Deploying Online Learning Effectively and Advantageously for the Institution

Coppin State University

Case Study   **July 2013**

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Highlights

Related ECAR Research Study: *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education: An Eye toward Growth and Increased Access*

Case Study Institution: Coppin State University

Issue: Optimize online learning activities and institutional resources for greatest institutional benefit

Solution: Identify online learning's role in the institutional mission and implement a cohesive strategy

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Online learning is widespread in higher education; the ECAR report *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education: An Eye toward Growth and Increased Access* shows that 82% percent of institutions offer at least several online courses.[1] As institutional leaders gain experience with online learning, they are beginning to recognize its potential contribution to institutional matters such as enrollment growth and learning experience enhancement; in fact, more than two-thirds of academic leaders believe that online learning is critical to the long-term strategic mission of their institutions.[2] One element in realizing online learning's full potential can be structuring it in a way that uses institutional resources optimally. A course to consider is a centralized approach; the ECAR report notes that a centralized approach to services provides more efficiency and is usually more cost effective for the institution as a whole because resources can be pooled to provide the best services for general use.[3]

Best Practices

- Senior administrators determined how online learning would strategically support institutional goals.

- The Faculty IT Governance Committee (FITC) and Information Technology Division (ITD) devised an evaluation and implementation process for institutional e-learning environment elements (e.g., course design and faculty training).

Benefits

- The strategic assessment optimized and coordinated activities and resources to build an institutional online learning environment.

- The evaluation and implementation process became a proven, replicable procedure that streamlined deployment of the online learning environment's elements.

Case Study Inspiration

During an ECAR focus group about e-learning, Coppin Vice President for IT and CIO Ahmed El-Haggan described his university's extensive activities in implementing an online learning strategy that supports institutional efforts to increase student retention and graduation rates.[4] His experience relates to the ECAR report *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education* in three ways: It illustrates the key finding that the successful, large-scale implementation of a centralized model provides greater efficiency and seamless integration of e-learning services, as well as the recommendation to make e-learning part of the institution's strategic plan and budget and to set specific goals for e-learning initiatives.[5] This case study presents Coppin's experience.

Coppin State University, a public MA institution with 3,600 FTE students, exemplifies this research. A proposed online management degree program in 2011 prompted the leadership to consider more closely online learning's role with respect to the institutional mission. Eventually, Coppin's administrators decided that online learning must support university student retention and graduation goals, and they decided to deploy a centralized, institutional online learning environment that fortified student performance in an online setting. This case study highlights how this centralized approach fostered effective deployment practices that resulted in a robust institutional online learning environment involving course design best practices, a faculty certification program, supportive faculty policies, and an assessment system.

Background

Higher education is changing. The number of nontraditional students continues to rise, and their circumstances may require different learning environments. For example, nontraditional students typically balance work and family along with their studies. Changes in work or family circumstances often leave them unable to take courses on campus or on a set schedule. In such cases, nontraditional students may turn to online courses to access lectures and other course materials on their own schedules.[6]

However, online learning can have its drawbacks in terms of the skills students bring to the online learning environment, the skills of faculty teaching online, and the quality of pedagogy and instructional design.[7] For example, a student who lacks the discipline to manage time might fall behind in an online class. A faculty member may require training because student engagement differs in online and classroom settings; best practices in online course pedagogy or design can differ from in-class courses, too.

At first glance, online learning would appear to be an ideal match for Coppin State University's student population. Coppin is a small, historically black university located in Baltimore's inner city. Many of its 3,600 students are nontraditional learners whose financial situations require them to work while attending school; thus, they could benefit from online learning's flexibility. In addition, Coppin can rely on its award-winning Information Technology Division (ITD) to manage an online learning environment's underlying services and technologies.[8]

In fact, Coppin moved gradually into e-learning about 12 years ago, informally offering a smattering of online classes. This situation changed in 2011, when Sadie R. Gregory—then the dean of the School of Business and currently provost at Coppin—decided to start an online bachelor's management degree program to provide a flexible course of study for her student base of primarily working adults.[9] In addition, Gregory wanted to address the fact that HBCUs

(historically black colleges and universities) have lagged behind other universities in the introduction and use of fully online programs. This initiative includes other Coppin academic programs so that students can complete the online management degree's general education requirements (GER) online, too.

