

WHAT WE WISH WE KNEW BEFORE GOING ONLINE Lessons Learned From Implementing an Online MBA

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Montclair State University (MSU) is New Jersey's second-largest public institution. As online education continues its rapid-paced growth, MBA programs have been some of the most common online degrees. In 2016, Montclair's Feliciano School of Business entered this crowded online MBA market. After a false start and sometimes rocky development, the online MBA was successfully launched in the fall of 2016. The program grew so fast that the leadership team needed to find innovative ways to handle the number of students. The lessons learned by the online MBA leadership team are detailed below.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced almost all institutions of higher learning to move quickly to online delivery modalities. The circumstances necessitated that this shift occurs rapidly—usually within a few days. Now that faculty, students, and administrators have had experience with online learning, some colleges and universities might consider fully developing online programs.

Before the pandemic, the Feliciano School of Business at Montclair State University embarked on developing a fully asynchro-

nous online MBA program. At that time, the market for online MBA programs was already crowded, with over 300 AACSB-accredited programs (AACSB-Accredited Online MBA Programs). While some individual faculty members had experience developing and delivering individual online courses, the university only had limited experience with online programs, and the School of Business had already been through one failed attempt at developing an online MBA.

This article uses a case study approach to provide lessons learned from the development of the online MBA program. The lessons are

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embedded in the theory of social network analysis (SNA) by identifying the key stakeholders and understanding their lines of communication. These lessons should prove valuable to higher education administrators or faculty considering the development of online programs.

As a result of the COVID pandemic, online education has infiltrated every level of teaching and learning. As we emerge from the pandemic, educators and students are now more accustomed to online education and will be demanding that more programs be offered in online formats. However, they are also savvier about online education and will be demanding high-quality and well-developed programs. It will be imperative that administrators take the time to incorporate their stakeholders and develop programs that will meet the needs and expectations of educated consumers and stand the test of time.

Theoretical Background

According to Wasserman and Faust (1994), SNA is focused “on relationships among social entities and on the patterns and implications of these relationships.” When visualizing this network, the people and groups form the nodes, and the links show their relationships. In this research, we extend the framework established by Latif et al. (2016), who used SNA to study the interactions among stakeholders in the development of an undergraduate e-compedium. While their focus was on an undergraduate course, the SNA approach can be applied to courses and programs at any

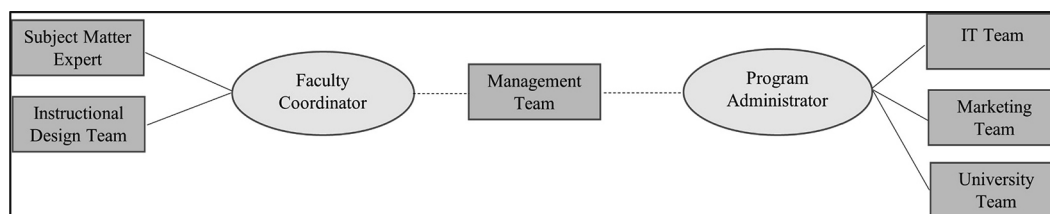
level. Three main stakeholders emerged when developing the e-compedium: the management team, the design team, and the lecturers (subject matter experts). More important than just identifying these stakeholders is understanding how they communicate and work within and among the groups.

We expand upon Latif’s model by adding three additional stakeholders—the information technology team, the marketing team, and the university team. We further expand the model by adding two coordinating roles—the faculty coordinator and the program administrator. Both coordinators also served as management team members (see Figure 1). Thus, institutions thinking about developing an online program (at any level) should consider the six stakeholders and how they will interact with each other and across the university. In addition, they will need to determine which, if any, coordination roles should be in place.

- Subject matter expert (SME): The faculty or adjunct who has expertise in a particular academic area and was assigned to design and develop an online course. Approximately thirty SMEs developed online courses for the MBA program, and often these SMEs also delivered online courses.
- Instructional design team: This team of professionals is trained instructional designers with expertise in the design, development, and pedagogy for instructional content to support the delivery of knowledge in an efficient, engaging and effective way for both live (in-person) and

FIGURE 1

Expanded Stakeholder Model



online courses. The instructional designers work with the SMEs to design and deliver online MBA courses. Five university instructional designers were assigned to work on the online MBA program courses. In addition, the university hired a multimedia specialist to assist with developing online programs. The specialist supported and coordinated video recording, editing, and some video effects in a green screen room.

