



Blackboard  
**Institute**



Preliminary Findings Summary:

# Effective Practices in Fully Online Higher Education Programs

## Introduction

Education institutions of all shapes and sizes are taking a serious look at fully online programs as a strategy for addressing some of their most pressing needs, including increasing access, reaching new students, creating new funding streams and improving graduation rates. But taking this step can be challenging, as skeptics of fully online instruction will quickly point out. Financing, marketing, and recruiting for fully online programs present new challenges to administrators. At the same time, teachers struggle with adapting to fully online education and meeting the high demands of their virtual students.

To look more closely at these challenges and start uncovering practice-driven solutions all educators can leverage, the Blackboard Institute undertook a multi-phase study of effective practices in fully online programs. We completed the first phase of this work – qualitative interviews with leaders of nine successful fully online programs – in spring/summer of this year. In this preliminary findings summary, we highlight some of the key drivers of success we uncovered. More detail on these drivers, a full presentation of the Phase 1 findings (including detailed institutional examples) and information about upcoming Phase 2 research can be found at [http://www.blackboardinstitute.com/online\\_programs.asp](http://www.blackboardinstitute.com/online_programs.asp)

## Key Program Drivers

The research identifies nine areas of common focus among these high-performing institutions as they built their online programs. Within each area, significant variation in approach exists based on the distinct missions and needs of the various institutions.

### Fully online programs reviewed

1. Baker College Online
2. Brigham Young University
3. Central Texas College
4. Drexel eLearning
5. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide Online
6. Ivy Tech Community College
7. Kentucky Community and Technical College System Online
8. University of Southern California
9. University of Texas TeleCampus

### 1. Leadership

A successful online program needs a strong champion from the administration. That leader should have a vision for online learning that is closely tied to the institutional mission, as well as the ability to corral the support of other administrators and empower an equally important leader of the online program.

*“We have widespread support from the administration of the college. Our President is very interested in distance education... in promoting it and in making sure we’re doing it at the highest quality possible...we present monthly to our 14 Vice Chancellors for Academic Affairs...when you think that those folks spend, at a minimum, an hour a month...that’s a fairly significant investment across the college.”*

Dr. Kara Monroe, Executive Director,  
Center for Instructional Technology, Ivy Tech College

A successful online program needs a strong champion from the administration.

## 2. Separation & Autonomy

While many programs rely heavily on the traditional institution in various ways, each institution interviewed created a separate group focused specifically on online initiatives in order to foster greater flexibility and increased openness to the change represented in these programs.

*“If you’re playing in the online world you should be aware that there’s a lot of creative competition out there. You have to somehow convince the President, Provost, Dean that you need a degree of independence to try things... Traditional is not going to get it done in this marketplace right now.”*

Art Zamkoff, President and CEO, Drexel eLearning

## 3. Diverse Financial Models

The research points to the importance of carefully tailoring financial models to the goals, mission and culture of the online program and institution overall. As a result, financial models such as revenue recognition and compensation vary significantly.

### Revenue recognition models

University of Texas TeleCampus (UTTC), for example, is a cost center funded by the universities within the University of Texas system. Each university’s contribution is based on the number of students they enroll online. Conversely, no revenue flows into UTTC as a standalone entity as tuition dollars go straight to the various universities. University of Southern California (USC) uses a similar approach.

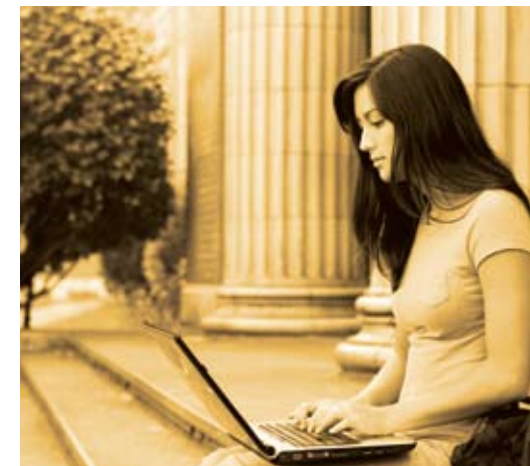
Other fully online programs are self-sustaining and fund their offerings at least partially through tuition dollars. They include Baker College Online, Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) Online, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) Worldwide Online, Brigham Young University (BYU) and Drexel eLearning.

