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## Drexel University Online
## Response to Case Study

### Introduction

Started in 1996, Drexel University Online (DUO) is a subsidiary of Philadelphia-based

Drexel University, a private university operating since 1891. Using primarily asynchronous

technology, DUO offers distance learning to more than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate

students. Known for their competitive admission, only 55 percent of the applicants are admitted

to DUO. However, they do retain more than 80 percent of their students (Drexel at a Glance,

2012; The Best Colleges, 2011).

Learner supports are considered to be scaffolding around students which include advice

from counselors, tutoring from experts, a help desk for IT problems, admission and registration

assistance, and much more. "In other words, learner support activities are all those interactive

processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process" (Brindley, Walti, &

Zawacki-Richter, 2004, p. 9). Because distance education students do not have the benefit of

walking into an office on campus and asking for assistance in a face-to-face setting, it is critical

for a school to provide more than the standard learner supports for distance students.

This recommendation paper will serve as a response to the Case Study entitled *Drexel*

*University Online: A Distance Education Experience – Comprehensiveness and Effectiveness of*

*Learner Support.* The Case Study was prepared by Donna Ballard, Carol Cron, Cynthia Lyons,

Jane Menker, Gloria Robbins and Vannessa Williams for OMDE 608, Section 9040, Spring

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2012.  Included in this recommendation paper are the goals of the proposed learner support system, the elements which can be addressed immediately and what needs more time and money, how these recommendations will be organized, staffed and achieved with existing resources, special areas to be considered and an opportunity for DUO to increase their revenue.

**Goal of Proposed Support System**

The goal of these recommendations is to suggest some immediate improvements to the learner supports to increase student satisfaction and retention, along with some future improvements in technology and expansion of DUO's distance learning program.  A 2007 student survey by Grace, Morris and Romyn in the College of Information Science and Technology (iSchool), revealed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the DUO student experience.  Several common complaints showed clear areas where changes could be implemented relatively easily and at a reasonable cost (Grace, Morris & Romyn, 2007).  Because the study was only done in one school, it is suggested that follow-up surveys be planned to expand the student input beyond the iSchool.  It is important to determine if similar student dissatisfaction is present in the other colleges offering distance learning.

**Weaknesses at DUO**

From the DUO Case Study, the survey results indicated areas of concern with learner satisfaction and communication, quality of service, fee arrangements, and technology (Ballard, Cron, Lyons, Menker, Robbins & Williams, March, 2012).  Grace, et al. (2007) found graduate student dissatisfaction with faculty and advisor support – specifically citing a lack of knowledge

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about course requirements, course sequence and graduation requirements.  DUO students pay

"activity fees" but rarely, if ever, utilize the campus services, unlike the traditional campus-based

students (Grace, et al., 2007).  Regarding technology, the case study states there is a lack of

synchronous communications in the online programs, as well as difficulty navigating the

Blackboard 8.0 learning management system (LMS) (Ballard, et al., 2012).

**Elements for Immediate Development**

These recommendations are suggested improvements in learner support to the following

problem areas, which can be implemented within a short window of time and with minimal

outlay of funds.

- Course advising – knowledge of advisors

- Course advising – availability of advisors beyond the 9-5 work day

- Use of students' activity fees – redirect to support distance learners

- Communication between students and instructors via additional technology

**Elements for Future Development**

In addition to immediate improvements, there is a more significant recommendation to

improve learner support with the LMS – the critical technological infrastructure for an online

education program.  This area will require much more study, research and expenditure of capital

funds.  The organization and staffing for this opportunity will be discussed in the section

"Rationale and Special Factors."

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**An Opportunity for Expansion**

Finally, this paper will suggest a way in which the school can expand its student base. DUO should consider becoming an open university, increasing their enrollment beyond the 55 percent, which in turn will bring in more income.

**Organization and Staffing**

The case study revealed a complaint expressed among both undergraduate and graduate students. The information available online about courses was sketchy, at best, and the knowledge of advisors was not much better (Ballard, et al., 2012). Solutions to these complaints can be addressed as follows.

An online course grid should be developed with course topics and learning objectives about every course offered in every major so that it can be accessed 24/7 by distance students. This will let them review course information and make informed decisions when it is convenient for them. An appendix to this recommendation paper has tables from both DUO and the author's employing institution – the University of Maryland, College Park. The tables present an example of the online description of a DUO undergraduate course along with a similar course taught at the Smith School of Business. The undergraduate course grid was developed in one semester by several people, with significant input from this author, and was made available for public viewing on the Smith website. Of particular interest is that every course number links to a number of syllabi for that course from prior semesters and prior instructors.

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Often distance students are adult learners with full-time jobs and family responsibilities. They need increased flexibility, with access to learner supports when they want access to their classes – and this is <u>not</u> 9 – 5 Monday through Friday! The DUO website can be improved to expand the information available to answer many student questions.

A change is needed in the staffing of the advising office (Ballard, et al., 2012). The current staff should be spread out so they are available to students seven days a week and with hours until 9:00 p.m. Some of the current course advisors need to be trained as specialists in supporting the distance student. This author believes these changes in course advising and available course information can be made within one semester to better serve the DE student and will not cost a lot of money.