- Information technology team: MSU's information technology team consists of the central university technology team and a team within the School of Business. The dedicated School of Business team primarily dealt with issues around providing faculty and student access to software for specific courses. The central university team was responsible for higher level issues, such as system integration.
- Marketing team: It was decided that the marketing would be outsourced to an online program management (OPM) company for this program. The company invests money up-front on marketing, recruitment, enrollment, and retention and takes a percent of the tuition revenue. All ad copy used by the OPM required prior approval from the management team.
- University Team: The university team, in this case, is defined as all of the functional units necessary for student admissions, enrollment, registration, and payment. These include the Graduate School, Registrar's, Student Accounts, and Financial Aid offices.
- Faculty Coordinator: The faculty coordinator was a tenured faculty member with extensive experience developing, teaching, and reviewing online courses. The coordinator had three main responsibilities. First, he worked with the instructional design team and management on course development guidelines that all SMEs would follow. Second, he served as a liaison between the SMEs and the instructional design team

– ensuring the SMEs stayed on schedule and adhered to the guidelines. Third, the coordinator provided a final quality assurance check on all courses developed for the program.

- Program Administrator: The program administrator coordinated and facilitated the operational implementation of the program by liaising with many university departments (i.e., registrar's office, graduate school, marketing and communications, financial aid, student accounts, information technology team) and OPM to ensure new protocols and procedures were created to accommodate many starts per year, course schedules that supported the program's rapid growth. The administrator ensured that the program implementation, ongoing success, and associated tasks were on track and completed promptly.
- Management: The management team consisted of personnel from the School of Business. The team consisted of the MBA director, the program administrator, the faculty coordinator, an associate dean, and the executive director of continuing and professional education for the university.

METHOD

This article uses a case study methodology. Yin (2017) points out that case studies are a good approach when analyzing contemporary issues in a real-life context. In this instance, the authors were the core of the planning and implementation team for the online MBA program. Therefore, they were in a unique embedded position that allowed them to analyze the mistakes made critically and the lessons learned.

In addition to the recollection of the participants, documents were reviewed in conducting this analysis. These documents include contemporaneous notes taken during (or just after) meetings, drafts of project plans, and e-mails among participants.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Montclair State University is the second largest state university in New Jersey, with over 21,000 students. While many state university systems offered significant online programs, New Jersey did not have robust online program offerings. In particular, Montclair State University only offered a small online master's degree program in education and numerous one-off online courses.

The Feliciano School of Business at Montclair State University currently has 2,738 undergraduate and 585 MBA graduate students. Before the launch of the online MBA program, there were two modalities, a face-to-face format on weeknights and a hybrid format with classes meeting on alternating Saturdays. Overall enrollment in the MBA program had been relatively flat over the previous 10-year period. In order to promote growth and reach an expanded target audience, the university decided to move forward with developing and offering an online MBA program.

Knowing the online MBA was a very saturated market, we knew that we needed to focus on three major areas to be successful. First, we knew that if we were going to launch an online MBA program, it needed to be a quality program both in terms of a strong academic program and, equally important, the online courses needed to be professional. Next, we knew that if we were to invest in developing a professional quality program, we needed strong student enrollments to justify our time and financial investments; therefore, we decided to offer six starts per year. Finally, if we planned to be a large program, we needed to invest in marketing and recruitment. In order to launch a large-scale program, we would need the assistance of an OPM.

After a false start and sometimes rocky development process, the online MBA has proven successful. The program grew so fast that the leadership team needed to find innovative ways to handle the number of students. Below are the lessons that we learned.

LESSON ONE—TAKE YOUR TIME

Some of the first faculty contacted to develop courses in the online MBA already had experience teaching courses in either online or hybrid formats. Therefore, when the decision was made to develop the online MBA, faculty members were contacted and told to start developing courses. The results did not meet expectations, with no uniformity across courses, subpar lecture recordings with sound and quality issues, and inconsistent course requirements and deliverables.