Her idea prompted Coppin leadership to consider online learning's role within the university, and the senior administrators were all too aware of the potential upsides and drawbacks. Given the remediation needs of Coppin's students and the university's low student retention and graduation rates, senior administrators recognized that any institutional online learning initiative needed to focus on quality.[10] They also saw that it would require a robust online learning environment and faculty trained to properly engage, support, and monitor students to help them thrive online. In other words, Coppin's online courses should entail more than accessing PowerPoint presentations in an LMS.

> *The idea was to become robust and more successful with online learning. In the past we allowed faculty to develop online programs on their own. We bought into a quality effort, building a good solid online program in a more structured way. For the next three to five years, we want to increase our retention and graduation rates, giving us a chance to see how successful e-learning can be.*
>
> —Dick Siemer, Former Vice President for Administration and Finance, on institutional strategy

Coppin opted to centrally develop its online learning environment. As this case study explores, this centralized approach enables the university to utilize organizational, procedural, and resourcing elements that facilitate an efficient implementation of its centralized online learning environment, resulting in the following accomplishments:

- Mandatory Quality Matters course design for online courses
- Mandatory Sloan-C teaching certification for online instructors
- Mandatory course curriculum approval process for online courses
- A set of institutional policies for online learning: course design, teaching, intellectual property, and technology's role in faculty evaluation
- Institutional roll out of online learning tools like Tegrity and Course Networking (the latter scheduled for fall 2013)
- Accelerated online program course development through outsourcing
- Deployment of Blackboard's Analytics for Learn assessment tool

Organizational Underpinning

Two elements underlie Coppin's online learning environment implementation. IT governance became the mechanism that transformed strategy into action through its close direction and supportive policies for online learning. Organizational interactivity mitigated resource issues and promoted greater institutional awareness about online teaching practices.

IT Governance

Coppin's IT governance structure shaped and guided its online learning implementation. Its governance structure consists of the following:

- **The Faculty Information Technology Committee (FITC):** A provost-level committee, it is chaired by a faculty member and composed of 16 representatives from Coppin schools and academic departments and the vice president of IT and CIO. The FITC deals with faculty IT needs and issues.

- **The IT Students Advisory Committee:** Representatives of the Student Government Association (SGA) form this committee to provide student IT-related input. The SGA president and the vice president of IT and CIO co-chair this committee.

- **The Information Resource Management Committee (IRM):** A presidential-level committee, this oversight and policy-making group consists of university vice presidents and directors of university divisions. It is chaired by the vice president of IT and CIO. Membership includes the FITC chair.

For action to occur, all three committees must first approve any IT-related proposal, and, if needed, the proposal goes to the university president for approval.[11] All three committees work together, and the committees' broad membership fosters across-the-board input into IT policy and direction.

At Coppin, the FITC plays an especially instrumental, hands-on role in Coppin's online learning activities, setting directions, priorities, and policies. For example:

- Upon the FITC's recommendation, Coppin instituted a two-year moratorium on new online courses so the university could pause, evaluate its options, and then proceed deliberately with its online learning strategy.

- The FITC created a process to vet all online courses before they are offered to students— review by a faculty committee of peers, the FITC, and the Coppin Curriculum Committee.

- The FITC established several policies for online learning regarding mandatory online faculty teaching certification, establishing online course standards, intellectual property policies, and technology's role in faculty evaluation.

Organizational Interactivity

Institutions can operate in silos, with administrators tending to their specific areas of responsibility. However, all of the Coppin interview participants discussed the importance of interactivity of different institutional areas in the online learning initiative to understand institutional requirements; to address resourcing issues; and to promote awareness of online learning. For example, the former vice president of administration and finance taught an online course to better understand the required resources and underlying financial investments in building a successful online learning environment. ITD and academic affairs jointly fund the instructional technology center, with the director reporting to the VP of IT but working for academic affairs. The two areas cohost an annual faculty showcase of innovative use of technology in teaching and learning.

