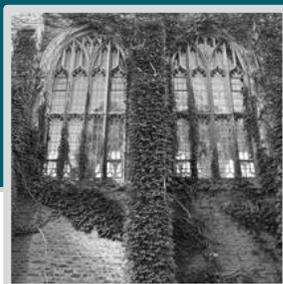


Best Practices in Online Course Exchange Systems

Prepared for the Texas A&M University System

September 2014



In the following report, Hanover Research examines the guidelines governing online course exchange systems at higher education institutions in the United States. In particular, the research focuses on opportunities and challenges in providing this service to students, operating principles, and technology systems.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

In the following report, Hanover Research (Hanover) examines the processes that online course exchange consortia have instituted to coordinate course sharing. This research has been conducted to aid the Texas A&M University System as it elaborates its own criteria for course exchange within its system. Hanover has based its findings on a review of the secondary literature on the topic, an examination of information available on institution websites, and interviews with representatives from six course exchange consortia.

The report is divided into two sections:

- **Section I** provides an overview of course exchange systems in the United States. In particular, it engages with the opportunities and challenges in providing this service to students.
- **Section II** examines the policies in place in three course exchange consortia of varying types in depth. Based on a series of interviews with representatives of these institutions, Hanover describes their operating principles and technology systems in detail.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Interviews highlight that personnel are a critical component for developing functioning course exchange systems.** While strong central administrative leadership is valuable, campus officials are better positioned to ensure the success (or failure) of exchange efforts. For this reason, it is important for exchange consortia to work to achieve buy-in from faculty as well as local officials such as academic deans and department heads.
 - Obtaining buy-in is not always easy, and there is no guaranteed way to persuade resistant campus officials. However, the most effective course exchange networks attempt to do so by providing each member institution a meaningful voice in developing consortium policy. The consortium should be governed by a representative body of members that meets regularly to plan strategy and review regulations.
- **The Texas A&M University System currently follows best practices regarding student payments and funding.** Course exchanges most commonly require students to pay tuition to their home institution at their home institution rate. It is also widely accepted that credit earned through a course exchange should be counted toward the student's credit requirements for establishing full-time status for the purposes of financial aid. Though some consortia have made alternative arrangements work, they add a layer of complication that may discourage students from enrolling in exchange courses.

- **The Texas A&M University System also currently follows many best practices regarding student registration.** The most effective course exchange consortia generally allow students to enroll in home and host institution courses using similar methods, and they accept and transcript credits earned through the exchange as home institution credits. The Texas A&M University System Course Exchange Program's website, which provides a centralized clearinghouse for course information and allows students to begin the course reservation process internally, is also an effective means of encouraging student participation in course exchange.
- **Exchange consortia are rarely, if ever, able to coordinate the learning management and student information systems of member institutions to function automatically.** Though the best systems allow registration, billing, and other functions to appear seamless for students, a considerable amount of back-end work is typically required to make these systems function. Current best practice appears to be to build a consortium-wide SIS that allows officials to communicate rapidly and coordinate workflows between campuses. However, these do not generally appear to communicate with institutional systems and generally require manual uploading/downloading of course schedules, student enrollments, student grades, and financial information.
- **Faculty and course approval processes are more complicated for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredited institutions.** Historically, individual universities have typically accepted the appointed faculty and curricula of exchange partners without further examination. However, SACS has recently begun to enforce more stringent regulations among consortia partners, making it increasingly necessary for individual institutions to thoroughly review all faculty and courses that their students have access to. No currently established norms for how this review process occurs were identified through this research.
- **Online course exchange consortia have begun to adopt increasingly rigorous measures of success.** For many years it was common for consortia to gauge their success based solely on student enrollment levels. However, more recent efforts have focused on different metrics, such as course and degree completion, grading, and alumni achievement. Moreover, while the task of measuring success was previously given to individual campuses, consortia managers have begun to undertake deeper examinations themselves.

SECTION I: COMMON PRACTICES IN ONLINE COURSE EXCHANGE SYSTEMS

In this section, Hanover Research offers a general overview of course exchange systems currently operating in the United States. This section examines the structures and policies of a wide variety of course exchange consortia (listed below in Figure 1.1) to provide the Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) with actionable best practices and to identify practices that are less successful.