We realized that faculty had been developing their hybrid or online content on their own and had no real training in how to teach online. This approach of rushing course development contradicts the research on effective online education. Numerous studies (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; King & Nininger, 2019) have shown that faculty require professional development and training before developing online courses. Therefore, we took a step back and required all faculty developing courses for the online MBA program to complete an in-house professional development program entitled "Empowering Online Teaching and Learning" (EOTL). EOTL is a 4-week program that provides faculty with an online overview of teaching and learning. The course is taught entirely online and places the faculty member in the role of an online student. The course was created and facilitated by the instructional design team.

By completing the EOTL, the faculty understood what it was like to be a student in an online course, which informed their thinking about their course going forward. Some concrete examples of changes deriving from the EOTL include faculty changing assignments to be much more detailed and specific (as online students cannot ask questions in class) and greater use of rubrics to guide students.

The first lesson learned exposed a disconnect between management, SMEs, and instructional design, and it was partly the reason for creating the faculty coordinator role.

LESSON TWO— FOCUS ON COURSE DESIGN

Having faculty work independently also led to an issue with the overall look and feel of the program. There was no design consistency among the courses that were developed early. In addition, many courses had not followed good design practices for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Research has shown that course design can impact student perceptions and outcomes. Eom and Ashill (2016) found that course design “significantly affects students’ satisfaction and learning outcomes” (p. 185).

In order to remedy this issue, the faculty coordinator worked with the instructional design team to develop a model syllabus based on Quality Matters standards. Quality Matters is a set of standards for evaluating the design of online courses. Hanna et al. (2010) and Cordeiro and Muraoka (2015) pointed out the importance of a model syllabus for online programs.

The model syllabus was used to develop a standard template for all courses in the program within the Canvas learning management system (LMS). In addition to the model syllabus, the template included a standardized course design (see Figure 2a), a PowerPoint template, a discussion board, and grading rubrics. The course content was broken into weekly modules (see Figure 2b), which ran from Monday night to Sunday night. This weekly format was chosen in order to give students all weekend to complete assignments. Each module contained the following: (1) an orientation that explained why the content for the week is essential; (2) the learning goals for the week; (3) the requirements for the week; (4) a perspective on how the material fits into the larger business content; (5) module content—readings and recorded video lectures; (6) a discussion board and prompt related to the content for that week; (7) any assignments due that week, and (8) rubrics for the discussion board and assignments.

The faculty coordinator and instructional design team worked with the SMEs to ensure they followed the model syllabus and LMS template for all courses developed for the program.

LESSON THREE— DEFINE YOUR MODEL EARLY

Given that we were planning to launch the MBA in a very competitive market, we decided to compete by offering flexibility in terms of start times and delivery. We felt that if we offered multiple start times per year, we would be able to recruit students throughout the year. We also decided to offer the complete program asynchronously so students would not be restricted by availability and their geographic location or time zone.

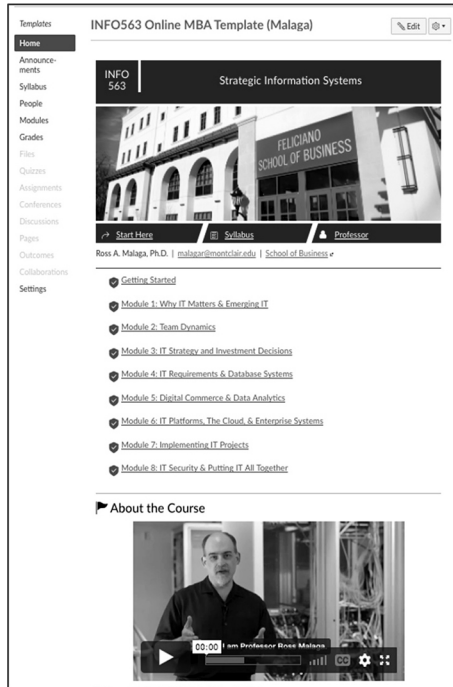
The management team worked with the marketing team to analyze market research to gauge demand, competition, and employment opportunities for various MBA concentrations. The results of the analyses identified three high-demand concentration areas to offer in the online MBA program: project management, digital marketing, and human Resource Management. Since our initial program launch, we have expanded the concentration options to include Business Analytics and Finance. Students can take one of the offered concentrations or proceed with a general MBA, where they can choose electives from any area.

