

# University of Maryland University College: Institutional Models and Concepts of Student Support

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## Introduction

The topic for this session is “Institutional Models and Concepts of Student Support Services”. I think I can best address this subject by speaking from the perspective of my institution, University of Maryland University College (UMUC), because that is the one I know best. I want to first describe this institution. Then I would like to talk about some key decisions that have defined where we are today in the world of online learning, and how we got here. Together, these describe the model we have pursued in online delivery. Finally, I shall talk about some of the challenges we are facing: the defining values and emerging issues that I think describe where we are going and our view of how we can best serve and support our students. These latter ideas are rather messy, because we are grappling with them every day. But those are issues that are extremely important to us, and they say something about the type of services and the type of institution we are, and aspire to be, for our students.

## About UMUC

We are a relatively young institution, founded in 1947 as a continuing education unit at The University of Maryland College Park. We became an independent University in 1972, and today we are one of eleven degree-granting institutions in the public University System of Maryland. So when you hear about the Maryland university with a basketball team or a football team (which in North America we hear a lot about), it is *not* UMUC but rather our sister institution, a very large, traditional research-oriented residential institution in a multi-institutional state system.

UMUC is unique because we are a complete university with a mission devoted primarily to adult and part-time students. Very few institutions in North America can say that. We are also unique because throughout our history we’ve received little support from the state government. Beginning in the early 1990s, we got perhaps 3% of our budget from the state; then they had a recession and took it away. In 1996, with a new governor we were successful in getting a funding formula for about five years. We reached about 7% of our budget from state funding and, sure enough, last year during the recession and the state budget crisis, our share was reduced to about 6% of our total budget that this year will be about \$240 million. So we are mostly dependent upon our own resources: the tuition and fees that our students pay, and some small revenue-producing enterprises.

Today UMUC is a very large university, with roughly 91,000 students and 3,100 faculty worldwide. We have 575 full-time faculty; the rest are part-time. Traditionally we have been a university that delivered courses on the ground in the face-to-face format.

Currently we have about 160 locations worldwide. Many of those locations are in Europe and around the Asian perimeter. Most (but not all) of those locations are part of large contracts that we have with the U.S. Government to deliver courses and programs to U.S. citizens overseas: government employees, U.S. Military, and their families around the world. We also have programs in Russia, with Irkutsk University and Far Eastern State University in Vladivostok. We are also partners with Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, Germany for the Master of Distance Education program, and we have cooperative arrangements in place or in progress with a number of other universities and institutions around the world.

UMUC is a comprehensive university with everything from Certificates to Associate Degrees, Baccalaureates, Masters, and the Doctor of Management. We deliver very little non-credit programming. We also have a National Leadership Institute that we run for executive and management training, but that is about all; everything else is credit-bearing.

We say that we are a university with many formats. Of course, we've always used the face-to-face, traditional classroom format. But we are also very big online, and we have used interactive video, two-way video conferencing, and instructional television in the past. We have executive formats, and short residency programs in which students combine face-to-face meetings with work over the Internet. We offer some classes in which the faculty will fly in to a site for face-to-face meetings, then interact with the students online or through synchronous video conferencing. So depending upon the situation, we can mix formats.

We have considered ourselves a distance university for many years, beginning about 30 years ago with instructional television. Today we have 17 Masters and 18 of our Baccalaureate degrees available to our students fully online. We offer more than 600 online courses altogether, and that number is climbing. Last year we had more than 110,000 enrollments online. And all this growth has happened since 1997. In fact, I can recall when, in January of 1995, we introduced our first graduate course online and we had 22 students; we thought it was fantastic. Look what has happened since.

It's also interesting to see where we were in 1997 in terms of the different types of delivery. At that time online enrollments accounted for only 4% of our total enrollments. They grew to 9% in 1998, 20% in 1999, 39% in 2000, and reached the 50% mark in 2001. Today online enrollments account for 71% of our total enrollments. Online is really the delivery mode "du jour" for us. We don't want to give up face-to-face delivery, but our students are voting with their feet, or their fingers you might say.

Our student body is quite diverse. In age the biggest segment, is from 25 to 44; but increasingly the age group under 25 is growing. These are usually traditional students who go to residential campuses. However, in the United States, those campuses are becoming more and more expensive, and many students have to work and go to school part-time. So increasingly they come to us.

We are also watching very carefully the 45 and older age group as the baby-boomers mature and consider retirement. We think they are going want something related to their intellectual needs, and we hope to be there for them when they do. Our student body is somewhat more female than male. And we are quite diverse in terms of ethnicity. Our students really reflect the diversity of society in our state and across our country.

## Key Decisions

I would like to talk now about some of the key factors and decision points that got UMUC to where it is today as a leading provider of online education in North America. First, UMUC was perhaps the right university in the right place. In the early 1990s, Internet and information technology had advanced to the point where it was ready for mass availability. There was also a large population of adults in North America who were very ready to go back to school to enhance their credentials and improve their career opportunities. In this environment we have UMUC, a student-centered institution with a mission and experience in delivering quality education to working adults at times and places convenient to them. We had curriculum that was ready and had been delivered in other distance formats, and we had a reputation as a public university. So we were well positioned to capitalize on the external changes and the external environment. However, that alone may not have been enough. I think there were some key decisions we made that capitalized on the changes in the external environment as well as our University's strengths that got us here today, five key decision areas in which we made the right choices.

