Chapter 10
Finding a Niche through an External Degree-Completion Program

Evan S. Smith
University of Missouri, USA

Terrie Nagel
University of Missouri, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The University of Missouri began seriously investigating an external degree-completion program in 2000, working with an existing Bachelor of General Studies Degree Program (BGS). Concerns included the development of Capstone and Writing Intensive courses. The program has entailed training advisors; updating curriculum; revising student services procedures; marketing; and coordinating with other branches of Extension.

BACKGROUND
Distance learning is a competitive field, and many institutions feel compelled to provide courses, generally online (web-based) or on CD-ROM, to students. Online often connotes “degree program” to many. Yet even before online distance education came about, adult educators recognized the importance of external degrees (Houle, 1973).

Bachelor’s degrees increase one’s marketability (Turner & Monk-Turner, 2001); therefore, degree programs or degree-completion programs are important in distance education. To that end, the University of Missouri’s Center for Distance and Independent Study (CDIS), part of the University of Missouri Extension, began investigating an undergraduate external degree program in 1998-1999, and in 2001-2004, the program began to materialize. Extension’s pursuit of the program included overcoming campus resistance to an external degree, drafting a proposal, and building on an existing on-campus Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree program. Justification of the degree-completion program included serving University of Missouri (MU) students who never completed their degrees, military personnel, and adult, non-traditional students, following the precedents of other institutions (Excelsior, Indiana University, and others); drawing on existing courses offered through CDIS; and complementing other MU programs. In seeking connections to
MU degrees, not only would independent study enrollments and prestige increase, but the stigma of \(-\text{e}\) (extension, for “correspondence courses”) on transcripts might disappear (Almeda, 1985); indeed it did disappear in 2002. In general, CDIS sought to follow principles such as those of the American Council on Education and Adult Higher Education Alliance (ACE & AHEA, 2000) and the North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools Higher Learning Commission (Taylor, 2000).

**SETTING THE STAGE**

CDIS reviewed its own print-based and online courses and their match with campus requirements, including new concerns for computer information and literacy (computer proficiency), and presented mock transcripts to administrators. The aim was to serve adult, non-traditional learners in a degree-completion program, although CDIS had contemplated a full degree program. At the time, over 78% of adults age 25 and older in Missouri did not have a bachelor’s degree or better (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The planning process exposed several concerns. The BGS program is housed on the Columbia campus, so one concern was using CDIS’s far-campus courses (e.g., Rolla and St. Louis). Although many courses were already in place, some junior-senior-level courses needed to be commissioned or revised. CDIS also needed faculty cooperation, especially on Capstone courses (faculty-directed special projects) and Writing Intensive (WI) requirements new to CDIS and requiring special approvals. The agenda included working with, educating, and informing advisors and representatives from campus offices such as admissions; maintaining a paper trail; updating and digitizing the curriculum; marketing the program; and coordinating with other branches of Extension.

CDIS began as print-based correspondence in 1911, but by the 1970s, CDIS used computers in enrollment, some multiple-choice grading, and word-processing. By 1997, CDIS created a website and produced courses in homegrown templates for the Internet.

In 1998-1999, CDIS researched external degree programs in the US. The CDIS catalog had a page devoted to external or distance degrees but cited only other programs. In the 1960s, a Certificate in General Studies offered through MU’s College of Arts and Science (A&S) and the Extension Division covered only the first two semesters of undergraduate work. Later, MU began offering a BGS through A&S with very specific requirements including residency, credits, Capstone, Writing Intensive, and Computer Proficiency. Could CDIS provide such a program with its courses? CDIS believed that it could do so, as most courses offered through CDIS were A&S and met general education requirements (see Kleiber & Zhu, 1995, for a similar plan of action).

Crucial to the BGS are “components,” 45 hours in three fields of study, at least one of which must be A&S. CDIS offered multiple courses in English, philosophy, political science, and other fields to meet this requirement. After several administrative meetings, CDIS identified courses to serve the BGS population at a distance and prepared mock transcripts. These transcripts solidified the plan; top administrators took the idea more seriously. Administrators agreed that degree completion was the better option for CDIS. CDIS would need to provide a large number of higher-level courses when it had otherwise specialized in lower-level offerings.

In 2002-2003, enrollments through CDIS were given a semester classification and added to student records at the time of enrollment, rather than when completed. These changes allowed students to receive student services such as financial aid and library access. Financial aid and other student services will be discussed later; however, these changes and preparation resulted in a spring 2004 decision by the College of Arts and Science to begin offering the Bachelor of General Studies.
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