

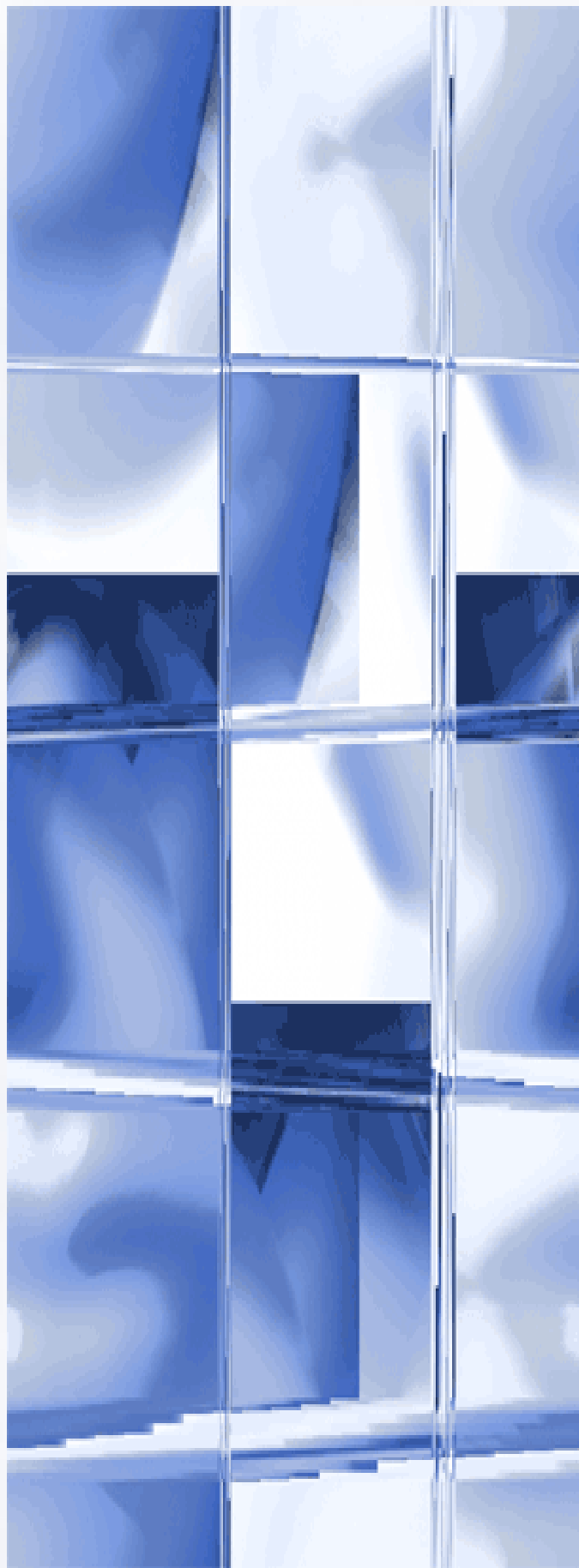
# Conducting a Self-Audit of Your Institution's Online Learning Activities

by Rob Abel  
Alliance for Higher Education  
Competitiveness

March 15, 2005

Lessons from the  
recently completed  
study: **Achieving Success  
in Internet-Supported  
Learning in Higher  
Education**

[http://www.a-hec.org/e-learning\\_study/html](http://www.a-hec.org/e-learning_study/html)



# Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness

## Introduction

Online learning has made great strides in higher education in the last five years. There has been wide adoption of course management platforms, such as Blackboard, WebCT, eCollege and Angel, as well as emerging open source solutions. However, many institutions are still unclear about how this new technology fits with their mission and if they are indeed making sufficient progress. Many institutions have found that achieving widespread adoption by a majority of faculty is difficult. They have also found that it is very challenging to succeed with respect to achieving deep adoption, the type that really enhances the learning interaction between faculty and students, as opposed to simply posting materials online.

