



# **EXPERT INTERVIEWS: DEVELOPING ONLINE PROGRAMMING**

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# PROJECT OBJECTIVE

This report is intended to support institutions in developing strategies for creating online learning opportunities.



- ✓ How do smaller institutions approach the development of online courses and programs?



- ✓ What are common challenges smaller institutions face when developing online courses and programs?



- ✓ What strategies are successful and useful for overcoming common challenges?

# METHODOLOGY



Hanover Research conducted **ten (10) in-depth interviews** with administrators in small institutions involved in online program implementation.

## Note:

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



1

Institutions new to online learning should gradually implement online delivery over at least a two-year period:

- Start with a limited number of courses or degree programs
- Offer initial online opportunities during the summer, when traveling students are more likely to enroll and benefit
- Survey students on their preferences for online courses when it comes to structure, services, components, and elective subjects

2

While allowing faculty flexibility to design online courses that align with content and learning objectives, institutions should implement some standardized structure.

- Courses should contain significant asynchronous components to optimize flexibility
- Cap class sizes and incorporate discussion boards and synchronous meetings to ensure student engagement

# RECOMMENDATIONS



3

To ensure faculty and administration are invested in the success of online programming, gain buy-in prior to implementation by:

- Clearly communicating the benefits of online teaching and alleviating any concerns about its effectiveness
- Providing thorough training to faculty on online platforms
- Allowing time for online faculty to come together and discuss successful strategies
- Selectively hiring faculty who express commitment to online teaching
- Modeling behavior by having senior-level faculty teach online courses

# KEY FINDINGS



- **Small institutions implement online programming gradually by starting with a small number of courses or one degree program and scaling up over time.** Gradual implementation ensures that initial program structures are successful before introducing additional programs and gives stakeholders time to become accustomed to online learning.
- **Small institutions retain the benefits of their traditional course formats by keeping class sizes small and creating opportunities for student-faculty interaction.** Online courses are mostly asynchronous to allow for flexibility, but incorporate interactional structures such as discussion boards and synchronous meetings.
- **Faculty resistance is the primary challenge institutions encounter when implementing online programming.** Faculty members often see online programs as a threat to their role and quality instruction and worry about learning new techniques. To minimize anxiety, institutions invest in thorough training and collaboration on online instruction.



# KEY FINDINGS



- **Participants implement online programs according to either faculty suggestions or higher-level administrative strategy.** An individual faculty member can introduce an online program idea to administrators, who approve the program. On the other hand, the administration can unilaterally implement online programming according to strategy informed by program demand assessments.
- **Small institutions face some considerations in developing in-demand programs and marketing courses or degrees to the general public.**
  - Small institutions tend to focus on MBA, nursing, or similar professional programs in order to widen their student base beyond a traditional undergraduate population.
  - Due to market saturation in some degree programs, small institutions struggle with losing enrollment to larger institutions with more name recognition.
  - Small institutions often struggle to anticipate enrollment numbers of online programs.





# DECISION-MAKING PROCESS



*We look at the competitive landscape, we look at the cost-benefit analysis, [and] we look at our resources.*

**-Anonymous**

# KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Online program implementation is carried out by internal and external stakeholders within the institution.

Internal Stakeholders	External Stakeholders
<p><b>Curriculum committee (and Faculty Senate, if applicable):</b> Final approval authority for newly introduced online programs</p> <p><b>Provost's office:</b> Carries out evaluation process for new online programs and determines program content and structure</p> <p><b>Faculty:</b> Involved in course development and writing the curriculum; works with instructional design team</p> <p><b>Instructional designers and educational technologists:</b> Involved in course development and implementing online platform</p>	<p><b>Market research firms:</b> Typically utilized at the front-end of online program development to assess program demand</p> <p><b>Marketing firms:</b> Typically utilized in the back-end of program development to advertise the program to potential students</p> <p><b>Subject matter experts:</b> Hired on an as-needed basis to develop courses and fill any knowledge gaps within the institution</p>

# PROGRAMS INITIATED AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Institutions may decide to implement an online program based on an initial suggestion from an individual faculty member or administrator.



Bottom-Up

In a bottom-up approach, a faculty member can suggest a program or course idea to upper management, who will then perform an evaluation process prior to implementation.

In a top-down approach, upper management unilaterally implements online programming based on a strategic framework informed by market research insights and focuses program development on the most in-demand subjects.



Top-Down

# CASE STUDY: TOP-DOWN PROCESS

At one institution, online program implementation begins with the Provost's office conducting a program demand assessment.

Provost's office hires a marketing partner to conduct an environmental scan to assess program demand.