> *The relationship between ITD and academic affairs is very positive, and it helps promote initiatives like online learning. At Coppin, information technology is not a top-down relationship; it is a shared opportunity of governance.*
>
> —Dionne Curbeam, Director, Instructional Technology, on organizational interactivity

Evaluation and Implementation Process

Over time, a process emerged that Coppin used to evaluate and implement components of its online learning environment (see Figure 1). This structured approached enables Coppin to identify and address problems and challenges before expanding online learning broadly across the campus and to implement online learning components in a way that aligns with institutional priorities, as illustrated with the examples below.
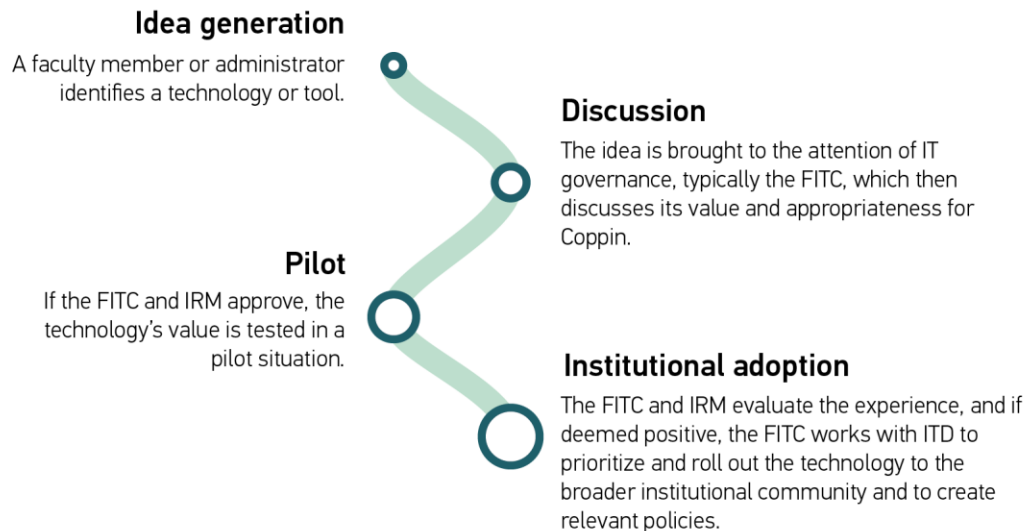
Idea generation
A faculty member or administrator identifies a technology or tool.

Discussion
The idea is brought to the attention of IT governance, typically the FITC, which then discusses its value and appropriateness for Coppin.

Pilot
If the FITC and IRM approve, the technology's value is tested in a pilot situation.

Institutional adoption
The FITC and IRM evaluate the experience, and if deemed positive, the FITC works with ITD to prioritize and roll out the technology to the broader institutional community and to create relevant policies.

Figure 1. Coppin Evaluation Process

Tegrity

Coppin's adoption of Tegrity lecture capture software in 2005 established Coppin's evaluation and implementation process. Acting Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and FITC Chair Habtu Braha and VP of IT El-Haggan spotted Tegrity at an EDUCAUSE Annual Conference and brought it to the attention of the FITC. The committee recommended Tegrity's use for online courses, and 10 faculty members piloted it during the spring semester. After a positive evaluation from faculty, a campus rollout followed in the fall. In addition, the FITC created a minigrant program to showcase innovative usage of Tegrity to promote faculty adoption and created a policy emphasizing that Tegrity recordings used in courses were not factored into evaluations unless requested by faculty. Later, Coppin used both the minigrants and supportive policies to encourage faculty adoption of online learning.

> *The FITC and the faculty are involved throughout [a new technology implementation]. The discussion took place and then the piloting, training, and implementation processes began. At this point, many people had come into the picture and were using the new technology. This shortens the time needed to put technology in place and use it.*
>
> —Habtu Braha, Acting Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and FITC Chair, on ongoing evaluation process

Sloan-C Faculty Training

Coppin wanted to ensure that its online courses featured an interactive environment, not just a series of posted material in its CMS, so after deliberations between ITD, the FITC, and senior administration, the university adopted the Sloan-C online teaching certification for all faculty who teach online courses.[12] The School of Business led the way, mandating certification for the faculty of its online management program.

Their experiences sparked other Coppin schools' interest in Sloan-C certification, and the FITC created a policy that mandated Sloan-C certification for all faculty members who taught online. Then the FITC and ITD prioritized faculty training to align with institutional needs. For example, GER courses are a critical need for the School of Business online programs, and certification priority was set accordingly: 1) undergraduate faculty teaching GER courses online; 2) faculty who teach non-GER courses online; and 3) graduate faculty. ITD manages the training process; faculty apply and receive approval from their dean or department chair and from the FITC before training.