A recent in-depth study (see Achieving Success in Internet-Supported Learning in Higher Education: Case Studies Illuminate Success Factors, Challenges, and Future Directions) based on experiences from 21 institutions across all Carnegie classifications provided numerous insights into best practices for achieving success in online learning in higher education. But, more importantly for higher education leaders, the study identified some potential root causes of success that connect progress to motivations, leadership, faculty support, student services, and delivery format. In this article, Rob Abel, the president and founder of The Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness (“A-HEC”), <http://www.a-hec.org/>, the non-profit organization that conducted the study, distills the key takeaways for leaders who want to understand how well their institution measures up. These are summarized into six self-audit questions, which allow an institution to understand if they are on track for success.

The full study is available for download or reading online at [http://www.a-hec.org/e-learning\\_study.html](http://www.a-hec.org/e-learning_study.html). For those that would like more information than what is presented in this article, the full study contains profiles and contact information for each of the 21 participating institutions, 60 pages of in-depth results, and a bibliography of 25 references.

The 21 institutions that participated consisted of five community colleges, seven baccalaureate/mas-

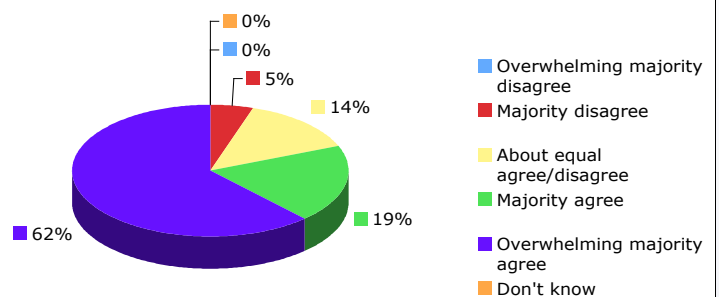
ters institutions (five private, two public) and nine research doctoral institutions (one private, eight public). They were selected based on a self-description of being successful in online learning. While that is clearly a subjective indicator, we are talking about institutions like Penn State that are supporting some 62,000 students with online technology to Peirce College which, while much smaller scale, is generating 46% of its revenue from online programs. Each of the participants vary on exactly how “successful” they have been, but reading the institutional profiles in the study report (see [http://www.a-hec.org/research/study\\_reports/IsL0205/participants.html](http://www.a-hec.org/research/study_reports/IsL0205/participants.html)) will allow you to identify an institution similar to your own and perhaps set a benchmark.

The following six audit factors are in a suggested hierarchy of evaluation, as each tends to affect those below. A-HEC has created a follow-up study that assists an institution in benchmarking itself against each of these audit factors. To participate in this new study, go to <http://www.a-hec.org/>.

## Audit factor #1: Compelling motivation

A key finding of the study was that successful institutions had very compelling reasons to support online learning. The short answer as to what is the primary

Figure 1. Adoption of e-Learning is very supportive of our institutional mission.



## Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness

motivation is a desire to increase service to students in a way that is consistent with their needs and the mission of the institution. This alignment between student service and mission can take many forms. Here are three examples:

- The mission component to serve working adults coupled with the strong need of these students to have more flexibility in receiving effective instruction.
- The mission component to serve more students coupled with the need to keep costs reasonable for students, which can be achieved in a number of ways, one of which is to use online technology to eliminate the need for additional physical classroom space.
- The mission component to provide a more personalized learning experience for students and to achieve that by using online technology to support things like increased collaboration, ability to replay lecture portions on demand, or bring in subject experts virtually to increase the breadth of the learning experience.

In the study it was also found that those institutions that were most successful also had some perceived competitive pressures and a desire to grow enrollments through online activities.

### Audit factor #2: Commitment and prioritization

Leadership of a certain type was indicated as being predominant in the successful institutions. The key leadership elements are summarized as:

- A long-term commitment to the initiative
- Investment of significant financial and other resources
- Prioritization of expenditures on high impact programs
- A clear understanding by faculty of why the institution is implementing e-Learning

In particular the involvement of key leaders in the deci-

sions around prioritization of where to focus the online learning development activities was critical. It was highly correlated with success perception in these institutions. What form did prioritization take? We heard over and over again that the best strategy was to start with your strongest programs, ideally the ones for which you are nationally ranked (or have some other distinguishing characteristic) and have a proven demand. Do not look for a market where you have not had some track record of success. In essence, most institutions already have the best market research - it's the existing track record of your programs. Some did benefit from performing national market research to decide whether to expand beyond the local area. Also, several of the institutions were able to "turn around" a declining enrollment scenario - a once popular program that was losing ground. A new focus to move the program online brought renewed vigor and success to the program.