The Provost's office then hires external subject matter experts in the in-demand subjects to develop curricula and program outline detailing the program format.



The Provost's office sends a program proposal and a financial pro forma to the curriculum committee for review. The committee ensures there are enough resources available to implement the program.



Once approved, faculty members work to develop the program in-depth with a team of instructional designers and education technologists. While the program is being developed, the program partners with vendors to market the program to encourage enrollment.

# CASE STUDY: BOTTOM-UP PROCESS

At another institution, online program implementation typically begins with a faculty member proposing a program.

Faculty or unit conceives of idea for an online program or course and proposes it to the administration in a concept paper summarizing the program idea.



Provost's office reviews the concept paper. If approved, the office develops it into a white paper detailing the online program or course structure, format, and curriculum. The office then hires an external firm to conduct research on market demand for such a program.



If the program passes the market research assessment, the curriculum is developed by faculty members and other relevant internal or external subject matter experts along with a team of instructional designers and education technologists.



The curriculum then undergoes an approval process by the curriculum committee and faculty senate.

# ON-CAMPUS COURSES ADAPTED FOR ONLINE

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*We have faculty who will say things like, 'I'm going to teach an online course, so we'll get media technology to come in and videotape my face-to-face course and we'll put that up on our LMS and that'll be my online course next semester.' No, that's not an online course. The goals are the same. In many ways, online teaching and face-to-face teaching have some similarities, but the way it's operationalized are very, very different...You need to have some instructional design support that are familiar with the online environment.*  
-Anonymous

**The development process for online courses is distinct from the process for traditional courses, even when adapting an existing curriculum.**

Participants stress the need for pedagogical rigor and adapting course materials to achieve the same learning outcomes within the online context.

Online courses are built by an instructional design and education technology team while faculty members and subject matter experts provide input on the curriculum.





# **ONLINE PROGRAM DESIGN**



*My role is to identify what are the instructional technologies? How do we resource them? How do we support faculties? How does marketing get involved? How does our admissions cycle also get upended in some ways?*

**-Anonymous**

# SMALL CLASS SIZES & STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION

Participants view small class sizes and quality interactions between students and faculty as one of the primary benefits of a small institution. Online courses and programs can retain these qualities through:

## Maintaining Small Class Sizes

Despite increased capacity, institutions continue to cap class sizes at similar numbers to on-campus courses.

*Our online courses are capped in most cases at 20 and hover anywhere from around 12 to the 16 students. -Anonymous*

## Discussion Boards

Students are often required to post frequently over the course of the week to maintain engagement

*Student [post on boards] Wednesday and they continue posting through Saturday, Sunday. So that keeps students engaged. -Anonymous*

## Audio Participation

One institution uses VoiceThread to enhance asynchronous formats via video and audio participation

*We feel it's a high level of flexibility but also a high level of engagement because you're hearing and seeing real people. -Anonymous*

## Phone Calls w/ Instructors

One institution requires instructors to engage in a phone call with each student at the start of a course.

*We find that when we provide the student with that human connection to the faculty they seem to, it makes it real. -Anonymous*

# SENSE OF CONNECTION TO THE INSTITUTION

*We just assumed that they would never need access to these more traditional campus-based resources. We're finding something very different though.*  
-Anonymous

*When we have events on campus, we have a speaker on campus, there's a digital recording of it that we can use for our classes (...) just to make it feel like the online students got the benefit of that person coming.*  
-Anonymous

Institutions strive to ensure their online students feel just as connected to the institution as their on-campus counterparts. This entails making as many of the on-campus services as possible accessible to online students.

- Student support services (e.g. counseling)
- Academic advising
- Career Center Services
- Library resources
- Guest speaker lectures

For fully online programs, institutions may include an introductory course that acts as an orientation to the institution's history and mission.

# COURSE FORMAT BASED ON SUBJECT AREA

Institutions structure formatting based on their compatibility with the subject.

## Fully online or blended courses for flexible students

Courses where students have the option of attending lectures either online or on-campus are suitable for students who are travelling or working during scheduled lectures.

## Hybrid courses for subjects with practicum components

Courses that include mandatory on-campus sessions tend to be applied to courses with a lab component, requiring hands-on work.