Figure 1.1: Online Exchange Consortia Examined

PROGRAM
Art Institutes of Portland and Pittsburgh Online Consortium
California Community Colleges Online Education Initiative*
Committee of Institutional Cooperation CourseShare
Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area**
Great Plains Interactive Distance Alliance
Illinois Community Colleges Online
New American Colleges and Universities
North Carolina Language Course Exchanges
Regents Online Campus Collaborative
State University of New York Open SUNY
Texas Electronic Coalition for Physics
Tri-College University**
University of Houston System Student Pathways**
University of Minnesota Digital Campus
University of Texas System Online Consortium
Washington University Consortium
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Internet Course Exchange
Virtual College of Texas

*The California Community Colleges Online Education Initiative is currently in the piloting stage and has not yet begun full operation.

** The procedures governing this exchange program apply to both online and classroom instruction.

PURPOSE

Online course exchanges have been developed to serve a number of different stated purposes. According to Southeast Missouri State University provost Ron Rosati, there are many reasons why an institution might consider developing or joining a course exchange program. These include:¹

- Improving student learning;
- Expanding breadth of offerings;
- Increasing economic competitiveness;
- Implementing new technological models; and
- Satisfying stakeholder demands.

Hanover's review of online course exchange systems reveals that some of these motivations are more prevalent than others. Exchange leaders most commonly cite improving time to degree by allowing students to take the courses they need on schedule as the primary motivating factor. For example, the University of Houston System Student Pathways Program describes its offerings as a way to "enable students to progress more quickly toward the completion of their degrees at their home institutions by taking advantage of course opportunities that may be more available, convenient, or affordable at one of the other UH System institutions."²

Other online collaborations indicate that their value arises from providing students with access to academic disciplines that they would not otherwise have been able to study. This thinking is most often seen in more extensive collaborations that partner to provide entire majors instead of individual courses. The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) is one such program. It defines its mission as "allowing institutions working together to field graduate programs that are greater in reach and significance than any single institution could field alone."³

While student achievement is a central purpose of all online course exchange programs, many institutions hope to derive additional benefits from the exchanges as well. Decreasing the cost of higher education is a core principle of the Online Education Initiative that is currently being piloted among California community colleges, as is increasing the overall demand for online courses in the state.⁴ Hanover's interviews with leaders in the field indicate that some institutions are also interested in generating revenue through course exchange systems, although doing so sustainably appears to be a difficult proposition.

¹ Rosati, R. "Collaborative Programs: Issues and Logistics." Conference Presentation. p. 2.
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=38&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CEAQFjAHOB4&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.umsystem.edu%2Fmedia%2FRosati_Collaboration%2520Logistics.ppt&ei=B2fzU9CYD87soATs74DoAw&usg=AFQjCNHEEeUZGlnBdAfakmWPvjHV6x-cgw

² "Student Pathways." University of Houston System. <http://www.uhsa.uh.edu/uh-system/student-pathways/index.php>

³ "Great Plains IDEA Vision, Mission, and Goals." Great Plains IDEA. <http://www.gpidea.org/about/history/vision/>

⁴ "Goals." Online Education Initiative. <http://ccconlineed.org/goals>

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Clearly articulated governing policies are a common element among successful online course exchange systems. These enable each member institution to understand its rights as a subscriber campus as well as its responsibilities as a provider. These guidelines should describe the procedures for offering courses across multiple campuses, registering students, curating course descriptions, processing credits and debits, approving curricula offered by other campuses, and any other essential program elements. According to an administrator of the Illinois Community College Online (ICCO) consortium, “You have to have some sort of coordinating body that is able to work through the institutions’ issues for its continued success.”⁵

“You have to have some sort of coordinating body that is able to work through the institutions’ issues for its continued success”

Interview subjects also frequently commented on the importance of having **strong leadership systems in place for managing exchange networks**. Able managers in the consortium’s headquarters can make up for potential deficiencies in other areas, such as technology systems. However, system-level administrators are only one element of a strong management team. It is also necessary to have **capable proponents of collaboration on each individual campus**. Academic deans, department chairs, and heads of distance learning can provide foundational leadership in implementing online course sharing.

Unfortunately, these same individuals can also often prevent cross-campus collaboration from effectively occurring if these stakeholders have not bought into the system. According to the interviewed administrator at the University of Texas System, it is important to “recognize from the very start that there are many actors and players in this, and they all have to be on board.” Any one of those actors “can shoot the entire process in the foot” if they do not like the direction in which the course exchange system is heading.⁶

Successful course exchange networks all employ officials whose job it is to represent the consortium on each member campus. Figure 1.2, on the following page, shows a selection of the duties required of Great Plains IDEA Campus Representatives. Although the duties and titles of campus officials vary somewhat by institution, their ubiquity across consortia indicates the essential role they play in creating functional course exchanges.

⁵ Administrator A. Illinois Community College Online. Telephone interview. September 3, 2014.

