For Quality and Cost Effectiveness, Build a Hybrid Program

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

It is a common problem facing colleges and universities across the nation: increasing enrollments mean greater demand for courses, but stable or shrinking budgets mean no new money for additional faculty or new classroom space. The charge to “do more with less” has led to classrooms filled to capacity and faculty with overflowing teaching loads.

This is just the situation faced by Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) in Decatur, Ga. There, Debi Moon, director of distance learning, and her colleagues are working to build a hybrid course program that will not only alleviate demand pressures but also offer students a high-quality academic option for some of the college’s most popular courses.

Getting started

A hybrid course is a course that blends elements of face-to-face instruction with elements of distance learning, hopefully combining the best features of each. Using computer-enabled distance education techniques allows the college to move a significant portion of the course online, reducing demand for classroom seat time by as much as half. That is, a course that may meet twice a week in traditional face-to-face mode may well need only one weekly meeting as a hybrid course.

In order to realize the biggest time and space savings from the creation of hybrid courses, Moon said that GPC initially selected core courses, those common requirements that draw high numbers of students. Moon also explained that GPC makes a point of selecting the college’s best faculty for the hybrid program and providing “a training program that is very thorough.”

Faculty rights

One such training element is information on copyright and ownership. This is often a confusing and sometimes a contentious topic for colleges and universities. Faculty understandably want to retain ownership in their work with the ability to resell information and lessons created for their courses, while universities want to retain the same rights in courses they perceive as part of the fabric of their institution.

At GPC, “we tell faculty what their rights are early,” said Moon. She explained that GPC grants faculty 100 percent profit rights in the work they create for their hybrid courses, meaning that the faculty can sell lessons to a publisher or modules to another educational provider. However, the university asks for the right to use all of the work created for the hybrid course as a template for other courses. Adjunct professors can then use these template courses as a guide, ensuring some consistency in course content from instructor to instructor and allowing the adjunct faculty access to the guidelines created by full-time faculty.

Changing the way you do things

Higher education has not changed much since its inception; students have been receiving information in a classroom setting for centuries. However, hybrid courses offer the chance for one of the first real shifts in teaching and learning practice since Gutenberg fired up his printing press. Indeed, Graham Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, has called hybrid courses “the single greatest unrecognized trend in higher education.”

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One of the differences between traditional and hybrid courses lies in the aspect of learning that Moon calls “first exposure.” This is the period in which students first meet new information, concepts, and procedures, and, in a face-to-face class, it often occurs during class time. Faculty spend valuable time in the role of “sage on the stage,” delivering lectures and introducing students to new material. Students are then sent home to grapple with the material for the first time on their own, writing papers, working problems, or otherwise processing information. This model encourages students to make their major time investment at the last minute, while class time is spent with students who are not fully prepared in the material. “We waste a lot of time dumping information on the student,” said Moon.

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Moon has noticed that moving first exposure to material into the online portion of the course frees the faculty member to encourage more in-depth processing activities when the class meets in person. While online work may lend itself to completion of case studies, tutorials, self-testing exercises, and online group collaborations, face-to-face time may be best utilized with interactive exercises such as lab work. Faculty are encouraged to think closely about their course goals and objectives, designing elements that can best be conveyed online and which will support the interactions that take place in the traditional classroom.

Faculty must also give thought to the tone set by their online interactions, an issue that they may take for granted in traditional interactions. Techniques for creating a positive tone include using layout and site design methods such as alternating color and font used, posting faculty pictures and personal information, and considering what a first-time or occasional visitor will first notice when visiting the course. Faculty can also create a positive tone through communication, such as providing prompt feedback, acknowledging receipt of student work, and providing encouragement as the course progresses. Finally, instructional design also plays a role in setting the tone; faculty can include a complete list of assignments and due dates for students to plan ahead and introduce elements that individualize the course, making the interaction fun and less “canned” than if a more sterile approach is taken.
The GPC model program

To encourage faculty to develop hybrid courses, GPC developed the Hybrid Fellowship, a faculty development program for teaching and creating hybrid courses. One third of GPC’s full time faculty applied for the first session, and the next third requested space in the next session. Each session held 70 participants.

Training courses were created to give faculty a solid background in pedagogical, technical, and relevant legal skills. Courses include: How to Build a Hybrid Course, WebCT Training, Using the Exemplary Course Standards, Legal Issues and Copyright, ADA Compliance Training for Distance Learning, Pedagogical Skills for Online Courses, Creating a Positive Online Tone, and Using Streaming Media.

Once faculty had been trained, GPC created a public relations campaign to let students know what a hybrid course is and how they might benefit from taking one. This campaign, which began two semesters before such courses were introduced, included a website, flyers, and open houses.

Moon had declared the hybrid course program a success, lauding the 50 percent reduction in classroom space needs as well as benefits in course quality from the use of controlled course templates and increases in faculty morale from easing workloads. What began as a move of pragmatism Moon hopes will continue to blossom into a choice of superior pedagogy.

“My dream [is to be able to say] we run hybrids because our students learn better,” she said.

Ongoing mentoring

Mentoring does not end when a new instructor starts his or her first online course. The mentor also oversees the course throughout the semester, providing support, answering questions, and offering suggestions. These new online instructors also have access to all the resources on the Moving Ideas Network, including peers in the mentoring program. They can ask questions when they run into trouble, and as they gain experience, they can begin sharing their expertise with peers and those new to the online classroom.

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 recommends Flora. “If more than one person in an area is taking a course, have them meet in study groups; have them take turns with child care.” She also advises having target learners participate in curriculum development. “We’re doing this with a new DE master’s program; we’re working to have learners from particular groups come up with examples and exercises that are meaningful to them.”

“We’re identifying where things are working well now, and how we can integrate good ways of working with communities, and helping to build native businesses, into our curriculum development process,” says Flora.

It’s also important to ensure that DE program marketing, and the images used in courses, appeal to specific populations. “We’re working with collective marketing approaches, using things like a horseback rider and a camp; you pull these together and redesign your marketing activities,” says Flora.

Flora is seeing more and more schools incorporate cultural relevance to reach underserved populations. In the U.S., “the tribal schools formed because traditional institutions weren’t meeting Native Americans’ needs; education didn’t make sense,” she says.

Educators working with Hmong immigrants in Fond du Lac, Minn., have found that the same cross-cultural principles apply, notes Flora. “The approach that works with Native Americans also works with them.” She says findings from British studies with immigrant groups agree that it helps to teach skills for a specific life purpose rather than for abstract purposes.

“They persevere more; this is why being culturally attuned is critical,” Flora says.