

Beyond a Campus: Adaptive Strategies for a Changing Environment

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive higher-education environment, universities may grow or hold their own by taking degree programs and services to the students wherever, whenever, and however they need them—becoming more nearly a delivery system rather than a single location. Supporting and developing faculty is critical to success. Sound fiscal strategies and collaboration with other institutions can reduce risk, contain costs, and ensure quality.

A decade ago *Metropolitan Universities* published an article on inter-institutional collaboration in establishing and operating off-campus teaching centers (Bell et al. 1998). In the intervening years one of those institutions, the University of Houston-Victoria (UHV—a public upper-level/graduate university 100 miles southwest of Houston) has reinvented its identity and doubled its credit-hour production, evolving from a small commuter campus with an incipient off-campus presence to a delivery system capable of serving students throughout its combined rural and metropolitan region—and beyond. Collaboration has been a part, though only a part, of that success. This article offers experience-based strategies and good practices for expanding an institution and building off-campus enrollments.

There is good reason for institutions to look off campus for opportunities to increase or simply maintain their enrollments. The higher-education environment continues to change worldwide—seemingly at a rate unprecedented in the 1,000-year history of universities—and competition for enrollments has taken on entirely new dimensions. As a result, institutions find themselves having to adapt and evolve also at an unprecedented rate. New modes of instructional delivery have emerged; new competitors have emerged; and students, therefore, have more options. Increasingly they mix and blend modes of delivery, as well as coursework from different institutions. Traditional and non-traditional institutions alike feel the stress of rapid change and the threat of competition. Moreover, as documented in a recent Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) report, a decline in the number of high school graduates is now upon us and may especially affect traditional, campus-based institutions. The decade-long trough will be deepest in the northeast and Midwest—though other areas can take small comfort, since with regard to college-going rates the “traditionally underrepresented groups are the fastest growing” (WICHE 2008). Thus, universities may find themselves having to extend or further extend their instructional reach to attract enrollments. As noted in the earlier article on

collaboration referred to above, “For hundreds of thousands of students the traditional campus is no longer the locus of higher education.” Indeed, “. . . taking higher education to the student . . . has become the dominant means of institutional growth” (Bell et al. 1998, 65). Since that article appeared, Web-based delivery has added a new and rapidly expanding means of reaching students off-campus (as well as on campus). It is important to keep in mind that time, not miles, is the operative measure in off-campus delivery. Across town may be too distant for students with jobs and families. For shift workers Web-based delivery may be their only option.

A caveat: generalizing from experience is always risky, since hindsight may confer after-the-fact prescience on mere vicissitudes of fortune or the serendipities of dumb luck. However, since one cannot control the variables and repeat experiments other than in a laboratory, what we offer are guiding principles that at least have been tested in practice. They have proven useful for us and may prove useful for other institutions. We are not offering a model and certainly not a formula (if one could devise a formula for success, every competition would result in a tie).

Getting Ready

Probably there is no longer any institution that does not have a strategic plan and well-established process for updating it, but because universities are highly decentralized, the critical need for unified vision, mutual support, and institution-wide commitment can be underestimated. Education is about trying to accomplish together what none of us can accomplish alone and so is survival-oriented strategic planning—hanging together, as the fomenters of the American Revolution realized, being preferable to hanging separately. As a case in point, this article represents the joint effort of a chief finance officer, a chief development and former chief student affairs officer, and a recently retired chief academic officer. They have had their disagreements, but they did realize, along with the president and others, that for the institution to move forward they had to share a common vision and had to see resources, authority, and power not as the prerogatives of any individual but as instruments of institutional change in the interests of serving educational needs and generating enrollment growth—the two interests being, as we came to see them, much the same.

But concurrence of its nominal leadership cannot change an institution. It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of inclusion, communications, and encouragement in ensuring that the purpose, mission, goals, and fiscal priorities of the institution are shared and supported across all academic and administrative units. If faculty and staff are to make an initiative successful, they must own a share of it.

Responding to Student Needs

From its origin in the early 1970s in the small city of Victoria, UHV was for years the only game in town—or in the surrounding region for that matter—though owing to lack of population density, it was a small game. Place-bound students who couldn’t go away to college had little other option, and so marketing of programs and student-

friendly services were perhaps more a nicety than a necessity. Protected markets are gone, however, and will not return. Like it or not, universities face the same challenges and must adopt the same marketing approaches as the commercial sector.

In the early 1990s UHV faced its own Darwinian ultimatum: adapt and evolve or risk extinction. Since small institutions have to provide the same services, comply with the same regulations, and meet the same accrediting standards as large institutions, the fixed costs of operation can become unsustainable or at the least soak up revenues that might otherwise have gone into salaries, to say nothing of new programs and quality improvements. Every employee of the institution understood, or was brought to understand, that reality and so understood as well that the need for growth had to be the paramount concern of the institution. Apart from our fiduciary worries, we also had a deeply felt obligation to students and alumni to ensure that the value of their degrees, earned in trust and often at considerable sacrifice, did not diminish along with the diminishing prospects of their university. To grow, we needed not just a clearly understood and commonly shared purpose, we needed a plan—not just an enrollment-management plan per se, but a plan that might enable us to effect a kind of bootstrap evolution in a compressed time frame. We needed not just commitment across the university; we had to turn that commitment into operational reality. Our first guiding principle and operational priority became the following one:

- Responding to students has to be the absolutely primary institutional priority.