⁶ Administrator B. University of Texas System Online Consortium. Telephone interview. September 3, 2014.

Figure 1.2: Sample of Campus Coordinator Responsibilities (Great Plains IDEA)

SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES
Website Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review and update institution webpages with Great Plains IDEA academic information. ▪ Update campus course information in the gpidea.org course catalog.
Prospective Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop, implement, and recommend changes in the university’s plan to recruit prospective students. ▪ Assist prospective students seeking admission to a Great Plains IDEA program.
Admitted Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promote new student survey by email to newly admitted students. ▪ Answer questions or refer students to appropriate parties. ▪ Inform students regarding graduate policies and forms. ▪ Assist students in developing a course schedule. ▪ Inform students when it is time to register for classes. ▪ Enter student admissions and enrollment data into ExpanSIS (information system).
Graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promote graduation and alumni surveys
Course Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide information to teaching institutions based upon student program course plans. ▪ Coordinate the creation of course sections for your campus to enable students to register/enroll for the courses offered each semester. ▪ When your institution is teaching the course, enter grades into ExpanSIS. When another institution is teaching the course, look up your students’ grades in ExpanSIS and record the grades at your institution. ▪ When your institution is teaching the course, verify enrollment numbers from each of the other Great Plains IDEA institutions and send them invoices. ▪ Monitor revenue, expenses, and budget for each Great Plains IDEA program and coordinate accounting functions with the appropriate university units.
Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide faculty members with information and documents concerning admissions, courses, and students. ▪ Request course information, such as text book information and grades.
Great Plains IDEA Board Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide updates as requested regarding university Great Plains IDEA programs.
University Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work with appropriate university administrators to implement Great Plains IDEA academic programs and resolve problems.

Source: Great Plains IDEA⁷

⁷ Specific responsibilities are taken verbatim, with some modifications to improve readability, from: “Policy and Procedure Manual, Appendix E.3.” Great Plains IDEA. http://www.gpidea.org/policy-procedure/appendices/appendix_e3.pdf

FUNDING AND STUDENT PAYMENT

STUDENT PAYMENT

There are **three widely recognized best practices for online course exchange programs regarding student payments**:

- Students should be charged at their home institution’s regular tuition rate;
- Students should make tuition payments directly to their home institution; and
- For purposes of calculating student financial aid, classes taken through a course exchange should be counted as home institution credits (allowing students to maintain full-time enrollment at their home institution).

These policies provide students with greater access to exchange courses by simplifying payment processing. They also create more equality and less competition between exchange member institutions by preventing students from enrolling exclusively in courses offered by the least expensive institutions. Any additional fees associated with a course (such as lab fees) may or may not be remitted directly to the host institution by the student.

Though many exchange networks operate under the principle that students should not be asked to pay more for exchange courses than for resident courses, there are some exceptions to this rule. For example, in some instances students are required to pay a “course exchange” or “distance education” fee, although this fee is generally the same as that paid by students taking online courses through their own institution. Furthermore, it is not unheard of for students to be required to pay tuition at each institution at which they are enrolled (although this mandate is fairly uncommon). University of Minnesota students who take a course at a different University of Minnesota campus, for example, are subject to variable tuition rates and fees.⁸ Likewise, students in the University of Texas System are required to pay separate tuition at each campus.⁹

INSTITUTIONAL COST SHARING

The issue of how expenses and payments will be shared between institutions is a question that all course exchange systems have to resolve. Unfortunately, there is no one guiding best practice in this area, as consortia have devised a wide variety of payment systems to meet their members’ needs. Some of these arrangements include the following:

- Committee of Institutional Cooperation (CIC) members do not share costs for exchange courses. The home campus keeps student tuition while the provider is responsible for paying delivery costs. This system was implemented after CIC internal research demonstrated that “monetary exchange was negligible” between

⁸ “Application to Register at Multiple University of Minnesota Campuses.” University of Minnesota.
<http://www.policy.umn.edu/prod/groups/president/@pub/@forms/@otr/documents/form/otr031.pdf>

⁹ Administrator B interview, Op. cit.

campuses because the number of students each campus sent to the consortium was approximately equal to the number of students each campus received.¹⁰