### Compensation models

The online programs researched carefully compensate the various constituents involved in delivering their online courses to ensure ongoing support, as well as quality courses and course delivery. Constituents include content creators, teachers, and the department within the traditional institution that originally supported an online counterpart.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, BYU and KCTCS Online employ multi-tiered compensation models to reward personnel and departments for their level of work. BYU uses a sliding scale for payment based on course complexity by factoring in the difficulty of grading, expected student-teacher interaction and effort from the sponsoring department to create the course. KCTCS uses a sliding scale based on educator performance by factoring in the number of students in the course, faculty online professional development scores and faculty performance on course satisfaction surveys. BYU and KCTCS’s graded compensation models focus on rewarding instructors and administrators for high-level effort and quality.

Financial models such as revenue recognition and compensation vary significantly



*"The campus is offering the course, and the campus is collecting the tuition and the fees, and the campus is providing the faculty member to teach. TeleCampus has no ownership; we're the service entity. When they're offering a course, we are the vehicle and the utility that makes it available. The course and the faculty belong to the institution that is offering it."*

Dr. Darcy Hardy, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, UT System and Executive Director, University of Texas TeleCampus

#### 4. Target Audience

Respondents place significant emphasis on the importance of carefully defining the target audience for their online program in alignment with key institutional goals. This results in very different approaches to targeting – from global reach to much more concentrated strategies focused on the surrounding area of an institution.

In a related point, institutions also look at what programming is available online to focus their recruitment strategy. At Drexel, for example, the School of Education was very open to expanding their virtual programming and became one of the first departments to offer fully online programs. Because of the availability of education courses online, Drexel eLearning sought students with demographics similar to those attracted to the brick-and-mortar School of Education.

*"Our student population is 80-85% military. We are considered a military-friendly college and are in top 20 of the military-friendly colleges. That helps a lot, too, because the military have publications and getting your name listed there helps with student recruitment."*

Sharon Davis, Director, Distance Education and Education Technology, Central Texas College

#### 5. Sales and Marketing

Approaches to sales and marketing for fully online programs vary significantly in focus and intensity. Private institutions like Drexel eLearning and ERAU Worldwide Online tend to take the most rigorous approach with Internet marketing, direct mail and business partnerships. Public four-year schools appear to focus less on marketing, with fewer dollars and people dedicated to getting students in the door. Community colleges engage in some targeted marketing, but rely more heavily on word-of-mouth; KCTCS leads the community college cohort with the greatest degree of marketing.

*"With KCTCS Online, we're marketing purely on the Internet. No TV ads or promoting on college Web sites; strictly on our system Web site... Other ways we're marketing is via direct sells to business and industry. Saying we have this skill set we can deliver for you online... Do you have employees who will be interested?"*

Jay Box, Chancellor, Kentucky Community and Technical College System Online

#### 6. Course Creation

Seven of the nine institutions interviewed have a very controlled course creation process to ensure high-quality courses, including an institution-wide rubric to assess course quality.

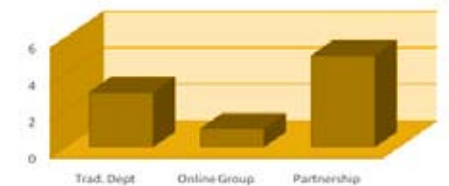
The most common approach to content creation is for the online group's instructional design team to partner with the traditional department's subject matter expert. However, there are examples where the content creation was all done by the online group and others where it was all left to the traditional department.

KCTCS Online creates its offerings in a modular format. Each module is created with a pre-test and post-test in order to allow students to move through the modules at their own pace. As a part of their quality rubric, the online group assesses the modular format of the course as well as the overall content quality. The developing college must also do ongoing maintenance of the course and take into consideration feedback provided from student and faculty evaluations.

