three courses and thirty students were involved in the first semester. By the fall semester of 1999, at the time of the ICTE meeting, UD will have 12 graduate courses, 20 sections, and approximately 500 students taking courses on the Internet. UD has committed to offer the full MBA by 2000. We have named this the IMBA (<http://imba.udallas.edu>). The first degrees offered in this venue are Electronic Commerce, Information Technology and Telecommunications.

This paper discusses the methods used to develop, teach and administer Internet courses using university resources--insourcing. UD has chosen to outsource the Web hosting for all aspects of this program. The reasons for selecting this option, and the issues and procedures implicit with this course of action, will be explored. The paper will stress the pragmatic and pedagogical aspects of this significant undertaking.

BACKGROUND

When UD began offering graduate management credit bearing courses on the Internet, we made the decision to outsource the Web hosting and Internet support. Initially, UD and Pace University (New York) formed an alliance for this purpose. UD professors were responsible for course development and teaching, while Pace University School of Computer Science and Information Systems provided the hosting support. Over a period of six semesters, the UD-Pace alliance demonstrated that the Web support required for Internet education can be outsourced effectively. This is a demanding requirement. Considerations include:

- Seven days a week, 24 hours a day support by highly trained staff members.
Enormous peak loads on the system during the evenings and weekends when UD's part-time MBA students take their on-line courses.
- Issuance of user ID's and passwords for a new set of users every semester.

The university offering Internet-based courses must either be prepared to support this complex, capital-intensive and skills-intensive hosting requirement or locate the appropriate partner.

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STRATEGY

Our partnership with Pace University proved the feasibility and desirability of outsourcing. We were able to get off to a fast start without a major investment in infrastructure or specialized staff. We look upon this two-year period as a pilot project that prepared us to move from an Internet-based five-course Telecommunications Management Certificate Program to a full MBA on-line.

In the spring of 1999, we investigated outsourcing alternatives for Web hosting of the full MBA. Since Pace University offers an MBA, continuing that partnership was not possible. UD selected eCollege.com (Denver, Colorado) for Web hosting this significantly larger undertaking. They were prepared to support us during our period of expansion. The first 12 courses were developed over the summer and launched in the fall of 1999. UD has an aggressive plan to add courses at the rate of approximately 10 per semester for the next four semesters to round out the MBA offers. Beyond that, UD plans to continue to add courses and programs to the Internet based on demand.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

UD professors began their task of converting courses to the Internet with a class on instructional design taught by eCollege.com. For many, new skills were required. They were all subject matter experts and teachers of the course that they were converting for the Internet. Lectures had to be presented in text or PowerPoint slides, with or without audio. The design assumption was that the students and professor would not need to be on-line at the same time. Using the asynchronous distance learning approach, interaction with students was implemented with a threaded discussion method or email depending on whether the communications is public (i.e. class discussion) or private (i.e. between teacher and student).

eCollege.com starts by setting up the course shells on the Web site. Professors can manage the course creation process themselves or send materials electronically to eCollege.com for a web-master there to do the necessary conversion from Word, PowerPoint or audio files to HTML for inclusion in the on-line course. Some professors relied extensively on this conversion assistance, while others did most of the work directly in HTML themselves. The eCollege system has a Course Manager software package that professors can use to develop new materials or modify those that are on the Net already. For those who are not interested or unsure of themselves, the web-master at eCollege.com is available to do maintenance of course materials under the direction of the professor. Others are controlling maintenance themselves.

The dominant lesson from this first semester of significant development is that it is time-consuming. The professor has to rethink the teaching strategy for the Internet. Biweekly meetings of the development team were held in order to share

ideas and approaches. Again, the instructional designers at eCollege.com were helpful in reviewing our approaches and suggesting new ones.

TEACHING

Next, the professor must learn how to interact, coach, encourage and evaluate the students' work. Of these, the most important task for the professor is that of tracking students' interaction on a week-by-week basis. They must not be permitted to "hide." Students need to receive feedback from the professor regularly. They must be made aware that their work is important to the professor, and that they can expect to receive comments and feedback regularly. Since the professor must review the work of all students on a continuous basis, we have found that the class size needs to be in the order of 20 students. When demand for a class exceeds that threshold, various approaches are used to control the class size. Most obvious is the division of the total demand into two or more independent sections. Alternatively, the professor may work with a graduate assistant who can perform some of the more clerical and computer oriented tasks. Ultimately, students' believing that they are important to the professor is a major determinant of the program's success.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

The University of Dallas' administrative support system was designed long before the Internet. As a result, much work was required on the part of the support staff to register students on-line. First and foremost, correct email addresses are required for all students registered for Internet classes. Even if the email addresses are in the students' file, they may not be up-to-date due to changes in ISP's or employment.

The students are advised, via email, of their student ID and password. Time is required for them to check out the learning site. Most of our students have knowledge of the Internet; however, there is a learning curve to navigate and use all the tools that are required within the course. In fact, to facilitate this learning, we schedule the first class "week" to be longer than all the rest. The first week is 11 days long (from Monday, the first day of class to the following Thursday) to allow time for all students enrolled in the class to learn the "ropes."

SUMMARY

The demand for the IMBA has taken us by surprise. In one semester we went from 125 students on-line to nearly 500. The dominant reason given is convenience, since our student body has many competing interests for their time. We saw no alternative but to in-source course development, teaching and administration. However, we are convinced that the decision to outsource Web hosting was absolutely the right one.