Chapter 14
The Blended Learning Initiative:
A University–Wide Program to Develop, Deliver, and Assess Blended Courses

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes a university-wide initiative to develop multiple courses in both online and blended formats. The chapter provides perspectives of the project from three vantage points – administration, assessment, and teaching – and focuses on the blended courses. The administrative aspects of the project, such as how courses were selected and how faculty members were recruited, are briefly described. The assessment, which includes data on faculty and students’ perceptions as well as student performance and course success, is described in detail. Finally, a case study of a particularly successful course provides a detailed view of best practices for teaching in a blended environment.

INTRODUCTION
The face of higher education is evolving as more alternatives to face-to-face course formats, such as online or blended courses, are added to university course schedules. Online learning continues to show dramatic growth, with most U.S. institutions and an increasing number of international institutions reporting that online learning is a critical long-term strategy (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). Online courses offer improved access to higher education, and an increasing number

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of studies are finding that online outcomes are equal to or even superior to face-to-face instruction (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). However, blended courses that combine online and face-to-face elements may be superior to both online and face-to-face formats. In fact, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) suggested that blended learning has the power to transform higher education because it enables online learners to be “both together and apart” and “be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere.” Blended course design “can extend time and task that sustain a community of inquiry beyond the limited frame of the traditional face-to-face classroom” (Garrison, 2011, p. 78). The integration of face-to-face and online elements enhances the sense of community, which, according to Rovai (2002), is important for perceived learning and persistence in courses. The blended format provides opportunities for face-to-face discourse, which is associated with energy and spontaneity (Meyer, 2003) and preferred by some students. And it also provides opportunities for online discussion, which affords time for thoughtful responses and is preferred by students who may not perform well in face-to-face discussions. Thus, an effectively designed blended course can enhance learning as a result of its ability to create a kind of learning community that cannot be created in either a fully face-to-face or fully online course.

Because of the enhanced learning and improved access associated with both blended and online courses, the Pennsylvania State University conceived of an initiative that involved the redesign of thirty courses for blended and/or online formats. What follows is a description of the Blended Learning Initiative (BLI), including the administrative and assessment activities associated with the project, as well as a detailed description of one particularly successful course. The chapter concludes with some of the lessons learned throughout the project by the administrators, the course assessments and the faculty. The objective of the chapter is to share the BLI experience with administrators, who may be embarking on a similar endeavor, and with faculty, who are interested in pedagogical strategies that will lead to student success in blended environments.

BLEND LEARNING INITIATIVE AT PENN STATE

The Charge to Create Dual-Use Courses

In the fall of 2004, Penn State’s provost charged university leaders to identify and create a portfolio of undergraduate courses that would be developed for both fully online and blended delivery. Penn State seemed uniquely positioned—with its online World Campus combined with a state-wide physical presence at twenty-four different sites—to offer our educational programs in a number of innovative delivery models balancing face-to-face (F2F) instruction with online learning. To leverage this strategic advantage, Penn State established the BLI to (1) increase access to strategically important Penn State curricula through fully online World Campus delivery, (2) attract new students and improve retention, enhance flexibility and convenience for students, (3) enhance quality and effectiveness in high-enrolling courses, (4) test new pedagogies that involve active, inquiry-based, resource-oriented learning, (5) position Penn State at all locations to respond to a high-demand workforce and the economic needs of Pennsylvania and (6) strengthen the partnership between the World Campus and the rest of the university by contributing to the evolution of a seamless learning experience for both resident and non-resident students.

The Blended Learning Initiative hoped to accomplish the above objectives with four overlapping activities:
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