No, students are not *just* customers; they are also participants in and contributors to the learning process. But they are at least customers—and they make the same kind of decisions based on the same kind of criteria that all customers do: they consider price, quality, convenience, and best value for them given the constraints on their time, money, and obligations. Marketing degree programs to them is very much like marketing any other product or service. While higher education is not *just* a product—it is also, at its best, a transformative experience—students are influenced nonetheless by brand recognition, by reputation, by welcoming behavior, and especially by evidence of commitment beyond the initial “sale.” Not only should learning be life-long; so should be enrollment management, in that our alumni can become our best recruiters. Should they become our worst, we would soon be out of business. While serving students is not the only mission of a university, but it is the only reason that universities exist.

Although we saw growth as essential to institutional quality and even survival, we soon realized that our goal had to relate to our mission; it had to be both a worthy and an operational one.

- Growth may be a necessity, and it may be a result, but it cannot in itself be the goal.

Our goal became to expand access, making higher education as convenient and affordable as possible throughout our service area—while maintaining or improving academic quality. We, of course, assumed that enrollment growth might follow as a

result of effectively pursuing that goal. As a commuter-based, upper-level/graduate institution, we had no hope of attracting more students to campus; we were already drawing a good market share of students within reasonable commuting range in the degree programs we offered. Expanding access required a different strategy.

- Expanding access means taking education to the students (the reverse of the millennium-old model of having them come to a campus to get it) beyond normal commuting distances, as measured in time, not miles.

We were determined to deliver education to the widest possible range of students—whenever, wherever, and however they needed it. Their need for convenient access was our opportunity. Fortunately, our plans coincided with the university System’s interest in serving the growing populations immediately west of Houston and with the emergence of Web-based instruction. Although there were three public universities in central Houston, the population density and resulting time in traffic meant that potential students in surrounding areas, especially those with jobs and family, often did not have the turn-around time to make it to early evening classes. Convenient access was for them the only way to pursue a degree. So, we had an opportunity. But as an ex-champion fighter once said, “Success depends on being ready when opportunity comes.” We wanted to be ready. That meant we had to change the way we thought about the institution.

- Taking education to the students means becoming a delivery system, not just a location.

It means packaging and putting on the road—and now online—not just courses but complete degree programs, along with instructional and student-support services. We now provide these through a mixture of in-person, interactive television, and Web-based delivery. Increasingly we rely on the last, not just for instruction and related services but for communication with widely dispersed faculty and staff. However, being a delivery system does not eliminate the importance of being there.

- Successful recruitment off campus requires a physical presence in the areas targeted for delivery of programs.

Though the campus is no longer the only thing, location in the sense of physical presence remains a very important thing in the targeted off-campus market. Without it, trying to attract enrollments is unlikely to repay the effort. That goes for both online and in-person delivery. The University of Phoenix very shrewdly figured this out years ago and so sprinkled its presence like seed pods around the country. A few universities, such as England’s Open University, found to their chagrin and loss that attracting students to Web-based courses is not just a matter of putting them online and advertising them. We were spared such a failure perhaps less by our foresight than by our modest resources and modest aspirations. We did not set out to serve the whole country or even the whole state; we did not intend to become technology-intensive just for the sake of it. We just wanted to serve students throughout our region as effectively

and productively as we could. We quickly learned that expanding access also meant establishing a physical presence in the target area. The Romans understood this, establishing their presence at outposts and controlling the territory between those and Rome—and creating an empire in the process. Brand recognition, familiarity, word-of-mouth, trust, a sense of shared community, a place one can go to talk with an actual representative of the university—all of these play an important part in turning the mere provision of access into actual growth. Students in El Paso could take the Web-based courses from UHV as easily as students in Victoria—but they don't. In fact, the effective range of online courses in attracting appreciable numbers of students is probably not much greater than commuting range. Even when state-wide systems like the University of Texas put a collaborative degree program online, students tend to take the degree from the nearest participating university.

Words like *product*, *customer*, and *marketing* are traditionally considered inaccurate and even demeaning as applied to academic endeavors, coming as they do with commercial taint. Nonetheless, a university still has to consider what primarily interests people in becoming students, what is necessary for them to become students, and what might best attract them to the university. Using whatever words we prefer, we still have to behave as if we were marketing a product to a targeted customer base. That means we must first determine what the product is. It may be tempting to try to test the waters at an off-campus location with a trial course or two, but such hedging of the bet is largely futile. In the main, students are not interested in investing time and money in work that does not lead to a degree. The marketable product is not an individual course but a complete degree program. A packet of courses may succeed in the case of student cohorts that have been identified and enrolled in advance, but cohort programs may indicate little about the sustainability of enrollments over time. Surveys of student interest are equally unreliable in trying to determine in advance the question of sustainability. There is, however, plenty of demographic and enrollment data available on national and state Websites that can inform decision-making. It is fairly easy for an institutional research office to develop a demographic profile of the area being targeted, including college-going rates, enrollment in various degree programs, and market shares of the institutions that typically draw students from the area. One can safely surmise that programs in high-demand elsewhere are likely to be in high-demand in the target area. For example, business and education are dependable off-campus offerings, but programs that struggle to maintain enrollment on campus are likely to struggle even more at off-campus locations.