- Home campuses in the Illinois Community College Online (ICCO) consortium pay a per-credit hour teaching fee to host campuses. This fee is determined by a formula based on the average community college tuition in the state and the average funding apportioned to Illinois community colleges. This payment is remitted directly from one college to another.¹¹
- Fee payments in other course exchange systems are mediated by the consortia themselves. Fees can fluctuate according to the number of credit hours delivered or the number of students served, or there can be a flat teaching fee. Fees are tracked by the consortia administration, which either bills or credits the individual institutions.
- The Texas Electronic Coalition for Physics created a system that reported course enrollments to the state from the hosting institution but not the receiving institution. This effectively resulted in the receiving institution's state tuition apportionment being sent to the providing institution. This exchange had the additional benefit of taking place automatically once course enrollment reports were created.¹²

STUDENT REGISTRATION

Ideally, registration in exchange courses should be seamless from the student's perspective. All available courses should be listed in the same location, regardless of the campus from which courses originate. Students should also be able to add these courses to their schedule by the same process governing home-campus registration. This process has been implemented by several successful course exchange networks, including Open SUNY and Regents Online Campus Collaborative.¹³

BARRIERS TO SEAMLESS STUDENT REGISTRATION

Unfortunately, presenting students with a fully integrated front can be challenging, and several registration-based barriers to student participation are common. Consortia commonly lack a centralized clearinghouse for course information, thereby requiring students to visit each institution's website individually to see what courses are available. This is the case with the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area, which does not list any course information on its website.¹⁴ A slightly improved approach is

¹⁰ "CourseShare Manual: Resources for Departments and Faculty." Committee on Institutional Cooperation.

September, 2013. p. 2. <https://www.cic.net/docs/default-source/sharedcourses/courseshareguide.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

¹¹ Administrator A interview, Op. cit.

¹² Suson, D., et. al. "Distributed Departments: A New Approach to Protecting the Viability of Small Programs." *Journal of Scientific Education Technology* 17. September 30, 2008. p. 601.

¹³ [1] "Open SUNY Online Course Listing." The State University of New York. <http://navigator.suny.edu/courses>

[2] Administrator D. Regents Online Campus Collaborative. Telephone interview. August 29, 2014.

¹⁴ "Cross-Registration." Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area.

<http://www.consortium.org/consortium/index.cfm/member-collaboration/cross-registration/>

taken by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), which maintains an updated course catalog on its website, although students cannot enroll in courses directly from it.¹⁵

Not allowing students to enroll in shared courses directly or independently creates an additional barrier to student participation in course exchanges. This issue is often compounded by the requirement that they seek prior approval from their home campus before enrolling in off-campus courses. Even if this requirement is largely a formality, students who have to complete additional steps prior to registration are more likely to be discouraged from using course exchanges. Some systems require home campus registrars to assist in or approve of student exchange enrollments, including the Tri-College University consortium and the University of Minnesota, which both mandate that students fill out separate exchange applications for each campus on which they plan to study.¹⁶

TRANSCRIPTING

Research suggests that it is standard practice to treat course exchange credit as residence credit rather than transfer credit. Based on Hanover’s review of information on the topic, students appear to benefit more when grades are transcribed as if they were awarded by the home campus, even though delivering campuses are responsible for student grading. Because member systems are not generally integrated, home campuses frequently create unique course numbers that serve as placeholders on the student’s schedule and enable the home campus to award credit upon course completion. However, it is not uncommon for grades to be converted from one grading system to another (for example, from a +/- system into a simple letter grade or from a letter grade into a numeric grade).

There are some institutions that report credits earned via course exchange as transfer credits. For example, most universities in the University of Texas System transcribe in this manner.¹⁷ This system may be simpler to implement initially because most institutions have preexisting methods in place for assigning transfer credit. However, this method of awarding credit also has several drawbacks, including that transfer courses are often not included in a student’s GPA. Considerations such as these have led several institutions, including the University of North Carolina Language Exchange, to phase out the practice of awarding transfer credit for course exchange in favor of awarding native institutional credit.¹⁸

¹⁵ “WICHE Internet Course Exchange Catalog.” Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <http://www.wiche-ice.org/new/?CFID=1090390&CFTOKEN=31cbceecffdb024c-B0EA9C8E-19B9-F805-20EB42A5E79ECB3A>

¹⁶ [1] “Course Exchange Registration Information.” Tri-College University. http://www.tri-college.org/course_exchange/registration_information/

[2] “Use Online Credit Courses for Your Current Degree Program.” University of Minnesota Digital Campus. <http://digitalcampus.umn.edu/courses/index.html>

¹⁷ Administrator C. University of Texas System Online Consortium. Telephone interview. September 3, 2014.

¹⁸ Administrator E. University of North Carolina Language Exchange. Telephone interview. September 4, 2014.