*"We believe that you have to be solving problems, and supporting the core mission of the university while you're trying to do this...we look to create online courses that will do some good and would benefit a large number of people...We will sit down with a department on campus, look at every course they offer and then prioritize them based on a strategic rubric."*

Justin Johansen, Director, Brigham Young University

Ownership of Content Creation



#### 7. Course Delivery

Institutions place significant emphasis on quality course delivery, as evidenced by their professional development and incentive structure. Eight of the nine institutions offer online faculty professional development opportunities. At least five of the nine institutions also employ online teacher/facilitator incentives to drive interest and effectiveness in online teaching.

*"We offer [teaching online] to the faculty at the campuses, but if they don't want to do it, we're not going to let them stand in the way... We're going to go out and find faculty that want to teach for us and who enjoy it."*

Dr. Julia Teahen, President, Baker College Online

#### 8. Student Services

A successful online program must cater to the unique needs of the non-traditional student. Seven of the nine online programs have direct oversight on the student services for the online population; the other two programs leave this responsibility to the traditional student services group. All agree on its importance.

**Five of the nine institutions employ online teacher/facilitator incentives to drive interest and effectiveness**

**With KCTCS Online, we're marketing purely on the Internet."**

Jay Box, Chancellor, Kentucky Community and Technical College System Online



*“The customer support/student support is just crucial. You cannot have a good quality, reputable, respectable program without providing services to students... We have our own online registrar, academic office, advisors, financial aid staff... We have our own library staff, own bookstore, career services support, development ed for students ...We have tutoring and developmental programs in math and English and reading for study skills online.... our own help desk support. All of that is needed to have a good program.”*

Dr. Julia Teahen, President, Baker College Online

## 9. Metrics

All interviewees stressed the importance of measuring for success, beyond enrollment numbers and financial growth, as a means to continuously improve the student experience and ensure ongoing revenue growth. With that said, metrics remains the area where all interviewees feel they have the most room to improve.

*“It’s all about quality, providing access, getting great course completion rates, having return students. That’s where we want to focus. It shouldn’t be all about how much money was brought in and how many students have enrolled – though that is important... The way you measure success is by looking at the quality of everything you do – services you offer, courses you offer, the faculty and how well they’re developed and doing this.”*

Dr. Darcy Hardy, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, UT System and Executive Director, University of Texas TeleCampus

## Conclusion

In order to effectively implement fully online programs, institutions must weigh many options to choose the best fit. To help navigate that process, this first phase of research distilled insight from a variety of sources into key factors for success that all institutions can draw upon. Phase 2 research will continue to flesh out promising practices and articulate common approaches to creating fully online programs. Collectively, this research work and resulting guidelines are intended to help education leaders steer through the process and create programs tailored to their unique mission and goals.

For more information on Phase I of effective practices in fully online programs, visit [http://www.blackboardinstitute.com/online\\_programs.asp](http://www.blackboardinstitute.com/online_programs.asp)

## About the Blackboard Institute

The Blackboard Institute initiates programs and projects that advance K-20 progression and offers actionable guidance drawn from Blackboard’s proximity to a large body of practice at all levels. By bringing together stakeholders from K-12 and higher education, and by sharing effective practices between the segments, we hope to foster an environment in which schools and institutions learn from one another and, together, improve the K-20 student experience.



### Jessie Woolley-Wilson

President, K-20 Strategy

“20 million students worldwide look to Blackboard as a partner in teaching and learning. We take that opportunity and responsibility seriously and continuously seek out solutions that increase student achievement. To improve student progression, we’re building consensus on common approaches for tackling tough education issues, sharing those approaches across the education community and tying successful approaches to education policy discussions to help create meaningful and lasting change.”



### Gordon Freedman

Executive Director, Blackboard Institute

“Without addressing roadblocks throughout the entire learning process, student success will continue to be compromised. We seek to increase accessibility for all students by supporting policies and programs that make the journey through school and into higher education efficient and productive.”



### Garen Singer

Program Director, Blackboard Institute

“At the Blackboard Institute, we showcase effective practices in the field through the support of our partners on the ground. But we also bring K-12 and higher education together to flesh out promising practices and articulate common approaches. By highlighting shared challenges and opportunities, we seek more far reaching solutions to the problems that plague all educators.”

**“It’s all about quality, providing access, getting great course completion rates, and having return students.”**

Dr. Darcy Hardy, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, UT System and Executive Director, University of Texas TeleCampus

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