Key Findings

Strategies for Supporting Off-Campus Growth

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Executive Summary

The explosion of the Internet during the 1990s provided a compelling new vehicle for colleges and universities to employ to extend the reach of the institution. Web-based technologies introduced dynamic new teaching and learning environments, while setting a new threshold for interactivity in distance-learning courses and programs. Web-based distance learning—defined as instruction delivered at a distance via the World Wide Web, primarily in the form of credit-based courses comprising programs leading to certifications or degrees—has achieved strong growth in a short time; Eduventures analysis indicates that more than more than 350,000 students were enrolled in fully online distance-learning programs in 2001–2002, a figure growing more than 40 percent annually.

Numerous institutions have achieved success serving students at a distance over the Web, ranging from prominent public universities to community colleges. Their experiences demonstrate that nearly any institution can achieve success in Web-based distance learning by engaging the organization in a deliberate process to evaluate and develop an institutional online distance-learning strategy.

Strategies for Supporting Off-Campus Growth highlights four strategic considerations—vision/mission, financial goals, market reach, and brand—and a set of six institutional competencies—leadership/management, capital financing, technology management, marketing, partnership ability, and institutional and faculty flexibility—that serve as the critical foundation on which institutions establish distance-learning program models. Successful programs must be closely aligned with the vision/mission of the institution; the financial goals should be clearly articulated, and the program's structure needs to align with these objectives; a target audience must be identified and agreed upon; and the brand reputation of the institution must be considered in setting a distance-learning strategy. In addition, colleges and universities must evaluate the six critical institutional competencies to foster online success and determine whether they can access them by leveraging existing internal capabilities, developing the competence, or outsourcing the skills.

Colleges and universities should review these issues and factors prior to launching a Web-based distance-learning initiative or when auditing an already established program. Institutions will then identify one of four principal organizational models—distance learning division, for-profit spin-off,

enterprise model, or single school model—that best fits institutional objectives and resources. Each model has distinct advantages and challenges of which institutions should be aware when developing or modifying their distance-learning unit.

Following this analysis, an institution is prepared to outline an implementation plan to launch a Web-based distance-learning initiative or make modifications to an existing program that has not fulfilled expectations. Colleges and universities will discover a plethora of discrete questions and activities that need to be addressed to launch an online program; a handful of these issues will prove most pressing including developing incentives to encourage faculty participation, implementing comprehensive student support services and establishing processes for measuring and tracking program success. Moreover, institutions should recruit Web-based distance-learning advocates at all levels of the organization during this self-assessment to ensure broad-based commitment from faculty, staff, and administrators.

The strategic considerations and key institutional competencies can be best understood and evaluated through investigation of specific examples. The study includes detailed case studies of four university efforts—Penn State's World Campus, Nova Southeastern's "Centralized-Decentralized" model, Eastern Oregon University's Division of Distance Education, and Cornell University's eCornell. Each case offers insight into the genesis of the institution's distance-learning efforts, key elements of the organizational model for online efforts, evaluation of the strategic considerations and critical competencies, and recommendations. In addition, a composite case study drawing on the experiences of seven community colleges offers further insight into the efforts of institutions that have embraced Web-based distance learning to meet their mission to serve their local communities while also contending with fiscal challenges and heightened competition from for-profit providers.

Strategies for Supporting Off-Campus Growth examines the strategic considerations and competencies critical to success for brick-and-mortar institutions' Web-based distance-learning programs. It provides college and university senior administrators and key decision makers with a framework for addressing the critical institutional issues and highlights a set of diverse distance-learning models to help leaders translate strategy into practice. The study concentrates on the experiences of two- and four-year colleges and universities that have launched fully online programs that extend their academic reach and generate off-campus growth opportunities; both virtual university (such as Michigan Virtual University) and consortia (including eArmyU and the Electronic Campus of the Southern Regional Education Board) models are outside the scope of this study and present potentially different challenges and opportunities for institutions.

After a brief introductory section that provides background and context for the current Web-based distance-learning landscape, readers will find the following sections:

- "Driving Web-Based Distance Learning Success" furnishes a detailed analysis of the strategic considerations and internal competencies. The principal distance-learning organizational models—and the benefits and challenges to each model—and leading implementation issues facing institutional leaders are also included in this section.

- "Transitioning from Strategy Development to Program Execution" profiles the Web-based distance-learning efforts of four universities and seven community colleges. The strategic considerations and internal competencies are evaluated within the context of current

institutional practices, and each case furnishes numerous tactics that should assist college and university leaders chart a course for their unique institutional efforts.

- "Appendices" describe the study research methodology, market sizing assumptions, and other selected topics.

The analysis and findings in this study draw extensively from conversations with higher education administrators, faculty, and staff; senior executives at postsecondary businesses; and other industry observers. This qualitative, interview-based methodology results in an issues-oriented analysis of key concepts and questions concerning Web-based distance learning and is less dependent on quantitative survey data and other statistical analysis. The analysis and findings included in this study are therefore drawn not only from the interviews conducted for the express purposes of this research endeavor, but also from hundreds of interviews and conversations conducted by Eduventures analysts concerning online learning and Web-based distance-learning programs.

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