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*If it's a more non-traditional graduate population that's the intended market for a program, then that's when we would look to figure out ways in which we can leverage instructional technologies to reach that population of students who obviously have a number of life constraints that prevent them from coming to campus as frequently as a typical on-campus program would be.*  
-Anonymous

# BALANCE OF STANDARDIZATION AND CUSTOMIZATION



Participants feel online courses must be customizable in order to accommodate different types of material and ensure learning objectives for the course are met

*"It's not a cookie-cutter approach. Not every course looks the same. (...) we have a whole toolbox of tools and strategies and part of my job is to work with those faculty to design each and every course to meet the needs of that specific course, not try to fit some kind of mold." -Anonymous*

*"I want to make sure that our courses all look the same, give faculty some latitude within that framework. But it's really confusing for students if they're taking three classes, and all three have a different-looking home page when they log in." -Anonymous*

However, courses should have some degree of standardization, creating structure for faculty and minimizing confusion for students



*"It has largely been kind of at the whim and the will of the individual instructors. We're trying very hard to provide some structure and some policy around **standardization across the institutional route to kind of keep that craziness in-check.**"*

*-Anonymous*

# MOSTLY ASYNCHRONOUS

**Institutions largely structure lectures in an asynchronous format to provide the most flexibility for students but allow opportunities for synchronous meetings between the students and the instructor.**

This provides students with convenience when it comes to attending lectures and participating in discussion boards, along with an opportunity to interact and engage with the instructor.

Because synchronous meetings are difficult to schedule, participants highlight the need to optimize time together for the most interactive exercises and discussions.

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*Generally, it's asynchronous...it's convenient to have an asynchronous course. The minute you make it synchronous, you lose some of the advantages of the convenience... Now, having said that, I will always, as a rule, ask students, "Hey, if you've got questions and you would like to have a synchronous dialogue, we can set that up."*

-Anonymous

*Face-to-face time should be interactive and real-time interactive. If you can get away with an asynchronous discussion, put that online. That kind of thing. So what can be easily done from your desk versus what really needs to be sitting around a table together to do.*

-Anonymous





# CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS



*We overcame survival anxiety with simplicity and transparency that this was not a veiled attempt to reduce the size of the faculty. We overcame learning anxiety by investing heavily in training.*

**-Anonymous**

# CHALLENGE: FACULTY RESISTANCE

A primary challenge in implementing online programming is overcoming faculty opposition.

## Sources of Resistance

- **Perception** of online programs as a threat to their role in the institution
- **Reluctance** to undergo a steep learning curve and adjustment to a new, online platform
- **Skepticism** that online learning is as effective as in-person learning

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*I think sometimes faculty are unsure of what that looks like and anytime there's uncertainty, that makes people anxious. Sometimes faculty recognize that, 'Wow, this is going to be a lot of work,' and they simply don't want to do it. -Anonymous*



## Solutions

- **Clearly communicating** to faculty that online programming will not replace their roles
- **Providing training** including opportunities to collaborate and share successful strategies
- **Setting a precedent** by having provosts and chairs teach online courses

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*We call them online debrief sessions, (...) faculty who have taught online previously will share some of the things that they're doing in their classes that are unique and that are working well -Anonymous*

“

*We invested heavily in training [and] alleviating learning anxiety. (...) I model the behavior myself and teach a few courses online. -Anonymous*

# CHALLENGE: ESTABLISHING QUALITY

With limited precedent for online programming, one institution encountered challenges in establishing a standard set of best practices for developing online courses as well as creating a system for quality assurance.

The participant emphasizes the importance of faculty dedicating enough time to plan their courses thoroughly and administration formally deciding on and enforcing quality standards.

An instructional designer at another institution mentions using a survey to measure online course quality.

*A good online course should be fully specified when it's rolled out (...) Getting faculty to understand the expectation of what a quality online course is, getting the institution, the provost office to be able to enforce what is a quality standards for online courses.*

*-Anonymous*

*[The survey has] helped us benchmark some of our services and resources and course design... And so we've used that feedback to improve our courses over time.*

*-Anonymous*

# CHALLENGE: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Online students may struggle to sustain the motivation and self-discipline needed to keep up with the program or course.

To combat this challenge, participants note that online classes should avoid lecture-heavy formats and focus on activities and projects that keep students engaged.



One participant notes that this is less of a challenge for military schools, as students with military experience tend to have the drive to complete work independently.



*Online learning takes a high level of time management and motivation to keep up with things. -Anonymous*

*What we've found is that didactic teaching doesn't work well in our online programs. So we really encourage [courses where] instruction is project-based. Identifying problems, solving problems collaboratively, mimicking the work that they actually do in the field. -Anonymous*

*They are capable of being self-taught and complete their work on their own. Which is always been a kind of discussion about can [undergraduates] do that work on their own without constant poking and prodding from their faculty. -Anonymous*



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# **OTHER SMALL INSTITUTION CHALLENGES**

# UNPREDICTABLE PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

*Online programs are much more volatile than on-ground programs....they can fall apart in ways that you wouldn't expect. The marketing is absolutely crucial. You're going to get that spot on.*  
-Anonymous

*We struggle with online enrollments in some of the programs and not others.*  
-Anonymous

Institutions generally find it difficult to predict the success of newly introduced programs.