We asked the study participants if there was a widespread perception that the institution was committed to online. The answer was very clearly that there was no doubt. They also indicated that past financial support was adequate and future financial support was apparent. In other words, this was not a one time event or investment.

So, audit question number two is: *Do you have an effective executive review process, formal or informal, to prioritize the program selection, faculty selection, and support activities to move online and are you committed to supporting these activities over the long term?*

### Audit factor #3: Programmatic approach

Probably the most significant finding of the study was that institutions that focused on putting full programs online were about four times as likely to perceive that they had achieved "overwhelming success" as institutions that were focused at the individual course level. So, as proud as you may be of that "groundbreaking online course" developed by "super innovative and tech-savvy faculty member", unfortunately it is not the indicator of leadership or progress in online that you would like to think it is.

## Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness

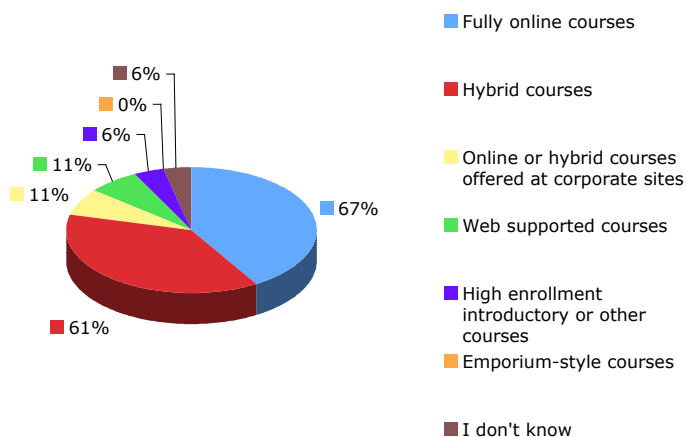
What came out clearly in the study is that institutions that are putting full programs fully online need to consider a full range of service and quality issues. Typically this approach was motivated by mission and student need, as explained in audit factor number one. The process to put a full program online, when done correctly and focused on student learning, involves teamwork, both within the academic department and among several units of the institution. In essence, in order for the online program to be successful, it must be thought through and perhaps reengineered to figure out how to serve students differently and, hopefully better.

Table 1 shows the most common success factors of those institutions implementing what we termed the “programmatic approach.” Looking at the factors one could say that much of this was just good management. But, it is also clear that these institutions were implementing new course and program formats to reflect the unique pedagogy of their program and/or institution. In other words, they were doing a lot more than just

**Table 1. Predominate Features of Programmatic Process**

Feature
• Support resources dedicated to the selected program(s) (93%)
• Development of a project plan, including schedule and milestones (87%)
• Prioritization from institutional leadership to choose most impactful programs (86%)
• Program redesign sessions to facilitate faculty leaders creating a better program using e-Learning (74%)
• Pedagogy defined to reflect the uniqueness of the program(s) (73%)
• Involvement of enrollment management in the program planning (67%)
• Development of success measures, such as enrollment targets (67%)

Figure 2. Which of the online course types do you see gaining in relative importance at your institution in the next three



posting course notes or syllabi online.

While most believe that the predominance of online activity is of the simple syllabi posting type, it was not true in the study institutions. And, the lesson was clear when asked where they expect to spend more efforts in the future. Figure 2 summarizes their responses.