- Once an institution commits to offering a program off-campus, that commitment must be kept.

Careful analysis of available data and careful planning cannot ensure that a program will in fact attract sustainable enrollments. Further, there is often a pent-up demand that swells initial enrollments and can lead to false expectations. In some cases it is possible to lower the risk of commitment by collaboration with other institutions, a strategy covered below in the section on resources. Finally, one must decide to take the gamble or not, and all the information one can gather will not ensure that the gamble

will pay off. Obviously, once students have made their own commitment to a program, an institution should not pull it back to campus, regardless of the kind of beating it must absorb. Sometimes alternatives can be offered for completing the program by other means, and in time a poor-performing program may be phased out or possibly turned into a cohort-based offering (meaning that students are lined up in advance and move through the program in lockstep fashion and that the program might or might not be repeated). But starting and then stopping programs arbitrarily leads potential students and members of the surrounding community to doubt whether they can depend on the institution. Community leaders take an active and often proprietary interest in a higher-education presence. It is a source of pride and promotion and they readily support it, they also expect an institution to honor what they consider to be a shared commitment, one they are likely to have supported with marketing, political, and financial assistance. Such negative reactions become quite evident when programs initially offered are cancelled—or worse, remain in promotional literature without the courses being available. Once a commitment is made to extend a program at an off-campus site, it is critically important that an institution demonstrate a good-faith effort to make the program viable. If it proves not to be, despite such effort, then understanding can be expected—but the institution is still left with the price of having disappointed some of its constituency and raised questions about its judgment in offering the program in the first place.

- Recruitment may be everybody's business but it must be somebody's responsibility—with roles, responsibilities, expectations both understood and supported.

It is not enough to have clear, well-communicated, and commonly understood institutional goals or even genuine commitment to them across the university. Those values must be translated into operational reality. The management challenge is not in managing enrollment or managing instruction or managing fiscal and technical resources—it is in managing human behavior: motivating, coordinating, and supporting the work of the individual human beings who make things happen, or not.

Everybody's business becomes nobody's job unless responsibilities are assigned, accountability is expected, and resources are brought to bear where they can provide the necessary support and incentive for getting the job done. We decided to decentralize student recruitment and allocate marketing dollars to each academic dean. They hired their own recruiters and devised their own marketing strategies, focusing on their particular degree programs. We retained admissions and the dissemination of general information in the student affairs division—including college fairs, financial aid forums, visits to high schools and community colleges, and such. We drilled staff on the importance of attitude, responsiveness, and caring in their interactions with students. We held customer-service training sessions, provided a well-promoted student suggestion box, and followed up on every suggestion or complaint—but we did not put any additional resources into general recruitment efforts. The deans were made responsible for both delivering a good academic product and for recruiting students into their programs. They had a condition: if they were to be effective, they had to

have resources. They were quite willing to be held accountable for stewardship and results. Indeed, they wanted the ball, and they soon demonstrated that they could run with it, involving their faculty and staff in pursuit of the goal and generating commendable *esprit de corps*.

- Decentralize responsibility and resources, but centralize control.

We didn't just divide the money and turn the deans loose. They had the ball, but the institution still had to keep an eye on it. All of us, including the deans, understood that we had to use our limited marketing funds where they were most likely to generate productive results. The allocations were to be strategic—not proportional, equitable, or perhaps even “fair.” Each dean deserved and had the opportunity to state his or her case and to participate in determining the priorities and eventual allocation of marketing and recruitment dollars available. We formed a marketing committee, composed of the deans, the chief student-affairs officer, and the director of public relations. The institution assigned to this group a lump sum of marketing/recruitment dollars for the fiscal year. The committee determined the most promising opportunities and the funds to be allocated to each dean. Since the institution develops its strategic initiatives and spending priorities each year as part of its annual plan, with marketing a major priority, the committee was not working in a vacuum but was guided by the goals and overall strategic priorities of the institution.

Institutions of higher education may be notorious for resisting change, but when it comes, welcome or not, they do have the advantage of having employees who are demonstrably quick learners. Within a short time this approach to marketing and recruitment had become seemingly second nature and part of our institutional culture. What people had participated in creating became theirs. New employees, in most cases, quickly fit into the culture—in part because as our sense of the kind of faculty and staff members we wanted became better defined, we could hire with greater confidence of a good fit. Understanding student needs, responding to those, delivering instruction conveniently, and following through with support services became values intrinsic and evident in daily operations.