Institutions strive to prevent low enrollment numbers by assessing program demand at the start of program development and hiring third-party marketing firms at the back-end of program development.

However, despite these efforts, some programs end up getting too few enrollments and ultimately canceled, resulting in profit losses.





# EXTERNAL COMPETITION

Small institutions are currently struggling to find a solution to losing enrollment to other institutions.

Small institutions struggle to compete for enrollment with larger institutions with more name recognition.

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*A major challenge that we are experiencing is other institutions breaking into the market. We've seen a lot of publics getting into the market and that has cut into some of the students that we might traditionally be able to recruit. -Anonymous*

Institutions are experiencing market saturation in some Master's programs, such as the MBA.

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*More challenges is master's programs right now in the very competitive environment because there are so many players in the marketplace. [Our] MBA used to be one of the most enrolled programs when we started, right now it's not. -Anonymous*

The background of the slide is a grayscale photograph of a building's exterior, showing architectural details like windows and structural elements. A semi-transparent green rectangular box is centered horizontally across the middle of the image. The text 'IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION' is written in white, bold, uppercase letters within this green box.

# **IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION**



*It was a gradual process. It was risk-averse, and it was very much tailored to a skeptical faculty.*

**-Anonymous**

# IMPLEMENTATION IS A GRADUAL PROCESS

**Institutions typically introduce online programming by starting with a single degree program or individual course and steadily scaling up over time.**

A gradual implementation process allows institutions to test program success prior to expanding as well as give faculty time to adjust to a new teaching modality.

Schools tend to select from their strongest or most popular courses/programs.

**Institutions have found success introducing online programs during the summer semester, when students are likely to be offsite and willing to enroll in the courses.**

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*Develop a proof of concept and then scale up if there's enough internal consensus around that program's success. -Anonymous*

*It developed gradually. We started with MBA because we had a very strong business school at that time. Then slowly added master of science in nursing and master of science in cybersecurity. -Anonymous*

*Over the summer is the perfect time to operate. [The cadets] will be out training all over the world. -Anonymous*

# MOTIVATING FACULTY ENSURES SUCCESS

*I think a lot of things have been going well and I think we've seen a lot of success in faculty participating in the trainings that we offer to teach online. -Anonymous*

*We developed this faculty training course that turned out to be a huge success. So that really has helped faculty feel supported in their efforts. -Anonymous*

**Faculty participation and engagement is crucial to online program success.**

Participants have found that developing an online training course for faculty new to teaching online proved to be successful in ensuring good quality teaching as well as increased morale, as faculty members felt supported by the institution in the transition to online teaching.



# HIRING OUTSIDE VENDORS MINIMIZES RISK

Institutions hire outside vendors at the start of online program implementation to install and maintain the online platform and to market the program.

Vendors can absorb the start-up costs of implementing an online program, including:

- **Profit losses** if the program does not get enough enrollment
- **Costs of purchasing and installing** an LMS platform such as Blackboard and Canvas
- **Costs of initial program advertising/marketing**

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*We were approached by Bisk (...) 'We'll provide the service. We'll maintain it. We'll do the advertising.' We negotiated a proportional cut in terms of the profit, and they would absorb any loss.*

*-Anonymous*

Once the program gains traction, some institutions terminate the partnership and continue operating their online platforms in-house. One institution negotiated a profit-sharing scheme where they provided the vendor a proportional cut of their profits while the company absorbed any losses.

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*We started with an online program manager and partnered with a vendor. Then we stopped that relationship. We terminated that and then did the rest of it in-house.*

*-Anonymous*

# SEEK CONSISTENT STUDENT FEEDBACK

## Feedback on New Programs

Institutions will conduct research amongst students or prospective students to gather insights on their interests, needs, and preferences as it relates to online course content and instruction.

*As part of that development process we are contracting with a firm to help us create a prospective student panel and that panel will be interviewed to help us think through some of the issues not just with the content of the program but most importantly the delivery of the program. We're pretty confident there's an opportunity but it's really important for us to make sure that we deliver and structure the program properly.*

*-Anonymous*

## Feedback On Existing Programs

Student surveys at the middle and/or end of a course are employed to collect feedback on course materials and ensure that online instruction is meeting expectations.

*We want to make sure that the online faculty does what they're supposed to do. So it's kind of a feedback of the student or faculty performance within the class and as well as student own-- its own assessment of his or her progress in the class. At the end of the class, that's a classic course evaluation. And that is used for course improvement and faculty evaluation.*

*-Anonymous*







Thank you.