So, the third audit question is: *Are you focusing most of your effort at the program level and are you redesigning programs so that they are enhanced by fully online or hybrid delivery?*

### Audit factor #4: Faculty support

As far as online learning is concerned, faculty are being asked to make the biggest changes, which are coming with very unclear rewards. The programmatic approach indicated in self-audit factor number three provides a framework that supports faculty working together to create a better student experience. But is this enough and what about all the rest of the faculty? Today, a quality online learning experience has much more to do with the faculty member teaching the course than any other aspect of the course. In other words, it is still about teaching, not technology. So, supporting faculty as teachers is crucial to success.

## Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness

**Table 2. Predominate Faculty Support Services**

Support Service
• Faculty web/email helpdesk (90%)
• Course management or other technical training classes (86%)
• Faculty phone helpdesk (85%)
• Course development support from support center staff (85%)
• One-on-one instructional design consultations (81%)
• Clear and effective policies for ownership of online materials (81%)
• Additional fees paid to develop an online course (67%)

So, how can an institution be supportive of faculty involved in online learning endeavors? Much depends on your institutional culture, but the study indicated the following frequently used approaches.

- Nurture grass-roots faculty ideas. Make sure they are at the center of reinvigorating programs as programs move online and be sure that all faculty that want to venture into online have the support services delineated in the study (see table 2 for a brief summary and see the full results at [http://www.a-hec.org/research/study\\_reports/IsL0205/support.html](http://www.a-hec.org/research/study_reports/IsL0205/support.html)).
- Provide frequent and clear communication on why the move to online is important to the mission as discussed in self-audit factor number one.
- Provide faculty with support in online technology and pedagogy so that they can focus on using the tools to enhance their interactivity with students – a key to enhancing the student experience.
- Provide one-on-one instructional design consultations and couple this with staff development classes that require faculty to experience online from the student perspective and to

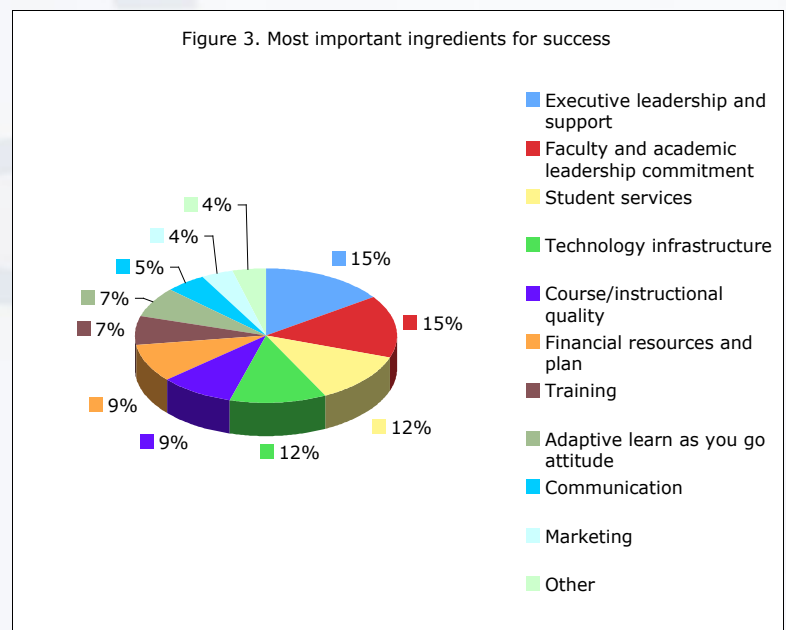
develop their own online course.

- Recognize the scholarship of teaching and the dedication that some faculty members have to it.

Audit question number four is: *Are grass-roots faculty efforts being supported along with the previously discussed programmatic priorities and are faculty supported in learning how to transform their teaching expertise to the online environment?*

### Audit factor #5: Student services

Several of the study participants indicated that one of their most important lessons was to take into account the complete set of students services required for students that are receiving more of their education online. Across all the participants, student services came in tied for third when asked an open-ended question regarding the most important factors in achieving success (see figure 3). The first two factors have already been covered in previous audit factors. What type of student services? Availability of course materials must be highly reliable and easy to use – and students must have someone to call when they need technical help. But, a clear trend was to establish a contact point for resolution of any student issue. This individual went by many names, such as program coordinator or advisor, but, whatever the title, the buck stopped there for making sure the student experience was up to par. Table 3 summarizes



