

Strategies and Techniques for Supporting Online Courses: A Scalable Institutional Model

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Technology use in higher education is growing exponentially. Increasing demand for online distance education, and technology quickly becoming a necessity and no longer just an option are forcing colleges and universities to rethink their technology support structures. In order to effectively compete in the changing field of higher education, it has become necessary for universities to develop new, flexible support structures. Additionally, while faculty members are often experts in their field of study, many are at a disadvantage when it comes to working with technologies for teaching and learning due to other commitments and the large amount of time it takes to learn to effectively use web-based teaching and learning tools.

These trends suggest a growing need to revisit existing instructional support structures used in higher education, to modify and extend existing structures, and to develop new support structures in order to provide quality instructional support. In this presentation, we will examine a model based on a developing relationship between central support units and college level support at Michigan State University, the redefinition of instructional support models on our campus, as well as the new challenges we are facing as we move forward with these new models.

Recently at MSU, the Virtual University Design and Technology (vuDAT) and the College of Education have been working on a joint project to develop a scalable model of working with online courses. Currently in its first phase, this model focuses on the support relationship between vuDAT and the College of Education, and makes use of resources within the two units, as well as other relevant campus services.

Overview of our Project

What are we developing?

A sustainable, strategically planned support model that promotes efficiency in online course production and maintenance

Goals

- Scalability
- Efficiency
- Clarification of unit priorities
- Promotion of collaboration
- Empowerment of faculty

Support Unit Model

This model focuses on the development of sustainable online and hybrid courses. There is an emphasis on development of courses over the short term, coupled with helping faculty become accustomed to using the appropriate support channels for long term support and not relying solely on vuDAT for technical support.

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Course Development – Outline

- First Contact Mtg./Decision process
- Producer Assignment
- Development
- First Offering
- End of First Offering
 - “One-up” courses – End of active VUDAT support
 - Degree program courses – Project based interactions
 - Future support provided by College/Department
 - Can go through the entire process again for major course redesigns

College Model

This model focuses on providing timely support during instruction as well as providing long-term support for the faculty teaching online. Two major support units, The Center for Teaching and Technology and the Computer Support Group, provide comprehensive instructional technology support.

Center for Teaching and Technology support is provided in the form of:

- Consulting/technical support
- Academic Policy and Planning Committee
- Labs/equipment
- Presentations, workshops and colloquia

Computer Support Group support is provided as:

- Server maintenance/administration
- Hardware/software support
- Classroom support

Outcomes

Assessment

Outcomes are mainly being assessed through looking at satisfaction on the part of the participants. Student ratings, support from administrators, and faculty satisfaction are considered. Future assessment efforts are being explored.

What have we learned?

The demands of changing technology have required us to be very flexible in the development, implementation and revision of our model. While the core components and goals of the model remain static, our methods must be very dynamic. At the heart of this model is the idea of separating short- and long-term support in order to bring scalability to the model. Our collaborative efforts have, and continue to, yield new ideas and varied views on our model and its progress. At times the allocation of resources to implement new ideas can become problematic. To address this, regular and open communication as well as a strong institutional commitment to supporting online courses is vital to any model of this type.

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