Making the Grade with
What Every President Should

I n this age of rising costs and shrinking budgets, ubiquitous technologies and changing student expectations, the hotly contested "bricks *versus* clicks" debate continues to gain traction on public university campuses. But given the merits of each in meeting this country's increasingly diverse academic needs, the logical solution undoubtedly lies somewhere in the middle. Rather than choosing one option over the other, we should be capitalizing on the best of both to create innovative, hybrid models that are more empowering for our students and more sustainable for our institutions.

The Case for Hybrid Education

A growing number of institutions are already moving in this direction as a way to provide greater flexibility for on-ground students while cultivating new markets for distance education—especially now that three-fourths of all college-goers are considered "non-traditional." Consequently, the burgeoning demand for more access and less seat time has opened the floodgates for more accommodating delivery paradigms.

On top of that, there is compelling evidence that well-designed hybrid courses actually improve academic performance and expand digital literacy. In fact, technology-mediated education promotes the dynamic learning environments our students need to interact more successfully with the content, with their instructors and with each other. There are even real-time options, like videoconferencing, that allow us to virtually replicate the face-to-face environment for students who choose to learn entirely from a distance.

Moreover, moving between the finite space of classroom instruction and the seemingly unlimited potential of cyberspace encourages students to take greater control over their educational process. For example, by providing something as simple as asynchronous chat room technology, they no longer have to wait until class meets again to ask a question or explore a novel idea.

Cost benefits are yet another reason for higher education to make the paradigm shift. Although there are substantial up-front investments associated with quality hybrid development,

there are also significant long-term cost reductions. One study, conducted by Ithaka S+R—a non-profit higher education think tank—estimated that instructor compensation cost savings in large hybrid survey courses could run anywhere from 19 to 57 percent, over time, depending on the model. In another, the University of Central Florida reported cost reductions associated with other, less tangible factors, such as higher student retention rates, greater resource efficiency, and improved learning outcomes.

It stands to reason then, that by effectively infusing face-to-face interaction with many of the same technologies our students regularly use to connect and communicate from a distance, we could actually make real headway in breaking the proverbial iron triangle of quality, affordability and access. Of course, the key word here is "effectively;" and in my experience, there are a few critical factors to consider in getting there.

First Steps

As with any transformative model, successful hybrid initiatives entail fundamental changes in roles, responsibilities and expectations. This means having a clear institutional strategy across divisions, departments and disciplines, as well as a strong institutional commitment at every level of operation— from senior leaders to mid-level administrators to faculty, staff and students.

Perhaps the best way to begin the transition is to create an internal research and development team comprised of key administrators and well-respected "champions" from each of the major stakeholder groups. In addition to identifying innovative hybrid models that are need-driven and mission-compatible, this team should produce a robust implementation and assessment process, along with guidelines around budget strategies and special policy considerations like intellectual property protection and faculty compensation.

Once these champions have seeded the transformation, they can then be deployed as change agents, piloting, evaluating and promoting new methodologies and proven practices. Moreover, faculty members who take part in this initial planning team should also be closely involved in creating peer mentoring and other professional development opportunities for their colleagues.

Hybrid Education:

Know

A Commentary by Susan C. Aldridge

Quality Course Design

There is simply no magic formula for allocating instructional time between online and in-class activities. In fact, the beauty of a well-designed hybrid format is its capacity to exploit the benefits of both to create rich learning experiences, interactive learning environments, and vibrant learning communities. That being said, there are a confluence of issues to consider in achieving these objectives in a way that meets the needs of our students—from learning styles and generational traits to time differences and geographic constraints.

In traditional classrooms, faculty members develop and deliver their own courses, often wearing many hats in the process. Thus, the quality of each individual course hinges on the instructor's skill level. But in a hybrid environment, where the goal is to optimize both teaching and technology in the service of effective learning, effective course design should be a collaborative effort, which typically takes between six and eight months to complete.

Although in many universities faculties are still primarily responsible for designing hybrid courses, there is plenty of evidence to support a far more team-driven approach. Under this scenario, instructors as content authorities join forces with specially trained course designers, assessment professionals and multimedia specialists. Some institutions maintain these teams in-house, often unbundling traditional faculty roles to create experts in each of these areas; others outsource some or all of these additional functions.

But regardless of the course development model, team members merge their unique skills to identify learning outcomes; embed meaningful assessment tools; establish well-defined course objectives; integrate suitable learning technologies; construct relevant and engaging learning activities; and select complementary resource materials.

Faculty Buy-In

Not surprisingly, hybrid learning places new demands on faculty. For starters, it is far more student-centered than teacher-directed, more interactive than didactic—which translates into radically different strategies for teaching and learning. So it is essential to provide faculty members with the resources they need to make this transition successfully.