COURSE APPROVAL AND FACULTY CREDENTIALING

Hanover identified two distinct, common processes for course approval and faculty credentialing among course exchange networks. The first does not require individual institutions to approve the offerings and/or faculty of partner institutions. Using this method, institutions agree that each member's curricula are fairly comparable and have undergone a sufficiently rigorous review process on the home campus. For example, the CIC policy states:

Courses that have passed academic review and/or received provisional approval at the host/teaching university do not need further academic scrutiny at other universities. Faculty/instructors who carry faculty or instructor status at their home institutions do not need to provide further documentation to other institutions.¹⁹

In other consortia, exchange curricula must be demonstrated to be comparable on a course-by-course basis. In some instances administrators approve courses at the consortia level. More often, however, officials at individual institutions review each course.

Course approval in small exchange networks, such as the North Carolina Language Exchange, may be an ad hoc process in which program directors approve courses for students as needed.²⁰ However, universities in larger networks, such as the University of Texas System, often find it preferable to follow the approval and articulation process that the system uses to review transfer credit more generally.²¹ Likewise, the WICHE does not have formal rules governing course approval among its members. Instead, receiving institutions "select, review, and articulate the courses they import" following their own methods.²²

FACULTY APPROVAL

Faculty members have historically been less scrutinized by receiving institutions, which tend to focus on the overall course curricula. Most institutions have long accepted the premise that, in the words of the New American Colleges and Universities exchange operations manual, "the host institution is the employer of the course instructor" and is solely responsible for credentialing them.²³ Consortia that allow individual institutions to approve or reject exchange courses could theoretically refuse to accept courses offered by a particular instructor at another institution, but in practice this appears to be an exceptionally rare occurrence.

However, **in recent years it has become more common for exchange coalitions to adopt more proactive policies regarding faculty credentials.** This trend has been driven by regulations instituted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and is

¹⁹ "CourseShare Manual," Op. cit., p. 2.

²⁰ Administrator E interview, Op. cit.

²¹ Administrator C interview, Op. cit.

²² "The Exchange." Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <http://www.wiche.edu/ice/exchange>

²³ "NAC&U Online Course Exchange Operational Principles." New American Colleges and Universities. <http://www.newamericancolleges.org/OnlineCourses/NAC&U-Online%20principles%20document.pdf>

especially prominent among SACS-accredited institutions. Currently, several individual universities and course exchange networks are developing systems to allow every institution to review the qualifications of every faculty member within the network, although those efforts remain preliminary. For example, the Regents Online Campus Collaborative, which is composed of all the institutions governed by the Tennessee Board of Regents, currently maintains a document repository that contains HR hiring files for each faculty member teaching on the exchange.²⁴

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Technological integration has been a consistent challenge for course exchange networks. Representatives interviewed for this research generally report that the universities in their consortia use different learning management and student identification systems. Because these different software packages cannot communicate with one another, exchange administrators must complete many important processes (such as enrolling students in courses, verifying their attendance, and transcribing their grades) manually. Students must also be issued multiple usernames and passwords because the login information from their

“The problem is not telling a student to take a course; it is in making the software speak with each other.”

home institution is not recognized across the system. “The problem,” as summarized by a UNC Language Exchange administrator “is not telling a student to take a course; it is in making the software speak with each other.”²⁵

Although this is a widely recognized problem, those interviewed emphasize that it would be difficult and expensive to implement universal learning and student management technologies across campuses. The most practicable solution that currently exists is for course exchange consortia to institute a shared management suite that officials from each campus can access. However, this system does not directly communicate with partner universities’ software. These systems are used to coordinate workflows, to share course and student information, and to facilitate student enrollment and transcribing procedures. However, while these shared systems act as a centralized location for consortia data, they do not work automatically and still require manual exchange of information. The University of Texas Online Consortium’s Texas Information System and Great Plains IDEA’s ExpanSIS are examples of information management tools that users report working well.²⁶

²⁴ Administrator D interview, Op. cit.

²⁵ Administrator F. University of North Carolina Language Exchange. Telephone interview. September 4, 2014.

²⁶ [1] Administrator G. Great Plains IDEA. Telephone interview. September 2, 2014.

[2] “Welcome to the Texas Information System.” University of Texas Online Consortium.
<https://tis.telecampus.utsystem.edu/>

MARKETING

Online course exchanges have generally struggled to effectively market their course sharing service to students. In interviews for this report, institutional representatives consistently identified marketing as an area for improvement for their consortia. These representatives generally, but not universally, believe that better marketing efforts would improve student participation rates.