Supporting the Faculty

We hear often that trying to get faculty to go in the same direction is like trying to herd chickens, and it is not always that easy. However, academic initiatives cannot succeed without the cooperation and commitment of the faculty, and extending access beyond campus puts a lot of stress on them to deliver the coursework. So, successful initiatives quite crucially depend on involving, encouraging, developing, and supporting the faculty.

Initially, before Web-based delivery became viable, there was only one way for UHV to take education to the students: put the faculty on the road. They took to it with good will and dedication, commuting two hours each way to teach a course once or twice a week at the centers near Houston. If the travel wore them down and made them cranky on occasion, they certainly never took it out on their students, who were delighted to

have convenient access to programs and faculty. However, travel is simply the most expensive, time-consuming, risky, and environmentally unfriendly way to deliver distance education and services, and it takes up a lot of valuable faculty time. The university paid mileage and a travel stipend (\$600) for each course taught, but modest as those expenses may seem, when multiplied by the number of courses, class meetings, and faculty members, they added up to a heavy fiscal burden.

- Relocating faculty near off-campus sites is preferable to long and frequent commutes.

An alternative to travel eventually became possible: relocating faculty and providing for home offices. As enrollments grew and the number of courses offered at the off-campus centers increased, some faculty members did most or all of their teaching at them and so preferred to relocate. Since growth brought additional positions, we soon began to specify teaching location in our job ads. Although the centers were fully functional in other respects, including shared cubicles, common work and lounge areas, computer labs, and secretarial support for faculty, they did not provide individual faculty offices. So, we substituted home-office support for members assigned to the centers as their primary workplace. For each member, we provided:

- An initial set-up stipend for office furnishings (since the stipend was included in their taxable income, they owned the furnishings).
- A university-owned computer and combination printer/copier/fax (with the option of a desktop or a laptop with docking station and monitor—which most members preferred).
- A monthly stipend to cover a high-speed internet connection and long-distance calls for professional purposes (there is also an 800 number for calls to campus).

Although the cost of home officing is certainly not negligible, it is far less than the cost of faculty travel to teach courses once or twice a week, and it spares long hours and accompanying risks on the road.

If home officing is not an ideal solution for everyone, it has nonetheless proven to be workable, especially as Web-based delivery has expanded and many faculty members are able to do most of their teaching from home. At this time, more than half of the faculty members in some degree programs are no longer campus-based. In fact, enrollment from Victoria County, location of the institution's home campus, now ranks third behind that from Harris and Fort Bend Counties in the Houston metropolitan area.

When the faculty no longer shares a common location, there are numerous difficulties and issues to address. These can be daunting, but are less so than they once might have been. Given the ubiquity of email communications and varied faculty schedules, the value of proximity has declined. Meetings for various purposes remain necessary and necessarily frequent—to carry on faculty governance, conduct promotion-tenure reviews, interview candidates, plan programs, and the like—but we now address these routine needs mainly with email, interactive television, and WebCT (the faculty set up

a shell course online to facilitate both threaded and chat-room conversations). Travel between the campus and off-campus centers still occurs when necessary—and it is frequently necessary. Communications are not as easy as proximity makes them, but they do work effectively because people make them work. Home officing has considerably reduced expense to the university and wear and tear on the faculty. In time, new construction at the centers will include faculty offices, but we will still be left with the need to maintain communications and decision-making processes among faculty living and working many miles apart.

- Web-based delivery changes everything.

We did not set out to be a technology-intensive university or to try to reach the whole world. We just wanted to make access to higher education as convenient and affordable as possible to students throughout our region. Effective use of technology was simply another means of trying to do that. Before we had the capability of Web-based delivery, we had interactive television, or ITV. The UH System developed a system-wide network in which all four institutions participate. Although it was a welcome alternative to commuting and although we still use it for a small number of courses, ITV technology is simply too limited in the number of students that it can accommodate at the remote site, too undependable, and too expensive—especially since the university has to buy and maintain all the necessary space and technology at both ends of the transmission. Further, students still have to come together in one place at one time to get the instruction, and so there is little gain in convenience to them (though it beats their having to drive to campus). Multi-point transmission makes ITV more economical, but it exacerbates all the other negatives. (Actually, we find ITV more useful for meetings than classes and rely on it frequently for that purpose.)

The arrival of Internet or Web-based delivery as a viable instructional medium was a life-changing development for our off-campus students and faculty. UHV became one of the early adopters and moved quickly from initial trials into making available online all the courses required in a program—or as many as could be effectively taught through the medium. Now more than half our credits generated are in online courses, though most students mix online and in-person courses.

- Doubts should no longer deter the use of Web-based delivery of instruction and services.

There continues to be skepticism about the efficacy of Web-based instruction, just as there has been skepticism about every emerging teaching technology since the invention of writing, but even if the jury is still out, its verdict will be meaningless in a world that has already moved on. As soon as we started offering courses online, we conducted surveys of student satisfaction and compared learning results in online and in-person classes. Also, numerous studies of satisfaction and effectiveness have been reported nationwide. In sum, there appear to be no appreciable differences—which is hardly surprising since the delivery medium is a far less significant variable than are the motivation of the learner and the skill of the teacher. At UHV most students and

faculty members have consistently indicated that in an ideal world they would prefer in-person delivery, but with equal consistency the online sections of a course always fill up first. It is simply that online delivery allows students the freedom to access whenever and wherever they can, and so even students who could easily take an in-person course will often opt for the online version of it. In fact, we sometimes have difficulty in attracting enough enrollment to some in-person sections to make them economically viable.