I have found that for buy-in to occur, they must not only understand the benefits and the expectations of hybrid learning, but also feel exceedingly comfortable using the model. This

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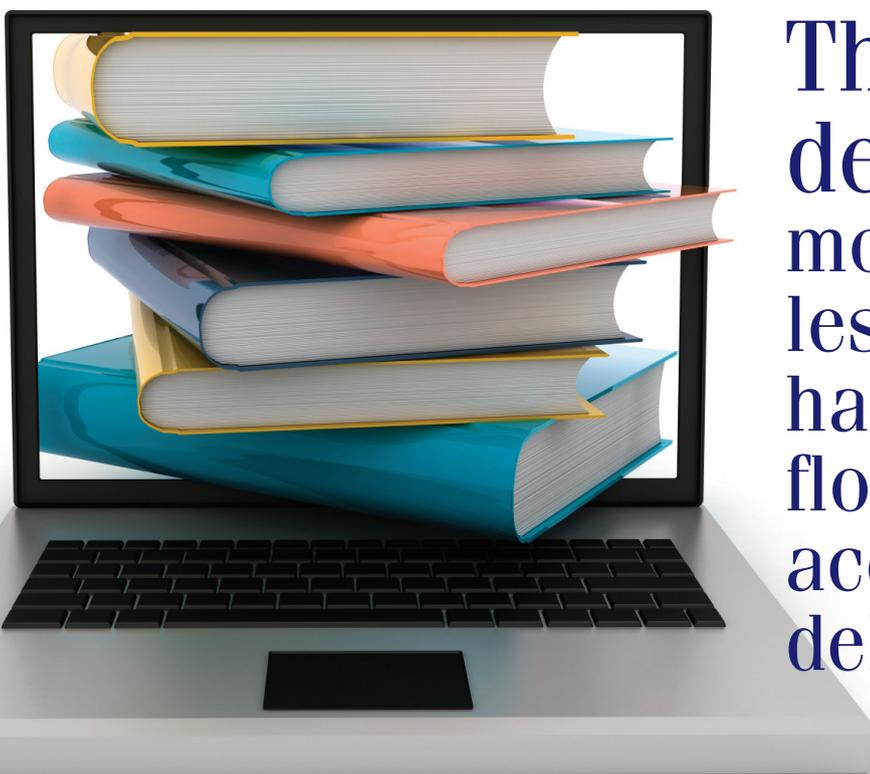
means open and honest communication around such important issues as anticipated changes in faculty roles that affect review, promotion and tenure policies, as well as compensated release time for the labor-intensive course design process.

It also involves quality professional development that simulates the hybrid environment, thus enabling instructors to experience what it means to be a hybrid learner, while mastering the requisite competencies for creating and teaching effective courses. Likewise, these programs should provide ample peer mentoring opportunities that link emerging hybrid instructors with their more experienced colleagues to reinforce new skills and share best practices.

Student Support

Students also need plenty of support to realize the many benefits of hybrid learning. Given that most of them still equate higher education with desks in a classroom and professors at the podium, they often have trouble making the shift from passive to active learners. Consequently, we should provide our students with opportunities to "test-drive" the hybrid class environment by experimenting with technologies, accessing course materials and completing sample assignments.

By the same token, we must reevaluate student services to ensure they meet the needs of hybrid students—whether on-ground or online. While this new paradigm affords new and exciting options around where and how our students learn, it also necessitates greater flexibility in the way we provide support services—from class registration and tuition payment to academic advising, career development and library resources.

Depending on the hybrid prototypes we choose and the students we serve, it can be as basic as extending on-ground service hours and furnishing 24-hour, dial-up help desks for technical support and library reference assistance. There are also services that lend themselves well to the same "high-touch, high-tech" models we use in developing academic courses and programs. On the other hand, institutions that serve students entirely online face the relatively expensive and time-consuming task of virtually replicating every service offered on campus.

Budget Considerations

While experienced online and hybrid education providers know that technology-mediated learning actually reduces academic delivery expenses over time, there are five distinct costs to consider when planning a move in this direction:

- ■ *The cost of the strategic decision-making process* used to determine "where we go from here" and "why;"
- ■ *The cost of redesigning traditional course content, materials and delivery systems,* including backend information systems, relevant learning objects, and other associated technologies that promote greater interactivity and learning;

- ■ *The cost of tech support and operation,* over a three- to five-year schedule that genuinely reflects the rapid evolution of learning technologies;
- ■ *The cost of developing and providing specialized student services and other support systems,* particularly with respect to stepped-up IT requirements and targeted benchmarks for tracking effectiveness and efficiency; and
- ■ *The cost of staff time*—including faculty, IT, administrative and support staff—to launch, teach, maintain, evaluate and refine hybrid courses and programs.

While the business model may vary from one institution to the next, these costs should be broken into operating, capital and revenue, as well as by funding source, not only to identify them more clearly, but also to specify how they will be covered short-term and upgraded long-term. Moreover, it is essential to incorporate a plan for underwriting institutional costs associated with hybrid growth and innovation, over time. This will entail making certain decisions up front, including the number and type of students you hope to serve; the percentage of hybrid courses and programs you want to offer; and the faculty remuneration process you plan to put in place. You should also factor in potential savings accrued through such standard working practices as the course design team model; in-house versus outsourced production responsibilities; and the use of cost-free open educational resources.

Final Thoughts

As hybrid learning continues to gain steam among higher education providers and consumers, we will need structured and longitudinal research studies with which to support and promote effective models and practices. We should evaluate student learning and engagement, as well as performance and retention, in hybrid courses; and faculty satisfaction with and requisite competencies for teaching in this environment. Likewise, cross-institutional cost/benefit analysis will improve resource allocation while laying the groundwork for strategic growth and innovation.

So in addition to collecting and comparing real-time data at many levels—from students and faculty members to individual courses and entire programs—we should also build in mechanisms for predictive modeling, which enables us to deploy focused teaching interventions and better learning technologies going forward. Although this will certainly require a significant investment, it promises a substantial return for both our students and our institutions as we forge new frontiers in American higher education. **P**

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