Marketing efforts frequently rely on the individual universities to increase student awareness of the course exchange programs on their campuses. These efforts usually include describing the exchange on university websites. It is also standard practice for exchange coordinators or others in campus advising offices to be tasked with notifying students that they have the option to pursue online courses provided by a different university. This word-of-mouth advertising also sometimes extends to faculty. For example, according to the interviewed representative of the New American Colleges and Universities, the organization has “created faculty liaisons on each campus, and part of their role is to make other faculty aware of the collaborative for online courses.”²⁷ While having a basic campus presence through word-of-mouth advertising and placement on university websites is important, online course exchanges would likely benefit from more focused advertising campaigns directed by consortia coordinators.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Interviews for this report reveal that online course exchange systems tend to rely on fairly straightforward measures of success. Student enrollment levels have generally been the most important metric by which consortia gauged their efforts. However, as is the case with higher education at large, **many course exchange consortia are beginning to adopt more sophisticated methods of tracking their programs.** Student retention and completion of degree programs have become increasingly important metrics. Similarly, programs have become more concerned with the sustainability of exchange systems and have paid more attention to whether they are generating enough revenue to cover costs.

Also, central administrators are playing a more active role in data gathering and analysis. For many years individual universities were tasked with assessing the course exchanges from an institutional perspective. While this approach remains customary in many consortia, others, such as Great Plains IDEA, have adopted a more programmatic approach. Great Plains IDEA has also turned toward a more top-down method to data gathering because central administrators have found the data collected by individual institutions to be difficult to reconcile across all programs.²⁸

²⁷ Administrator H. New American Colleges and Universities. Email correspondence. August 25-27, 2014.

²⁸ Administrator G interview, Op. cit..

COMMON CHALLENGES

Despite their benefits, consortia often fail to attract significant enrollments. For example, the Utah eLearning Connection – which drew students from 10 public colleges in the state – served only 200 students at the time it closed after operating for nearly a decade.²⁹ Likewise, the ICCO has seen declining enrollments in recent years after serving fewer than 500 students per year at its peak.³⁰

It is difficult to explain why relatively few students choose to engage with course exchanges. The interviewed administrator at ICCO suggests that part of the problem is likely that so many colleges within the system offer a full complement of online courses that there is little need for students to seek outside coursework. The interviewed administrator at New American Colleges and Universities (NACU) also reports little student engagement with the course exchange system and offers another opinion: this individual believes that the effectiveness of the NACU exchange is limited by student resistance to the idea of taking online courses in general. That problem, the administrator thinks, is compounded by student hesitance to take courses off-campus and by limited student and staff knowledge of the exchange program.³¹

In addition, faculty and staff resistance has presented a considerable barrier to the full implementation of some course exchanges. As described previously, the exchange network representatives with whom Hanover spoke universally acknowledged the important role that individual campus actors play in the success of course exchange systems. They also related a variety of reasons why university officials have been opposed to engaging with an online exchange. These include:

- Loss of institutional identity;
- Increased workload;
- Belief that other university's curricula are not rigorous enough;
- Belief that online programs are of lower quality than classroom programs; and
- Lack of understanding of what a course exchange is or how it works.

Unfortunately, there is no best practice for increasing the buy-in of faculty and administration. Resistance may be mitigated as campus officials become more familiar with the exchanges. Exchange administrators can also work to create a sense of trust and equality among member institutions through regular meetings of representative bodies. However, the ultimate key to achieving campus buy-in often rests on communicating the necessity of the exchange. According to the interviewed administrator at Great Plains IDEA,

²⁹ Parry, M. "Utah Disbands E-Learning Consortium." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 18, 2009. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/utah-disbands-e-learning-consortium/7167>

³⁰ Administrator A interview, Op. cit.

³¹ Administrator H email correspondence, Op. cit.

“For us, the success of a program depends upon the need for the program. There needs to be a sense of urgency.”³²

³² Administrator G interview, Op. cit.

SECTION II: INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

In this section, Hanover Research profiles the registration, funding, and technology policies and operations of three course exchange systems. These systems each represent a distinct model of partnering to share courses between universities.

GREAT PLAINS IDEA³³

The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance, commonly known as Great Plains IDEA (GPIDEA), is an academic alliance of 20 universities. The exchange was founded in 2001. While its membership remains largely clustered in the Great Plains, the organization has since become nationwide and now includes members from California to Florida. GPIDEA members do not exchange individual courses. Instead, the consortium “offers fully-online graduate and undergraduate coursework and program options in high demand professional fields.”³⁴ The consortium began by offering master’s programs in the Human Sciences, but within the last few years it has expanded its programs to include Agriculture disciplines as well. Figure 2.1, below, displays current program options.