The management team worked with the instructional designers to create a multicarousel model where students can begin their program six times per year or every 8 weeks. Since our MBA curriculum consists of both 1.5 credit and 3.0 credit courses, we designed the online program, so students complete three courses (either one 3.0 credit course or two 1.5 credit courses) every 8 weeks. Each carousel (see Figure 3)—the intro, the core, and the advanced core—contain a set of courses that repeat every three to four terms to allow students to progress through the required courses

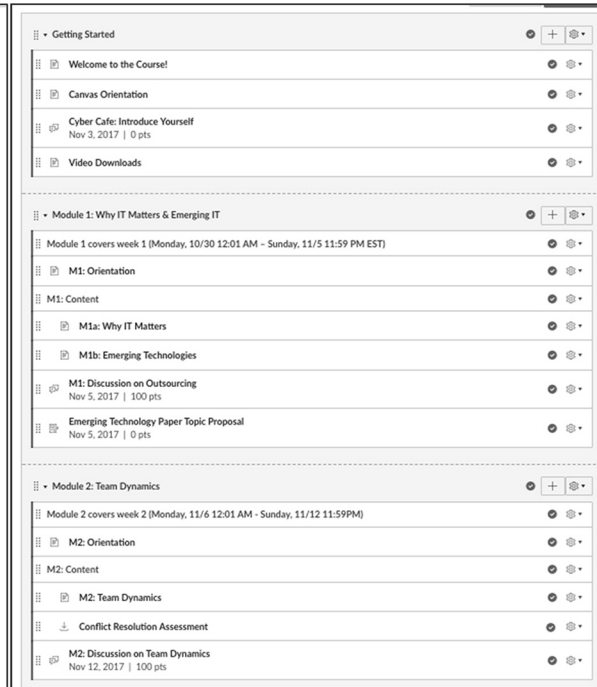
FIGURE 2

Standardized Course Design in Canvas

2a



2b



efficiently. Students need to complete all courses on one carousel before proceeding to the courses in the following carousel. Depending on a student's concentration area, they may either proceed with courses in the third carousel or the sequence of concentration/general MBA elective courses. The carousel model enabled the management team, in coordination with the program administrator, to plan out a detailed multiyear schedule for the program delivery.

LESSON FOUR—INVOLVE YOUR TECHNICAL TEAM FROM THE BEGINNING

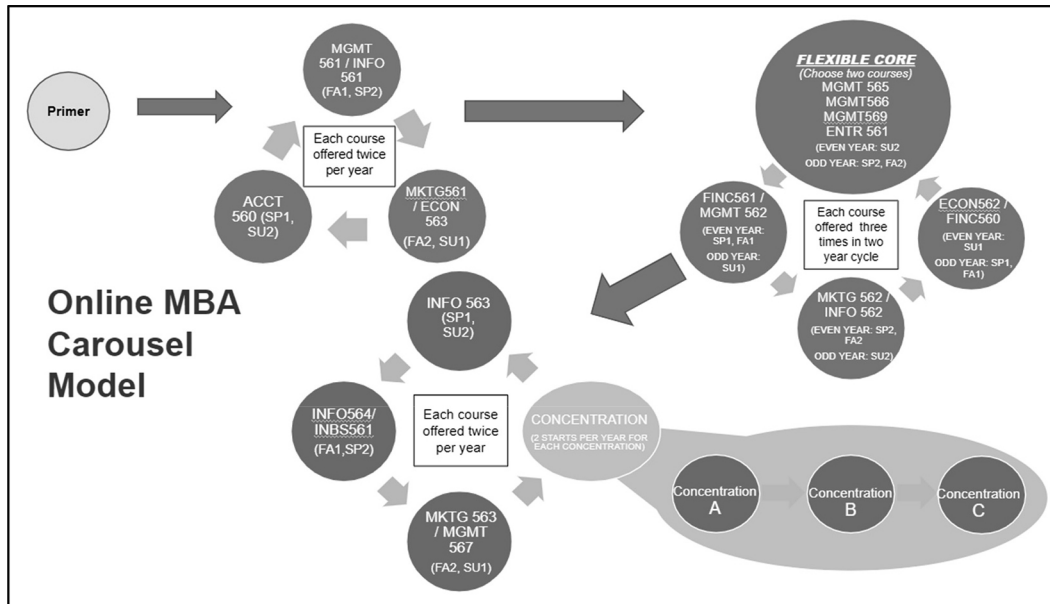
When developing any online program, it is essential to involve your technical team from the beginning, which might sound obvious, but

