An academic curriculum is a series of courses related by themes and skills development. The individual courses within the curriculum help learners progress from basic, introductory levels of knowledge and skills to higher-level objectives for critical thinking, mastery of skills, and demonstration of knowledge common to a discipline. Completing specified courses within a curriculum leads to a degree, and the degree program may involve courses in several different departments or disciplines.

An online curriculum forms the basis for a program of study. For a curriculum to be successful, administrators must support online programs and keep in place an infrastructure that appropriately supports and encourages course development. The institution must have an ongoing commitment to online education and provide resources to create, implement, and modify course designs according to the subject experts’ specifications.
Administrators must approve a unified framework and design (perhaps through the selection and support of courseware, such as WebCT or Blackboard) that will give the curriculum a unified appearance and structure. If courseware is not used, administrative policies concerning individual course designs and the use of technology to implement them must be put in place. All persons working with course design must understand the institution’s design parameters and the process for creating course sites.

The institution also must plan for the costs of maintaining high-quality programs and delivering appropriate levels of technology. Whether the technology is low- or high-tech, all courses within a program should offer the same type of online access to and use of tools appropriate for the study of a specific discipline.

Of course, when an entirely new curriculum is being designed, the personnel who will create, teach, support technical needs, work with students in the business areas of online education, update courses, market programs, and so on, also must be hired or reassigned to these new tasks. These personnel must be trained and retained, too. As the curriculum or curricula expand, additional personnel must be prepared to assist those people who continue to work with the system. The “first wave” of personnel cannot simply take on more tasks as programs grow; the hiring and training of new faculty and staff are necessary throughout the life of the program. As well, current personnel need to participate in additional training as a course or the whole curriculum is modified and different technologies are put in place.

Completely virtual universities or colleges may have several curricula; an institution’s business is to provide a variety of online offerings leading to specific degrees. However, traditional campus-based institutions may decide only to create a few online degree programs, with the majority of courses and degree programs presented on site. Some institutions may find it appropriate to offer highly popular courses in both online and on-site formats, although the entire curriculum is not offered online. The range of course offerings, and their status within an entire curriculum, often varies among institutions.

What’s appropriate for your institution? Are online degree programs necessary to meet the needs of your target market of learners? Are similar
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