Figure 2.1: Great Plains IDEA Program Options

HUMAN SCIENCES	AGRICULTURE
Community Development	Agricultural Education
Dietetics	Agriculture and Environmental Law
Early Care and Education for a Mobile Society	Agricultural Systems and Management Technology
Family and Consumer Sciences	Animal Science
Family and Consumer Sciences Education	Bioenergy and Sustainable Technology
Family Financial Planning	Food Safety and Defense
Gerontology	Grassland Management
Merchandising	Horticulture
Youth Development	Soil, Water, and Environmental Science
Military, Veterans, and Families	Swine Science Online

Source: Institutional website³⁵

Institutional participation varies by program. Universities select which programs to participate in based on institutional needs as well as teaching abilities. Before entering a program, every institution approves every course within that program following a course and curriculum development process. It is also expected that GPIDEA members will be full participants in the consortium and will be responsible for both enrolling students and offering courses in at least one program.

³³ Unless otherwise noted, the information in this section comes from: Administrator G interview, Op. cit.

³⁴ “Home page.” Great Plains IDEA. <http://www.gpidea.org/>

³⁵ [1] “Human Sciences Programs.” Great Plains IDEA. <http://www.hsidea.org/programs/>

[2] “AG*IDEA Programs.” Great Plains IDEA. <http://www.agidea.org/programs/>

REGISTRATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

GPIDEA ensures that students can seamlessly enroll across multiple campuses. Every GPIDEA course is catalogued by individual institutions along with all of their other courses. Thus, students follow the same registration process as they would if they were taking a course offered by their home campus. Transcribing is done by the home institutions, which also award the degree upon completion. Finally, GPIDEA students pay tuition and fees to their home institution by the same process as non-GPIDEA students. However, students enrolled in GPIDEA programs all pay the same tuition per credit hour, which may be more or less than the tuition at their home university.

While the consortium's common SIS allows for timely and secure exchange of student and financial data between consortium members, it cannot communicate directly with each campus' SIS system.

TECHNOLOGY

However, the system in place at GPIDEA requires considerable back-end work that is not apparent to students. GPIDEA coordinators on each campus manually upload registration information to the consortium's common SIS, called ExpanSIS. At the end of the course, the coordinator at the providing campus uploads student grades to ExpanSIS, where they are retrieved by home campus administrators and transferred to the home SIS. While ExpanSIS allows for timely and secure exchange of student and financial data between consortium members, it cannot communicate directly with each campus' SIS system.

FUNDING AND MARKETING

Moreover, cost sharing also requires considerable effort on the part of each institution. Every year the finance officers of GPIDEA member institutions negotiate a common price for GPIDEA programs, which is paid by all students. Students pay their tuition directly to their home institution, but the revenue is ultimately divided three ways. Seventy-five percent is given to the teaching institution, 12.5 percent is given to the home institution, and 12.5 percent is given to GPIDEA to fund its infrastructural supports. The consortium's central office notifies each institution what it is owed, but it is the responsibility of member to process its own billing.

Marketing of GPIDEA programs has generally been the responsibility of the individual member institutions. This ad hoc approach has not been completely effective, but for many years it was not a major concern for stakeholders involved in the consortium. However, in recent years it has become apparent to many that the current environment for online programs "is much more competitive than it was when Great Plains IDEA started." This realization has motivated GPIDEA to undertake more formal marketing campaigns from the central office.

REGENTS ONLINE CAMPUS COLLABORATIVE³⁶

The Regents Online Campus Collaborative (ROCC) emerged from a policy decision of the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR). The TBR is composed of 46 institutions, including six universities and 40 community and technical colleges.³⁷ The original goal behind the collaborative was for it to offer degree programs of its own, and there is still some discussion of implementing such a system in the future. However, as it is currently structured, the ROCC primarily facilitates the sharing of individual courses among the TBR's higher education institutions. Enrollments in this system have grown consistently in recent years, and since 2012 ROCC has served over 40,000 students.³⁸

REGISTRATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Like Great Plains IDEA, the ROCC strives to offer students a “totally seamless” experience in taking classes across multiple campuses. ROCC courses are listed in each institution's course catalog along with the institution's native courses, and students register online just as they would for courses on their home campus. ROCC courses are identified as such in the course catalogs, but the system appears to work well enough that it is possible students would not even know they were taking a course offered by a different campus until the first day of class.