Quality Matters

Coppin adopted Quality Matters standards to ensure quality course design and to provide the necessary structure for course review.[13] Every online course follows Quality Matters principles of effective course design: course overview and introduction, learning objectives (competencies), assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learner interaction and engagement, course technology, learner support, and accessibility.[14] Again, the School of Business led its adoption for its online courses, and as interest spread to the other schools and departments, the FITC and the ITD followed suit with prioritization and policies.

Outcomes Measurement

After expending significant resources to build its online learning environment, Coppin's senior administration wanted to measure its effectiveness. One significant step in this direction was its implementation of an assessment system—Blackboard's Analytics for Learn—in September 2012.[15] As with other online learning components, the School of Business adopted the system initially; the dean and faculty identified learning objectives and the courses for evaluation. The system pulls data from various sources, including the LMS and the student information system (SIS). Dashboards enable the dean and faculty to compare course sections and drill down to course specifics—assignments, engagement frequency and activity, faculty responsiveness—to discern patterns that lead to actionable insights. Online students have their own dashboards where they compare their class ranking and activities. Coppin has spent the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013 on data collection and plans to begin a deep analysis of the data during the summer of 2013. In addition, Coppin can use the system as an early-warning system for students by spotting certain behaviors, such as a drop-off in student log-ins or lack of course engagement, and the institution plans to use the system's analytics to increase enrollment in its online management degree program by using student performance and demographics to better identify potential students. As with Sloan-C certification and Quality Matters, the FITC and ITD worked together to establish training priorities, starting with faculty who teach online courses and then moving to others who use Blackboard to web-enhance their face-to-face courses.

Educational Social Networking

Currently in the evaluation phase is an education social networking capability. E-learning increases opportunities for collaboration among students, as discussion of class material is no longer constrained to a one-hour period three times a week in a physical classroom.[16] Social networks could be a collaboration tool, but nearly three in five students want to keep their academic and social lives separate and are thus not inclined to involve faculty members in their social networking activities.[17] In light of this situation, Coppin and Indiana University are piloting CourseNetworking (thecn.com), a new educational, cloud-based, social networking environment where students and faculty can dialogue with others in their class or at other thecn.com member institutions around the world.[18] ITD launched a pilot of 10 class sections in spring 2013 and plans to open up thecn.com to the entire campus in fall 2013.

Augmenting Internal Resources with Outsourcing

Smaller institutions may benefit from outsourcing or partnering with companies, vendors, or other institutions for e-learning provisioning, and that it is the case with Coppin.[19] ITD's Instructional Technology department consists of just two people, lacking an internal staff of instructional designers, media specialists, and instructional technologists. El-Haggan recognized that building the courses for the online management degree program in a timely fashion would outpace the Instructional Technology department's limited resources. So the ITD, the FITC, and senior administration reviewed various options. Rather than invest in additional internal resources, they decided to outsource the process to Pearson Education, using a pay-as-you-go model based upon online course enrollments.[20] As part of the agreement, Coppin controls and owns the courses.

With Pearson on board, the Instructional Technology group assumed advisory, managerial, and review roles in the online course development process. Instructional Technology staff advise the faculty member as needed throughout the course design process. Faculty members work directly with Pearson to build their courses according to their specifications. Upon completion of the course, the Instructional Technology staff load the course into the CMS and review it for technical glitches; then the faculty member reviews the content's alignment to the course learning objectives. Interestingly, as the online management degree program faculty became Sloan-C certified, many opted to build their own courses that incorporated lecture and video clips, avatars, and other elements with Pearson's help rather than relying on Pearson's prebuilt CourseConnect online courses.[21] The Pearson agreement enabled Coppin to build 15 classes in 1.5 semesters for the online business program.

In addition, Coppin administrators recognized the need to augment student support services in areas like tutoring. They elected to outsource, using Pearson SmartThinking, as opposed to investing in internal resources.

Next Steps

Coppin continues to contemplate longer-term actions of enhancing online student service support and broader student access through MOOCs.

Online Students' Administrative Support

Online learning encompasses administrative as well as academic elements. For programs to be truly online, students should be able to complete administrative functions—such as admission, registration, and financial aid—online as well as on campus. With the online learning environment's teaching and learning aspects well under way, El-Haggan acknowledged the need to focus on administrative support, especially if Coppin expands its student base geographically to include those who cannot complete their administrative tasks in person. This is not an inconsequential issue, and to accomplish this, El-Haggan may have to recalibrate the current evaluation and implementation process. For example, no clear administrative counterpart to the FITC exists in the Coppin IT governance structure to provide the same level of direction and participation in process, policy, and resource issues.

