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ONLINE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Bring your mission to life through intentional, evaluated online course development

By Halley Sutton, Editor

When Royce Robertson took a position as Director of Academic Technology at Le Moyne University, a Jesuit institution, it was the first time in his more than two decades in higher education that he'd worked for a faith-based institution. "They're so welcoming and open about articulating their mission beyond an institution's typical mission statement," Robertson said. He found himself intrigued and wanting to understand more clearly the nuances of the Jesuit mission.

Around the same time, he had a memorable interaction with one of the Jesuit scholars of the institution. While in the library, the scholar began chatting with Robertson and during the conversation, the scholar expressed skepticism about the quality of online learning in general. At that time, Robertson said the institution had been slow to make changes regarding online learning, partially due to fear of losing the institution's identity as a Jesuit institution.

The scholar posed a question to Robertson: "Can we make an online course truly Jesuit?" Robertson said his response was: "I can't tell you that today, but I can tell you the core component is good. We can design it if we believe in it, if we have intention." That interaction sparked a years-long quest for Robertson on which components and best practices are key for designing online courses that fully embody the mission of an institution. Read on for his findings.

Examine your online course offerings

That question — how to make a truly Jesuit online course — became the germ that grew into Robertson's research with the Society for Campus and University Planning (SCUP) on aligning mission with online course development. Robertson first heard of the SCUP Fellows program (which enables selected faculty and their research projects a year of access to SCUP resources and coaching to complete their project) while at a conference. The first time he applied for the SCUP Fellows program, his application — for the same project — was denied. He retooled his application, applied again a year later, and was accepted.

"What I really wanted to know is, to what degree do the U.S. Jesuit institutions prepare and plan and actually go through an intentional instructional design process to bring those [aspects of Jesuit education] to life in online courses, or is it more of a process where an institution forklifts content [into an online CMS] and organizes it in a logical fashion?" Robertson said.

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Robertson said he'd done some "secret shopping" by enrolling in online courses (at institutions other than Le Moyne) and found that many of them were so-called talking head modules. Robertson said such interpretations of online learning show him the massive potential for mission-designed online learning, but can also be concerning: "It also kind of discourages me because it tells me sometimes the bar for online learning might be pretty low."

There are 27 Jesuit institutions in the United States, and Robertson reached out to all of them, receiving survey responses from 20 of those institutions. "There's at least one person at every institution responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the design and development process for online courses," Robertson said, and it was this individual who he attempted to target with his surveys.

Evaluate your course and program design for maximum efficacy

Working with a trained psychometrician, Robertson developed the questions on his survey to get at two things: the core components of the institution's mission, and where the institution was in terms of a maturity model for online course development and implementation.

The maturity model of online course development and implementation can be broken down into three phases: the

planning phase of online course development; the implementation phase of online course development; and the evaluation phase of online course development.

What he found was that almost all institutions spent a lot of time in the research and planning phase, less time or resources in the implementing phase, and very little time, with a few exceptions, in the evaluation phase of online course development. "In other words, we do a lot of planning, and then that planning breaks down in the implementation," Robertson said. He speculated that could be due to several factors:

- ▶ Faculty autonomy.
- ▶ Faculty turnover.
- ▶ Not enough staff on hand.

"And then actually going back and looking at our process, seeing how well we aligned with the Jesuit components [of the institution's mission] and how we take any feedback to improve the overall process — evaluation had the absolute lowest scores," Robertson said.

In other words, while most institutions spent significant time planning online course development and implementation, few conducted thorough reviews determining whether those courses actually lived up to the institution's missions and standards.

The institutions that did conduct thorough evaluation tended to be very well funded, and to take their Jesuit mission very seriously, Robertson added. "I really do believe and observed

TOP TAKEAWAYS FOR ALIGNING MISSION AND ONLINE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Regardless of whether your institution has a faith-based mission or a secular education mission, making sure that your institution's virtual offerings connect with your mission is key, not only for your strategic plan and accreditation, but also to ensure students receive the full value promised by your institution.