Cost benefits of Web-based delivery are that the university does not have to build and maintain so many classrooms and does not have to buy and maintain both ends of the necessary technology, since online students provide their own space and technology. The university still has student computer labs on campus and at the centers, but since computers and Internet connections are now as ubiquitous as cars and TV's, fewer and fewer students use the labs. Both the campus and centers have wireless capability, and many students rely on laptops. Some classrooms are equipped with electrical outlets for the battery-free use of laptops in the classroom. However, the question does come up as to why, if instruction in a course is conducted mainly on the computer, students should need to come to a given location at all. In some cases, of course, instruction is more effective in mixed-mode delivery. Convenience is indeed important, but it is not more important than effective instruction, and the faculty members of a program must be free to use their judgment about that.

- Instructional technologies are useful only if faculty use them.

In discussions of Web-based instruction at professional conferences, the question often comes up of how to get faculty to do it. Availability of state-of-the-art technology is not enough, and initial incentives, including pay for training, are also not enough. Since time is a faculty member's most precious resource, efficient use of it is the only thing that can enable them to keep up with their teaching, research, and service obligations. So, they must be convinced that moving into Web-based delivery of courses will not simply add an upfront and ongoing burden to their already heavy load of commitments, and they must believe that it is possible for them to teach effectively using that medium. The distances over which they have to deliver instruction made UHV faculty perhaps more than usually receptive to the possibilities of online delivery, but most of them nonetheless remained hesitant. There are, nevertheless, always a few ready to take on any new challenge. We found and funded some of those faculty to run trial online courses, and we then set a dialogue in motion. The most important thing we learned early in that dialogue is that faculty members teaching online were spending a lot of time putting up course materials and responding over and over to the same non-academic questions about course logistics and use of the supporting technology. In one faculty member's estimate, such chores were taking up about 80 percent of the time he spent on the course.

- Assistance for faculty using Web-based instruction must be ongoing, as well as initial.

In light of what we learned, we immediately hired and trained new staff members to assist faculty and students with courses logistics and the effective use of the WebCT platform. These “Online Support Technicians” put up syllabi, examinations, and other materials for faculty; they help students to learn how to use the platform; they troubleshoot for both faculty and students; and they take on assorted other duties that keep the course running smoothly and thus free the faculty member to concentrate on teaching. These specialized staff positions are assigned and report to each school. They soon made an enormous difference in faculty attitudes toward online teaching. We also created an instructional technology unit to help with initial and ongoing training and to keep up with the latest advances in learning technology.

Initial and ongoing support for online teaching consists of the following:

- Upfront incentive (money or release time—\$3,000 or one-course release for each online course developed up to three).
 - Initial and ongoing training on a one-on-one basis, as needed.
 - Ongoing assistance with courses from trained staff assigned to each school.
- Developing people, not producing online courses, is the more significant goal.

As a result of our early efforts to support online teaching, the pioneers of the new medium could give favorable reports. They could say that online teaching really was not too difficult or burdensome. Now, that kind of positive feedback is critical. It can not only keep an initiative from stalling, it can move the initiative along faster and farther than anyone might have foreseen. The number of adopters soon increased to a critical mass, and after that the initial incentives were scarcely needed (though they are still provided); no faculty members were going to be left behind their colleagues in mastering a new mode of instruction. At this point, there is probably no UHV faculty member who has not taught online; most of them do it every semester.

Odd though it may seem, we never stressed production of online courses as an end in itself. Online capabilities obviously had enormous implications for an institution heavily into off-campus delivery of instruction, but we focused on developing human capabilities. Here was a revolutionary way of delivering instruction—with implications for how our students would be learning and working long after they had left the university. It was therefore important for faculty to have knowledge of Web-based teaching and learning. So, whether a faculty member developed a course but didn’t teach it or developed one that someone else had already developed, we still encouraged the effort and provided incentive funding. If a faculty member were willing to put in the time and effort, the university followed through with its part of the bargain. Such follow-through helped give credibility to the online initiative and motivate even the most resolute non-“techie” to give it a try. Our priority was to put resources into people—or, in other words, to see people as our greatest resource. We believed that if they got the support to develop themselves they would develop the courses—and they did.

- Institutional expansion and quality improvement can be mutually reinforcing.

It is sometimes assumed that enrollment growth, especially by distance delivery, must come at the expense of academic quality. However, growth can and should lead to improved quality, and that enhanced quality can then become an added attraction for recruiting both faculty and students.

- Growth = greater budgetary flexibility.
- Growth = reduced number of course preparations and reduced course loads for faculty.
- Growth = greater depth and range of expertise among faculty members.
- Quality = greater institutional attractiveness and therefore more growth.