However, this impressive coordination is facilitated by a “fairly labor intensive” process at the TBR. To ensure that up-to-date course information is included in every institution's catalog, the ROCC curates an extensive list of programs that it regularly distributes to member schools. Moreover, the ROCC receives daily updates on exchange enrollments from each institution. The central office sorts these students into sections using a custom SIS, and provides student information to the provider campuses.

TECHNOLOGY

The ROCC system demonstrates the difficulty that is inherent in integrating consortia's technology systems. Every institution in the system uses D2L as its learning management system (a decision that was made by the TBR), and all institutions are also on Banner. However, there are no unique student identifiers that operate across the system. Thus, students must use different usernames and passwords for courses offered through the ROCC than they use at their home campus. Although ROCC leaders recognize that there would be value in a more integrated system, they have not been able to institute one yet.

³⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the information in this section comes from: Administrator D interview, Op. cit.

³⁷ “About Us.” Regents Online Campus Collaborative. <http://www.rodp.org/about-us>

³⁸ Ibid.

FUNDING AND BUY-IN

Students pay tuition to their home campus at home campus rates. Tuition rates are largely consistent throughout the system, but the ROCC uses a formula based on the number of course exchange students attending each institution to calculate where pay adjustments are needed between institutions. The ROCC directly bills institutions that owe money and credits institutions that are owed.

The ROCC has managed to secure considerable buy-in from its member institutions, although ensuring good management at the campus level remains a challenge. One leader attributes the ROCC's success in this area to its governing structure, which gives each institution a continued voice in the decision making process. The ROCC has a Curriculum

“If we would have had to rely on every institution signing on willingly,” an interviewed representative relates, “I’m not sure that it would have ever happened.”

Committee that approves programs and curricula and an Oversight Committee composed of Chief Academic Officers that meets regularly to discuss strategic decisions. However, the interviewed administrator also notes that the TBR's role as a governing system also simplified the development of the ROCC considerably by allowing it to mandate institutional participation. “If we would have had to rely on every institution signing on willingly,” the representative relates, “I’m not sure that it would have ever happened.”

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ONLINE CONSORTIUM

Exchange courses in the University of Texas Online Consortium (UTOC), which is administered by the University of Texas (UT) System, can be taken as part of a completely online, multi-campus program or as a stand-alone supplement to one's home institution's offerings. Though both approaches share many aspects, the rules governing them are slightly different.

REGISTRATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Students enrolled in fully online programs of study are not limited in the number of courses they can take on different campuses. As importantly, the grades these students earn at non-home institutions are transcribed as native institution credit and counted in the GPA. Alternatively, the students' home institution may transcript stand-alone exchange courses as either native or transfer credit. Home institutions may also limit the number of exchange course these students may take, although there are no restrictions at the system level.³⁹

Regardless of the program, students register for exchange courses using the Texas Information System (TIS), the UTOC's registration and student record management system. Using TIS, students submit registration requests for non-home campus courses. These requests must be processed and approved by the student's home campus advisor, the

³⁹ Administrator C interview, Op. cit.

home campus registrar, and the host campus registrar. After being approved, the student is manually registered in the course on the host campus.⁴⁰

TECHNOLOGY

The UTOC officials that Hanover spoke with recognized that because all of the universities are autonomous with different student numbering and other systems, “the [registration] process is going to be tedious.”⁴¹ However, though the registration process is time consuming and somewhat cumbersome, it is improved by the fact that most of the steps happen within the TIS. This technology allows users to communicate across campuses and has enabled officials to coordinate with one another, despite the fact that their individual LMS programs are not compatible. “In general,” declares one interviewed UTOC representative, “we feel very comfortable with the system as a system of record and a system of transactions.”⁴² This individual also notes that the TIS has worked well as a system-wide marketplace that allows students to view all available courses at once.

FACULTY QUALITY AND ACCEPTING EXCHANGE CREDIT

Each institution in the University of Texas System is responsible for credentialing its own faculty, and there is no official process in place by which the qualifications of teachers on the exchange can be adjudicated by other universities. However, the universities are under no obligation to accept exchange credit from one another for stand-alone courses. Instead, each institution accepts or rejects that credit following the same process it would use when considering transfer credit of any type.⁴³

FUNDING

Students are billed directly by each campus on which they are enrolled, and they are required to pay the tuition rates of that campus. Moreover, while the universities in the UT System waive student service fees for services online students are unlikely to use (such as parking or health services), they generally charge a distance education fee. This fee is assessed at the same rate for course exchange students as for home institution students taking an online class. Because each institution receives tuition from all students enrolled, there is no fund sharing between universities.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Administrator B interview, Op. cit.

⁴³ Administrator C interview, Op. cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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