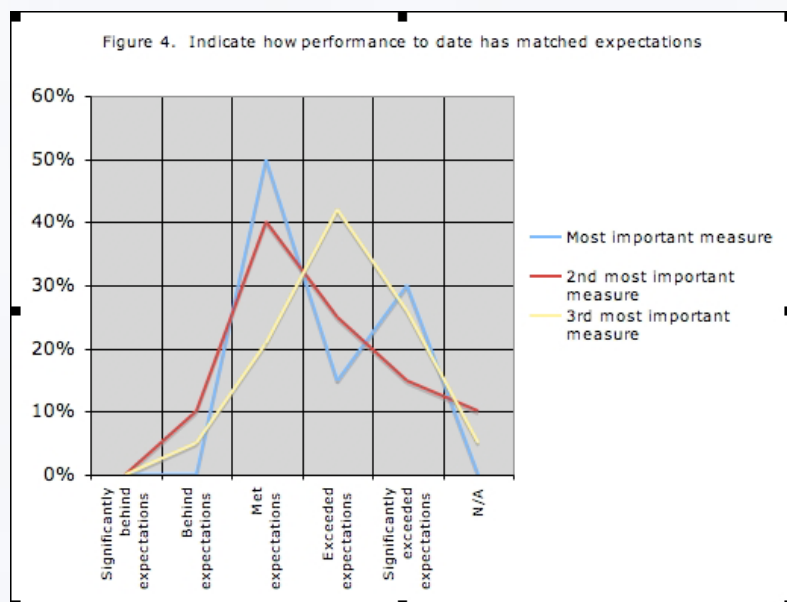
## Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness

other student support services that were predominant at the successful study institutions (see [http://www.a-hec.org/research/study\\_reports/IsL.0205/support.html](http://www.a-hec.org/research/study_reports/IsL.0205/support.html) for more detail).

**Table 3. Predominate Student Support Services**

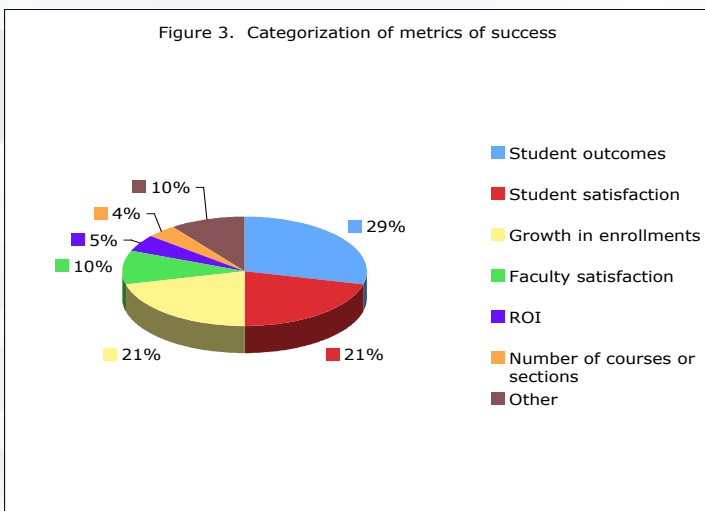
Support Service
• Student phone helpdesk (100%)
• Highly available website and/or course management system (100%)
• Orientation to online courses (81%)
• A single program coordinator, hotline or other program specific contact to report and resolve student issues (81%)
• Student feedback through course assessments (76%)
• Student web/email helpdesk (72%)
• Online or phone-based registration (67%)

The fifth self-audit question is: *Are you providing highly reliable and easy online access for students coupled with a single point of contact that can resolve any issue or concern?*



## Audit factor #6: Goals and measurements

If you are experiencing challenges in online learning or have heard about some of the high profile failures of online businesses in higher education, you will probably be surprised that the majority of institutions in our study felt they had done better than they initially expected. As shown in figure 4, study participants found that meeting, exceeding, or greatly exceeding expectations was the overwhelming norm.