we overlooked certain elements. Of course, the online MBA would utilize the university's LMS (Canvas). However, on-ground students also have access to computer labs and the library. Some faculty use software that cannot easily be installed on all types of computers. For example, MS Project does not have a Mac version. On-ground students can go to a computer lab to complete assignments. However, now we were faced with the challenge of providing our online students *lab* access to specific software tools.

Another major interaction is the need for technical support to record the narrated videos professionally. The management team relied on the technical expertise of the IT team to advise on the latest technology and equipment for video production, including the technical requirements for a recording studio, lights,

FIGURE 3

Online MBA Carousel Model



cameras, green screen, and the quantity and qualifications of staff needed.

LESSON FIVE—COORDINATION BETWEEN THE SME AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN TEAM IS CRUCIAL

The quality of the online courses is critical to the overall success of an online program. Online courses not only need to have strong academic content, but they also need to be user-friendly, engaging and professionally developed.

Each subject matter expert was assigned a member of the ID team to assist with developing pedagogical tools, student interactions, online assessments, and narrated lectures. The IDs were able to help with best pedagogical practices and incorporate the latest technologies into the online course. A structured timeline was utilized to ensure that the development process stayed on track and pro-

vided a cushion in the event of unforeseen delays. All online courses were completed and approved well before their scheduled delivery.

Once an SME agrees to develop a new online MBA course, they are oriented on the online development process. This process includes periodic meetings with their assigned ID and a schedule for deliverables, including the course syllabus, followed by the lecture content, discussion board prompts, assessments, announcements, and assignments for each module. Once each module’s lecture content is approved, the recording studio is scheduled to video the lectures.

Under the direction of the multimedia specialist, the SMEs are videoed in front of a green screen, and PowerPoint presentations are superimposed on the video next to the presenter. Depending on the specifics of the lecture, the multimedia specialist may develop animations or other technologies to enhance the presentations. Some SMEs utilize a light board, a glass chalkboard filled with light where the SME would appear to be facing the

camera while writing on the board to present formulations or annotate their lectures. All videos are professionally edited, and closed captioning is added.

Once the online course is developed, the ID team and the faculty coordinator formally review the entire course and initiate the approval process.

If your university does not have IDs on staff, many instructional designers can be hired for contract work.

LESSON SIX—EVALUATE INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND IMPLEMENT NEW POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

You need to measure institutional readiness for the online program: determine the stakeholders, supporters, and nonsupporters. Having buy-in from critical constituents and administration is extremely important. Determining which components of the online program you will handle in-house and which need to be outsourced is also crucial. The institution should determine early on whether it will utilize an OPM. If an OPM is used, the institution must decide what processes are best handled in-house (depending on where the expertise is). For example, we determined that course design and teaching will be handled internally versus the OPM's handling of marketing, recruitment, and retention.

The entire process that a student will follow (from initial interest to apply, to enrollment, to advise, and eventually to graduation) needs to be mapped out as it currently exists for the on-ground students and what tweaks must be made for a fully online student to move through the process seamlessly. For example, we needed to set up the infrastructure for six starts per year (including summer starts) for the online program—this was a new procedure at the university. Determining which facilities/services the online students will be able to utilize and the program cost are essential. Another consideration is whether the on-

ground students can enroll in online core and elective courses. We allow our on-ground students to enroll in online concentration/elective courses and occasionally allow students to switch programs for extenuating circumstances. Faculty compensation for teaching in the online program must also be determined early on as some faculty may prefer to teach on-load, and some prefer to be paid off-load.