Owing to growth, the number of UHV faculty members has more than doubled over the past decade, and they have become much more diverse (by identity and by academic expertise)—creating a broader and deeper knowledge base at the institution. Quality improvement at the institution is not just self-perceived but has some external verification.

- The regional accreditation body’s substantive-change review of the off-campus centers resulted in two official commendations from the visiting team.
- The regional accreditation body’s decennial review of the institution resulted in very few substantive recommendations but praise for the responsiveness and quality of the university’s distance-education efforts.
- The School of Business achieved AACSB accreditation about five years ago for its BBA and MBA programs—with online delivery of business courses cited by the visiting team as a “national model.”
- There has been a demonstrable increase in the number of faculty publications per year, and the university has become home to the *American Book Review*.
- The institution has consistently ranked near the top of participating state agencies in the state’s *Survey of Organizational Excellence*, conducted biennially and completed by employees of the agency.

Thus, the institution has grown dramatically, expanding to off-campus locations and adding a still-burgeoning presence in online delivery, while at the same time improving quality in an environment far removed from ivy-covered walls and oak-shrouded diagonals. Support for faculty has been especially critical to that effort. Perhaps worth mentioning is that the university’s commitment to equitable and competitive salaries for both faculty and staff, though not directly related to strategies for institutional expansion and enrollment growth, has likely had an important impact on their commitment to the university’s progress (a description of UHV’s faculty salary plan appeared in *Planning for Higher Education*, April-June issue, 2008).

Making the Most of Resources

A former chancellor of the UH System used to tell regents intent on providing affordable access, high quality, and low cost that he could give them any two of the three but not all three. Indeed, if fiscal resources were no object, an institution could become as big and as good as it wanted to be. But though growth does eventually bring more resources and greater flexibility in the use of them, one must first find the funds necessary to implement growth strategies and accommodate the increased enrollment—to the extent that those strategies are successful. We firmly insisted on the following principle:

- All resources and revenues are institutional ones to be assigned and allocated to serve institutional priorities (certain dedicated fee revenues being an exception).

UHV's management of institutional resources starts with a shared belief that the institution has one mission: that all of its resources are institutional ones, not owned by different constituent units; and that students are the first priority—not just of student affairs and academic affairs but also of administration and finance, development, and any other division. We allocate and reallocate available funds annually on that basis. We routinely make one-time allocations that may or may not be renewed the following year. We invite each budget center to make its case in open budget hearings that anyone can attend. One important allocation, by whatever means, is always to reserves, so that we will have the flexibility to respond to opportunities and unforeseen circumstances. Some state institutions are not allowed to maintain a reserve account, labeled as such, but there are nonetheless different ways to incorporate reserve flexibility into a budget. Obviously, utilities, employees, and other obligations must be paid, but beyond allocating funds to meet the basic expenses of operating the institution (and that is indeed most of the available funding), we continue to keep what's left as flexible as possible. As noted above in the section on students, it can be effective to decentralize responsibilities and allocations of resources, but it is still necessary to centralize the setting of institutional priorities and control of funds that can be swung quickly to where they may be needed.

In seeking revenues to support growth efforts, UHV also added or increased some student fees. This recourse is seldom popular or risk free. No university wants to impose greater fiscal burdens on its students, and from a recruitment point of view fee increases can undermine marketing efforts.

In concluding that increased revenue from fees was critical to our efforts, we settled on the following principle.

- Any increase in fees should first be discussed with students, and the fees should remain consolidated to the extent feasible.

Some might disagree with consolidating fees, but we have found that a laundry list of fees tends to create student resentment and resistance, particularly in an environment

that includes a variety of students located in different places taking courses through a variety of means. We once had a computer fee. A number of students complained that they never used the labs and therefore shouldn't have to pay the fee. We once had a distance-education fee to help defray the cost of faculty travel and maintenance of the off-campus centers. We soon discovered that many students were taking courses on campus, at an off-campus location, and online during the same semester. We eliminated the fee. Even though online delivery incurs the cost of additional IT staff, instructional support staff, and the WebCT platform, we have not added a fee for Web-based courses—in the main because, given the economies of that medium of delivery, such costs are actually less than the cost of providing instruction by faculty travel or by interactive television. Charging a fee would be disingenuous. Certain dedicated fees seem to work okay—for example, a library fee—perhaps because students do not dare complain that they do not use the library. An MBA fee has worked, because students were told and clearly understood how the additional revenue would be used to enhance the value of their degree. When we must increase fees or add a fee that affects a particular group of students, we first go to the student senate with the proposed increases and then hold open hearings on them. We have yet to find students unsupportive when we explain how fee increases are regrettable but are intended to preserve, protect, or enhance the value of their degrees. This approach is not just an exercise in democracy or compliance with a mandate (the state does require that institutions first apprise students in advance of proposed fee increases, which must be approved by the Board of Regents); it is a matter of prudence and a deliberate marketing strategy. A cynic might say that it is advisable to increase a fee from time to time just to provide an opportunity to have a serious discussion with students about the cost and value of their education. Sharing information about institutional needs and related fee increases, seeking feedback, and reassuring students that the institution is trying its best to be a good steward of its resources and of their investment in a degree, have justification and value on their own, but they are also an important part of marketing strategy.