Massive Open Online Courses

In the discussion phase are massive open online courses (MOOCs). Their free admission opens new educational opportunities, and Coppin is evaluating whether to interweave MOOCs into its online learning environment. "We serve a population of students who are very challenged financially," stated El-Haggan. "We always wonder how we can make college education more affordable for them."

Senior administrators continue to contemplate MOOCs' role in the university's online learning strategy. One thought is to accept MOOCs for 9 or 12 credits upon students' passing a placement exam for the online business program, essentially giving students a semester for free. In addition, Gregory sees a potential role for MOOCs in developmental math and remediation classes. When students' placement tests demonstrate weaknesses in specific areas, they can remediate on specific topics via a MOOC in a timely manner without taking an entire course. "This can impact graduation, retention, and time to degree for business students," she explained. Another idea is to design a MOOC about African American studies, given that Coppin is highly regarded in this subject; such a MOOC could introduce Coppin to potential students.

Lessons Learned

These lessons emerged from Coppin's activities.

Partnership facilitates buy-in: This truism is rather obvious, but one of the keys to developing Coppin's online learning environment is how all facets of the institutional community "became intertwined. Everyone works for better technology focus and interests on the campus," stated Braha. "There is buy-in and support from the technology, faculty, and academic affairs divisions because they were involved in the upfront strategizing and planning."

Designating "go-to" players creates a replicable process: When evaluating and implementing its online learning environment, the FITC and the School of Business emerged as the pivotal points in the process. The former became the forum to discuss ideas, direct activities, and set policies. The latter was the de facto organization to pilot ideas and recommendations because of their imminent online

> *We need to stay engaged because technology affords so many wonderful teaching and learning opportunities that allow us to better serve our students.*
>
> —Sadie R. Gregory, Former Dean, School of Business, and Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs

management degree program. Having these designated parties and roles in place streamlined the implementation process at Coppin.

Make sure all elements of your online learning infrastructure are ready: This advice applies not only to technology such as networking but also to human capital and course design. "It takes a long time to get course design right, and faculty's expertise in their content area does not necessarily translate to technical expertise in the LMS, online teaching, and analytics use," stated Dionne Curbeam, director, instructional technology. "You don't want to roll out ineffective classes and destroy the reputation of your program. Have it all ready first."

It is easy for an institution to get pulled in many different directions with respect to online learning. Initiatives can originate from different academic areas, and a diluted approach may prevent an institution from realizing online learning's full benefits. Coppin's institutional approach to online learning enabled it to sagaciously create an environment that maximizes resources and aligns with its institutional mission.

Acknowledgments

ECAR would like to thank the following Coppin State University representatives for their assistance, insights, and time in researching this case study: Habtu Braha, Acting Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs; Dionne Curbeam, Director, Instructional Technology; Ahmed El-Haggan, Vice President and CIO; Sadie R. Gregory, Former Dean, School of Business, and Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs; and Dick Siemer, Former Vice President for Administration and Finance.

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Citation for This Work

Pirani, Judith A. "Deploying Online Learning Effectively and Advantageously for the Institution: Coppin State University" (Case Study). Louisville, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research, July 2013, available from http://www.educause.edu/ecar.

Notes

1. Jacqueline Bichsel, *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education: An Eye toward Growth and Increased Access*, Research Report (Louisville, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research, 2013), 19, available from http://www.educause.edu/ecar.
2. Ibid, 2, 6.
3. Ibid, 17.
4. Research for *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education* included seven focus groups, totaling 30 individuals. For more information, see the report's methodology section on page 39.
5. Bichsel, *The State of E-Learning,* 4, 38.
6. Ibid, 7.
7. Ibid, 22.

8. For one example of Coppin ITD's awards, see Office of University Relations, "IT Department Receives Blackboard Honor," Coppin State University (August 14, 2012), http://www.coppin.edu/news/article/18/it_department_receive_blackboard_honors.

9. As of July 1, 2013, Dean Sadie R. Gregory resumed her position as provost and vice president of academic affairs. The intention is to appoint an interim dean, but she plans to remain involved in the School of Business.

10. "FY2014 Operating Budget Analysis," University System of Maryland, http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/pubs/budgetfiscal/2014fy-budget-docs-operating-R30B27-Coppin-State-University.pdf, 8.

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