The course evaluation process, add/drop deadlines, course schedules, coding for both courses and students, and financial aid processes had to be overhauled as they mainly applied to on-ground students and did not translate well for online students/programs.

LESSON SEVEN— PLAN FOR SUCCESS

One of the main benefits of online programs to universities is that they do not require scarce classroom space. Without the physical limitations of a classroom, online programs can be as large as the university desires. The initial plan for the online MBA program was to keep the size the same as the traditional programs—about 30–35 students in a cohort. However, demand for the program proved very strong, and the initial cohort was 45 students. This number proved too large for a single instructor to handle effectively in one class. So, an adjunct was hired, and the cohort was divided into two.

It was determined that the university could not afford to pay current faculty to teach multiple sections of the same course online. In addition, it would not be feasible for the university to source enough qualified adjuncts for the program, and our accreditation would not permit the majority of courses to be taught by adjuncts. Therefore, the school was left with the option of limiting enrollment or finding another solution. Fortunately, when management personnel attended a conference, they discovered a company that provides academic coaches. Academic coaches are hired to assist the online professors with grading, student

communications, and facilitating the discussion board in large online classes.

A policy was adopted: when an online course exceeds the standard enrollment, the professor (subject matter experts) will be assigned an academic coach to support the large online course. This arrangement allows a single professor to teach online courses with up to 120 students effectively. It requires interaction and coordination among the SME, management team, instructional design team, and an outside vendor.

The course divides students by cohort/section for discussion board interactions and group projects, allowing students to feel like they are in a smaller, intimate setting within the larger class. The setup for each course occurs through the interaction between the SME and the instructional design team.

DISCUSSION

This article extends the existing literature on online program development in higher education. First, we expand on the work of Latif et al. (2016) by adding three additional stakeholders to their original framework. These three stakeholders—the information technology team, the marketing team, and the university team—are vital when developing a fully online program versus standalone online courses.

Second, the expanded model included additional complexity. For example, the marketing team was an external vendor. The internal stakeholders needed to establish processes for interacting with this external stakeholder while still complying with university policies and federal regulations (e.g., FERPA).

Third, we applied the extended model to graduate education in a highly competitive market. About 300 AACSB-accredited online MBA programs (AACSB-Accredited Online MBA Programs, 2021). Succeeding in such a highly competitive landscape required coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders detailed in the model.

This research clearly has several practical implications for any institution of higher education considering the development of an online program. First, it is vital to include the instructional design and information technology teams as early as possible. They can help define what is and is not feasible given resource constraints. The instructional design team can help develop LMS templates and model syllabi. Second, define your model for online program delivery. The model will drive the course development process. Third, determine SMEs for each course. Consider that the best SME for online course development might not be the instructor teaching the course. The SME needs to be willing to work effectively with the instructional design team and conform to the model syllabus, LMS template, and policies set for the program. Finally, plan for growth at the beginning. Understand how your program will handle a larger number of students than anticipated.

The main limitation of this research is that, as a case study, it is confined to only one institution. While the lessons discussed in this paper should generally apply, other higher education institutions must adjust based on their particular circumstances.

One area touched on in this research that should be expanded upon in the future is that of external stakeholders. Our extended model only contained one external stakeholder—the marketing team. However, some universities use external vendors for SMEs, instructional design, and other parts of the model. Future research should explore the interaction among multiple external stakeholders when developing online programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The online MBA program has proven a great success. In 5 years, the program enrollment increased from 0 to 327 students. Online MBA students account for 56% of our total MBA student body. However, this success was the product of several stumbles and false starts.

The seven lessons presented above should guide the development of new online programs.

The program's success has led us to replicate the approach and add additional online programs to the School of Business offerings using the same model. These new programs include a 30-credit master's in business analytics and an online undergraduate business degree completion program for students with an earned associate's degree in business.

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