We also asked participants what level of growth or improvement they were expecting. Generally, the growth expected was in a reasonable 15-25% range. We felt that these institutions were quite mature and realistic in their expectations. Many explicitly stated that balancing quality with growth was paramount.

But what measures of success did the study institutions use? As shown in figure 5, fully 50% of those mentioned were focused on student outcomes and satisfaction. Student measures were followed by growth in enrollments and faculty satisfaction.

We also asked participants what measurements they thought would be most useful in benchmarking their institution against similar institutions. Table 4 shows the results with retention and graduation rate as compared to the equivalent

face-to-face course or program being the two most favored (for the complete results, including metrics not favored, see [http://www.a-hec.org/research/study\\_reports/IsL0205/measures.html](http://www.a-hec.org/research/study_reports/IsL0205/measures.html)).

**Table 4. Most Favored Comparison Metrics**

Most Favored Comparison Metrics
• Student retention in online programs vs. on-campus programs
• Student completion in online programs vs. on-campus programs
• Learning outcomes (employment, wages, etc.) against a normalized set of factors
• Enrollment growth of students served by selected online programs
• Student e-Learning satisfaction against a normalized set of factors
• Online course quality as determined by students
• Percentage of enrollment growth in online courses in tandem with enrollment growth across the institution in all programs, i.e. total enrollment gains for the institution regardless of delivery format

The study indicated that the institutions were on top of a set of metrics that generally involved both quality and quantity measures. One preliminary conclusion is that almost by definition a programmatic approach is easier to measure in both these regards. Also, the respondents were very clear that they refined their metrics over time.

The sixth and final self-audit question is: *Have you established quantifiable metrics that are balanced between quality and growth and have you set objectives that demonstrate consistent progress?*

### The Sum Total

Let's review the six self-audit questions:

1. What key mission objective that is aligned with a primary student need, will be the focus of your on-line learning activities?
2. Do you have an effective executive review process, formal or informal, to prioritize the program selection, faculty selection, and support activities to move online and are you committed to supporting these activities over the long term?
3. Are you focusing most of your effort at the program level and are you redesigning programs so that they are enhanced by fully online or hybrid delivery?
4. Are grass-roots faculty efforts being supported along with the previously discussed programmatic priorities and are faculty supported in learning how to transform their teaching expertise to the online environment?
5. Are you providing highly reliable and easy online access for students coupled with a single point of contact that can resolve any issue or concern?
6. Have you established quantifiable metrics that are balanced between quality and growth and have you set objectives that demonstrate consistent progress?

Taken in total, and roughly in order, positive answers to these questions will result in very significant success in utilizing online learning in achieving your institutional mission.

We also think that an institution that can successfully navigate these items has done much more than implement a new technology. Success in all of the above shows significant aptitude in moving the institution toward the future. Why? At a minimum, here's what these self-audit factors indicate:

- Attitudes and ability to implement new innovations focused on student needs
- Effective inter-department processes
- Clear communication on mission at all levels
- Evidence of strong centralized support that works successfully across boundaries
- A high priority placed on teaching and learning

### About Rob Abel

Rob Abel founded the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness (A-HEC) in May 2004 for the purpose of helping higher education leaders collaborate to better understand new market forces in higher education. In order to fulfill this mission, he has evolved the organization to perform much needed action research to provide the understanding required to build a foundation for sustainable change. Prior to founding A-HEC Rob was the senior vice president of client services and online and academic services at Collegis, where he was responsible for the services delivered to more than 60 higher education institutions. Rob has over 25 years experience in high tech general management, business development, marketing, and product development, with degrees from Carnegie Mellon, USC, and Stanford.



### About A-HEC

*Tools & Research for Quality Education. . . .*

The Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness (A-HEC) is a nonprofit 501c3 organization providing self evaluation tools for quality Internet-supported Learning and extensive research on the impact of education on society

A-HEC is dedicated to collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information on how higher education organizations and leaders of all types are creating value through innovation.

Visit the A-HEC web site at:

<http://www.a-hec.org>