- The end use and users should determine institutional investment in technology.

UHV is a technology-intensive university not necessarily in terms of its state-of-the-art technology but in terms of those who use it. Our mantra has been that the technology does not work; people do. And so our investment in technology has followed the capability of students and employees to make the most of it. In developing Web-based delivery of courses, along with related instructional and student support, we thought first about the kind of equipment and size of the pipeline most students were using. Not everyone had a high-speed connection or late-model computer.

What goes for the technology goes for the IT staff. The focus must be on the user. IT had to change the perception of its role and responsibilities. At one time it simply had to order, set up, and maintain computers and computer labs, but as Web-based delivery of instruction and services expanded and as the university's Web portal became more and more the front gate to the university, IT had to become a user friendly service to both students and faculty and to become a mediator between all constituencies of the

university and the technology essential to their daily work.

- There is no second chance to make a first impression.

Whether a visitor's first encounter is with the university's Web site, the campus, or an off-campus center, there is, as the cliché goes, no second chance to make a first impression. For many potential students and other visitors the maintenance staff provides the first impression. The maintenance staff has been encouraged not only to take good care of the buildings and grounds but also to keep an eye out for visitors, to assist with special events, and to pause in their work when it appears someone is in need of information or other assistance. They have responded wonderfully well and take considerable pride and satisfaction in their contribution to making the campus and centers attractive and welcoming places. In that first impressions now extend to the university Web site, or portal, there is a continuing effort to make it as attractive and efficient to use as possible. Finding the right balance between the claims of advancing technology and those of familiar and, therefore, efficient use continues to be elusive, but that pursuit, too, is one in which all users—students, faculty, and staff have been invited to participate. The IT staff as well as librarians now interface mostly unseen with the university's internal and external constituencies, but they provide often a first and certainly a frequent contact with students, other employees, and the world beyond. This is a changed environment indeed and one that warrants carefully considered institutional strategies and management.

- Students are not the only customers; so are one's colleagues and co-workers.

If one insists that neither students nor colleagues are exactly customers, it still helps to treat them as if they were. Maintaining a sense of cohesion and unity of purpose is perhaps a bigger challenge when an institution's presence and people are dispersed over a large territory, but with training and discussion sessions, reminders, and reinforcement, the university has created, in the main, a culture in which employees take seriously their *responsibility* to be *responsive* to students and to each other (those words share the same root derivation). They readily understand how the work of others can make their own more or less effective—and vice versa. When the hand-offs are not going well from one office to another, we have used the strategy of having key staff members sit down together, often over a university-provided lunch, to discuss what is going wrong, to analyze the processes involved from end to end, to pinpoint the problems, and to come up with solutions. The employees who perform the tasks are the ones who can best identify and propose workable solutions for any number of problems; they just need to be empowered.

- Everyone deserves to know what the institutional priorities are and why available funds have been allocated as they have been.

Open communication about priorities and funds available means that employees quickly become sophisticated about the trade-offs involved in ranking priorities and allocating funds. They understand, for instance, that the money for new faculty

positions could just as easily have gone into the pool of funds available for raises, and some of them may want to argue about which should have the greater claim in a given budget cycle. If so, so much the better. They are well informed, and it is possible that they could be right.

- *Co-opetition* is more than a portmanteau word.

The title of a book by two Ivy League professors, “co-opetition” is a concept coming out of game theory that refers to the paradoxical relationship between cooperation and competition (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996). In oversimplified essence, collaboration can help to grow a pie; competition can still decide each participant’s slice of it. All get more pie for less cost than they otherwise might have gotten. Enrollment growth is not a zero-sums game.

In the mid 1990s the UH System set up its first “multi-institution teaching center” (MITC) in Sugar Land, which is within the Houston metropolitan area immediately southwest of the city proper. After initially leasing space, the System soon secured its own property and constructed facilities, later adding a second center several miles farther north near Katy. The four System universities and the community colleges operating in the area formed a partnership, with the colleges providing lower-level courses and the universities providing upper-level and graduate courses, leading to selected degrees. This collaborative initiative was a way to expand access, while maintaining quality and containing costs.

Marketing considerations: Collaboration makes for a bigger footprint and more extensive array of program offerings than any one institution can provide. The greater the visibility and the greater the buzz created in the community affected, the more effective and efficient marketing can be. Since the involvement of different institutions makes a bigger impression and since the larger array of programs comes without commensurate risk to any one institution, the time necessary to get program enrollments up to a break-even point, especially with costs being shared, is unusually compressed. Granted there will be wrong guesses and programs that never pay off, but that happens on campus, too.