Royce Robertson, Director of Academic Technology at Le Moyne University and a recent Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) Fellow, shared takeaways from his research into aligning your institution's mission with its online course offerings. He recommended the following:

1. Break down the individual elements of your institution's mission. Really unpack your institution's mission and identify individual words in your mission statement, Robertson advised. "If your mission says 'collaboration,' what does that actually mean? What are the ground rules for being a collaborator in the courses you teach online — what kind of protocols are you thinking about and designing?" Robertson said.

2. Figure out assessment metrics. For example, if part of your mission is to create lifelong learners, how is your institution going to measure that? "What are you

doing in your courses to promote lifelong learning? And how are you going to check that that's occurring [with former students]?" Robertson asked.

3. Examine your processes. At Le Moyne, Robertson said the institution's instructional designers have created a map of the instructional design process and put little stickers on the steps that reflect integrating the Jesuit mission into design. "Draw out your process and say, Here are the steps that are friendly to our mission," Robertson advised.

4. Identify institutional partners. If your institution has a mission of social justice, identify who the person responsible for promoting that is, and then reach out to them for the instructional design process of online course creation meant to reflect that value, Robertson said.

"Every element in every course doesn't have to contain all the elements of your institution's mission — that's when things start to become contrived," Robertson said. "Find the courses that are most logically related to certain aspects of your mission and really bring it to life so that students get a more in-depth and immersive experience [of that particular aspect in their education]." ■

that evaluation is an afterthought for a lot of folks. They spend so much time on designing and planning, but they often think that evaluation is not only a summative task, but an optional one,” Robertson said.

From anecdotal feedback from his surveys, Robertson heard that the lack of evaluation also stems from a lack of time and staff. Superficial changes might be made to a course after it launches, based on student or faculty feedback, but a coordinated review of how well the course performed in terms of mission-driven goals rarely occurs, he said.

Bring your mission to life to ensure student ROI

“The bottom line is that the [higher education] market in New England is ultra-competitive right now and it will be [going forward]. And so the only way to really diversify our revenue and to attract new students to our institution, or attract old students back to our institution, is to have a solid online design and development process that really gets at the Jesuit component of our education. When we talk to students, they tell us there’s something special about a Jesuit education and we don’t want to lose that in the online environment,” Robertson said.

Ensuring that students’ courses are living up to the mission of your institution is crucial, not only for the sake of your institution, but also in ensuring student, or customer, satisfaction. “If we have an explicit mission and we say getting an education at this institution helps to achieve that mission, then we need to know to what degree we’re achieving that,” Robertson said.

If a student looks at course offerings from two different institutions, particularly if one of them is more expensive than the other, and they can’t immediately tell what distinguishes the two, that’s a problem for your institution, he said.

Finally, Robertson made the point that without well-thought-out evaluation processes, your institution doesn’t have a very good idea of the internal return on investment of online course development. “We’ve got to be able to look at [online course development] and say, where are we wasting time and money, and how can we get a better quality product out in less time, at lower cost?” Robertson said, adding those questions can really only be answered through thorough

360-degree evaluation, gathering responses from students, faculty, and online course designers.

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Of those institutions who were doing robust evaluation of mission-aligned online course development, Robertson said he saw the following takeaways:

► **Create a library of instructional strategies.**

Rather than re-invent the wheel every time an online course is developed and created, Robertson said institutions with strong evaluation practices would look at what worked in their online offerings, and then catalog resources about successful instructional design practices in a library for future use. That way, if a faculty member has crafted thoughtful, mis-

sion-aligned learning practices into a course, they can share them with other faculty members or course designers to use in future course creation.

► **Integrate mission-driven components into teaching.** It’s much more effective to embed and demonstrate mission-aligned principles into teaching, rather than simply teaching *about* those principles, Robertson said.

For example, Robertson shared his idea for a virtual examen (a Jesuit practice of reflection) embedded into course design. “Imagine an online business ethics course where [in an examen] students are asked to think about a time when they were asked to compromise their own values. When was it? What were they feeling? What did that experience teach them?” Robertson said, adding that such a practice would be both more aligned with a Jesuit mission, and a more effective learning tool than answering an online multiple-choice quiz.

Read more about Robertson’s research at <https://bit.ly/3bi836z>. You can email him at roberrol@lemoyne.edu. ■

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