**Achieving Goals and Objectives within Existing Resources**

The complaint from distance education students that they pay "activity fees" – but rarely, if ever, utilize the activities/services available on campus, is a valid one (Ballard, et al., 2012). The fees that are collected should be re-named to "DE Student Fee" and re-directed to better serve distance students. As previously mentioned, this author works for the University of Maryland, College Park, and is familiar with many practices at this institution. At Maryland, students are charged student fees that pay for the Shuttle-UM, the recreation center, campus security, and other services that are well-utilized by campus-based students, but are rarely used by commuter students. By re-naming and re-directing the activity fee, the DE students will be better served. The fees could be used to purchase equipment, such as iPads or other mobile

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devices, so that distance education faculty can be more available to their students, whether via video chat such as Skype, via chat within their online classroom, or through paying faculty a stipend to be on call at set times for Q&As from DE students.  Re-directing activity fees towards distance students will solve two complaints: it will make DE students feel they are not paying for services they do not use, and it will give them some unique learner supports, which they are complaining they currently do not have.

**Follow-Up Evaluation**

Will these improvements be effective?  The same student satisfaction survey administered to the campus distance student population should be given again after these supports are implemented and have been in place for at least one semester.  This will tell DUO administrators whether their distance students are better satisfied with the new and improved supports.

**Rationale and Special Factors**

There are two additional areas which require extensive investigation and financing to determine the feasibility of implementation.  There are complaints about the use of Blackboard 8.0 and some of the functionality of it (Ballard, et al., 2012).  This is not a unique complaint, and as their contracts with universities expire, Blackboard appears to be losing clientele to new open-source LMS platforms.  The campus technology administrators need to work with Blackboard to address some of the common complaints.  At the same time, if the contract with Blackboard will

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expire within two years, the campus needs to determine what will take its place. Of course, upgrading to the newest version of Blackboard may solve many of the current problems.

The final item addressed in this recommendation paper is not based on a complaint from students, but rather addresses a potential opportunity for DUO to expand their student base. With only a 55 percent acceptance rate, it appears that a lot of students who would like to attend DUO are being turned away (Drexel, 2012). Of course, no university wants to significantly lower their standards or the quality level of their students, but DUO could serve more students by relaxing their admission standards, while at the same time ensuring that they have adequate faculty and learner supports to expand their student base. Not only will more faculty be needed to teach more students, but as reported in Brindley, et al. (2004), additional learner supports in the form of writing coaches, tutors, and library support should be planned.

**Conclusion**

Drexel University Online has a number of immediate opportunities to improve their student satisfaction by providing more in-depth course information, expanding the availability of their advising teams through longer hours, and making their faculty more available to students. Some of the expenses for these improvements can be recovered by re-directing student activity fees to specifically support their distance students. In terms of long-term or major changes, the campus administration is poised to address these issues by assessing their need for, and desire to expand their student base and to change their learning management system.

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## Appendix 1

**Drexel University Online**
(Retrieved from: http://www.drexel.com/online-degrees/business-degrees/bs-ba/curriculum.aspx)

| **"INTB 200 International Business - 4.00 credits** |
| --- |
| This course examines economic, political, legal, and social factors affecting formulation of international business strategy" (Drexel University Online, *Bachelor's Degree Online: Curriculum,* 2012). |

**Smith School Business**
(Retrieved from: https://bmgt-students.rhsmith.umd.edu/courses/grid.nsf/web-vw-coursesalll-table)

| **BMGT 392 -- Introduction to International Business Management** -- 3.0 credits<br>Note: On the course grid the BMGT 392 links to a collection of syllabi for this course over the past several semesters/years from various faculty | |
| --- | --- |
| **COURSE TOPICS**<br><br>• Globalization<br>• Cultural Issues<br>• Political, Economic and Legal Systems<br>• International Trade and Institutions<br>• Regional Integration<br>• International Investment<br>• Ethics<br>• International Monetary System and the Foreign Exchange Market<br>• Financial Management and Capital Markets<br>• Strategy and Organization<br>• Modes of Entry and Strategic Alliances<br>• Global Production and Logistics<br>• Marketing and R&D<br>• Human Resources Management | **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**<br><br>• Develop an understanding of the domestic and foreign environmental factors affecting international business operations.<br>• Develop an understanding of best management practices for coping with challenges presented by international markets and competition. |

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## Appendix 2

**Drexel University Online**

(Retrieved from: http://www.drexel.com/online-degrees/business-degrees/bs-ba/curriculum.aspx)

| **"MKTG 301 Introduction to Marketing Management - 4.00 credits** |
| --- |
| Provides a conceptual and applications-oriented framework for marketing decision-making in a dynamic environment. Emphasizes satisfying target customers and achieving organizational objectives through skillful blending of strategies in product development, pricing, promotion, and distribution" (Drexel University Online, *Bachelor's Degree Online: Curriculum,* 2012). |

**Smith School of Business**

(Retrieved from: https://bmgt-students.rhsmith.umd.edu/courses/grid.nsf/web-vw-coursesalll-table)

**BMGT 350 – Marketing Principles and Organization** -- 3.0 credits
Note: On the course grid the BMGT 350 links to a collection of syllabi for this course over the past several semesters/years from various faculty)

| COURSE TOPICS | LEARNING OBJECTIVES |
| --- | --- |
| <ul><li>Marketing Mix</li><li>Environment</li><li>Ethics and Consumerism</li><li>Segmentation</li><li>Marketing Research</li><li>Consumer Behavior</li><li>Global Marketing</li><li>Product Strategy</li><li>Distribution Strategy</li><li>Pricing Strategy</li><li>Promotional Strategy</li><li>Services</li></ul> | <ul><li>Understand marketing constructs and concepts.</li><li>Appreciate the nuances of consumer behavior and product value assessment.</li><li>Acknowledge the ethical and global issues affecting marketing strategy.</li><li>Provide an up-to-date overview of selected topics from the field of marketing.</li></ul> |

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