Quality considerations: The collaborative approach helped to ensure quality, in that each university was approved to be the “lead” institution for programs that it could comfortably extend off campus—with one or more of the other partners offering some of the courses, as needed. Since institutions could not offer the same program, there was no risk of fragmenting enrollment and encouraging cost-cutting measures, such as overuse of part-time faculty. Healthy competition and relative advantage were still in play. A university with a popular and well-marketed program was going to get a bigger slice of the total enrollment, assuming it marketed and supported the program effectively. If an institution was not supporting a program effectively, offering sufficient courses to meet demand and permit expeditious progress toward a degree, then the lead could be reconsidered and possibly switched to another institution.

Thrift considerations: The simple economics of collaboration are perhaps obvious. Two, or more, really can co-exist almost as cheaply as one. As we envisioned it, the same classrooms, computer labs, and on-site staff at the centers could serve all four universities. Each university was free to add its own staff and specialized equipment as needed for particular programs. Each university controlled the programs it offered and paid its own faculty. Insofar as possible and particularly in the early period of the centers' development, courses were "partnered" or articulated up front, so that a student could sign up for a given course at his or her own university but actually take it from another university. Such courses had to be somewhat generic, but even though they were all upper-level or graduate, there were a number of close matches that could be made. Many academic policy issues had to be ironed out, such as which institution handled a grade appeal. Most of these issues were resolved by resolutely focusing on what best served the students and allowing them to follow the policies and procedures of their home institution. Insofar as possible, the collaboration was quite invisible to students taking courses at the center. They neither knew nor cared whether the course was taught by a faculty member from their university or another—so long as it counted toward their degree. There were also many fiscal issues to sort out, such as precisely how to share revenues and costs. Tuition and fees were to go to the institution providing the instruction. But since tuition and fees varied from university to university, there had to be some working out of revenue sharing behind the scenes in the case of partnered courses. Costs for operating the centers were somewhat easier to apportion, since those could be assigned on the basis of each institution's actual enrollments at the centers. Disparate use of ITV classrooms was ignored, with all sharing the expense even if some got more benefit than others. Web-based delivery became and remains a problematic issue, since students in those courses do not ordinarily use center classrooms but may use certain services and sometimes the computer labs and library. Library resources were not a problem. There are librarians and limited library space at the centers, mainly for handling reserved work, inter-library loans, and information needs. Also, students may use any of the libraries at the four participating universities, and the libraries make resources and services extensively available online.

Management considerations: Planning, policy making, program approval, and dispute resolution are handled by the System's Provosts' Counsel. In a different collaborative arrangement in which two of the UH System universities are involved outside the System, appointed representatives of the participating institutions fulfill much the same function. In the UH System the chief finance officers handle matters related to budget, construction, and maintenance. The University of Houston-Victoria serves as managing partner for the collaborative endeavor, supervising on-site staff, caring for building and grounds, and bringing any issues or proposed changes to the attention of the other university partners. In such collaborative ventures, it is important that there be both a representative governing entity and a managing agent. A *Guide to Collaboration* is maintained on the System Web site at the following link:
http://www.sugarland.uh.edu/PDF/UHSSL-collab_guide.pdf.

Political considerations: A not-negligible consideration is that regents and legislators tend to favor collaboration and are readily inclined to support it. Though they are quick to see the advantages, they may not be so receptive to hearing about the downsides.

The downsides: There are some. Inter-institutional collaboration in serving higher-education markets and sharing resources can be practical and otherwise valuable—if undertaken with energy, integrity, and mutual trust—but it is not easy. It requires an initial and continuing investment of time in communications and decision-making among the partners. Competition of an unhelpful sort can still edge its way in. For example, an institution may be glad to spare costs and share risks while enrollments in a program are meager, but as those become more robust, it may take over for itself more and more of the course offerings, eliminating the need for partnering. Insofar as the economics go, a penny saved may indeed seem like a penny earned. Nevertheless, collaboration is a strategy well worth any institution’s pursuing if interested in expanding its off-campus presence. It has the intangible value of improving communications and reinforcing a sense of collegiality and common purpose among the institutions involved.

Summary

Strategic planning is a curious art in that it is meaningful only within certain parameters. In times of great stability strategic planning is largely unnecessary; in times of great unpredictability it is almost impossible. It becomes critically important only in an environment characterized by a mixture of constancy and change, such as the current one in which institutions of higher education must seek effective ways to adapt. The strategic principles we came to employ at UHV may be to some extent self-evident, or possibly even presumptuous, but they may also be useful, especially to universities contemplating expanding their presence off-campus and online.

To summarize major points:

- Students must be the primary focus and first priority (their need for access is your opportunity).
- Teamwork and inclusiveness are vital to the success of any large-scale university initiative (especially any that involves significant change in the work and lives of faculty and staff).
- Expanding beyond a campus presents novel organizational and communication problems that necessitate novel solutions (off-campus is already outside the box).
- To develop off-campus potential, universities need to think of themselves more as learning-delivery systems than as places of learning (actually our libraries started doing this years ago).
- Collaboration can be an effective and efficient way to concentrate energies, create synergies, ensure quality, contain costs, and build inter-institutional relations that can add value for students and the human communities that institutions serve.
- In a knowledge-based economy, knowledge workers are the most, if not the only, critical asset of an institution (facilities, technologies, and other resources merely follow from this realization).

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