*The first critical decision* concerned the level of academic quality for online delivery. For us there was no question that the outcomes for online learning must be the same as for face-to-face. If it is not so, then what would we be saying about one mode of delivery over the other? That one is inferior or superior to the other? So we decided that we have to look very carefully at inputs and processes, and that we have to manage these so that the outcomes for the student will be the same regardless of the mode of delivery.

We have worked hard to try to make this outcome a reality. The faculty who teach online are generally the same ones who teach face-to-face, and some of them switch from one mode to another. The curriculum is the same in both modes. We have worked hard to provide the technology, information resources, and institutional services to support both modes, on which I shall comment more shortly.

For us, interaction is critical in online delivery, as important as in the face-to-face classroom; so that governed how we would design our delivery platform. We have always felt that students must be engaged in their learning, so we have encouraged our faculty to be creative in facilitating that process in the online classroom. And of course, we need assessment and feedback. All of these inputs and processes were as important to us in offering the online classroom as in the traditional one.

*A second critical area* in which we made the right decision, was that we saw the challenge of online delivery as not just converting a course or even a program for Internet delivery. The real challenge was to be able to surround the whole thing with a rich package of support services for both students and faculty.

We began working on this problem from the beginning. We felt we must have 24 hour by 7 day technology help service available to students and faculty. So we provide interactive guidebooks, e-mail, chat, and an 800 number for students and faculty to call if they are having trouble with their technology. In addition we offer online orientation and tutorials for those students who may be new to the use of the technology.

We believe the library is the heart of the learning enterprise. So we decided that we must provide 24 by 7 library services for students who are distributed across the Continent. It took us until last year to get the 24 by 7 service, but we have it now. Students can get help from a librarian through e-chat, e-mail (with a guaranteed two-hour response), or through an 800 number they may call to ask a librarian a question. We also have a lot of guides and tutorials. We belong to the public University System Library Consortium; so there are about 12 million hard copies available that students may order online and have them delivered to their doorstep overnight if they wish. We have an e-book library service that has several thousand copies now and is growing. Students may go there to read and bookmark texts online. We also have over 100 online databases, about half full text, that students may use to retrieve articles from journals and bulletins. And we have e-copy services online, so that if a faculty member or a student cannot get the full text e-copy, the librarian will retrieve the copy, get the copy-rights permission, and post it in the classroom.

In student services, we set a mandate that every service a face-to-face student needs must also be available online. We are working hard to try to meet that goal, but it's always a challenge. Nonetheless, students can do everything now via technology. They can apply for admission, enroll, get advising, get grades, and apply for graduation, either via online or phone. This goal required us to rethink our student service operations, and to try to introduce business process management techniques to them. We are making progress, but we still have work to do, which I will comment on shortly.

Of course, distance faculty also require online services. In addition to the technology and library help services I mentioned, we have an online training and certification program. No faculty member enters the online classroom until he or she has successfully completed the five-week online training course. We provide numerous other services for faculty, including the ability to submit grades online and participate in online symposia and other training opportunities. Increasingly we encourage them to be linked in online communities.

*A third critical decision* concerned how we were to convert our face-to-face curriculum to online. Should we do it inside the university or go outside?

We decided to stay inside with our own faculty. We had a number of ways to construct the curriculum. We have some faculty, largely in the Graduate School, who were very innovative and technology fluent, and wanted to do it on their own, sometimes with the help of a technologist. In our undergraduate programs, however, we used a team approach in which we surrounded the faculty member with course designers, multi-media technicians, editors, and graphics people.

It worried us for a while that we were using two different approaches, but in the end we decided it provided us with a great deal of flexibility. Today, we have reached a point where we would like to see a merger of those two processes in both the graduate and undergraduate operations. We are searching for the right balance between a standard approach used by all faculty and the opportunity for faculty to bring their value added to each course section, according to their knowledge, professional background, and style of teaching. We think we have arrived at an approach in which we have avoided the tug-of-war found at some universities between institution and faculty over who owns what. Basically UMUC owns the delivery platform and any commonly produced instructional materials or lecturettes. The faculty bring their value added, which primarily appears in

the conferences, and that is their material. Being able to find the right position for this issue has enabled our University to avoid energy-consuming conflicts and get on with the business of getting our curriculum online quickly.

*A fourth critical decision* involved choosing the right delivery paradigm. We found a continuum of delivery paradigms emerging between the so-called broadcast model at one end and the interactive model on the other. The former is one in which communication is largely one-way – students are sent materials and instructions and are largely on their own as in an independent study, or perhaps the tutorial approach. Sometimes there is a large investment in multimedia with a single course costing several hundred thousand dollars to develop. An advantage for the institution is it may be open to very large class sizes.

At UMUC, we chose the interactive model that relies heavily on two-way online conferencing. In this model, faculty and students proceed through the class as a cohort, engaged in considerable discussion. The investment in multimedia is usually more modest. However, this model places limits on class size. We have limited that to about 30, and hopefully smaller.

In the elements of our online classroom, the learner is central, so we put a very heavy emphasis on conferencing. There is the opportunity for study groups and the creation of common documents, or for common problem-solving. Private e-mail is an option for one-to-one communication. Most of our classes still use the paper textbook. We do not believe that e-textbooks are quite ready for primetime, although the publishers are pushing them. Students have the opportunity to get other learning materials such as CDs, and of course, faculty developed or institutionally-developed materials which are built into the classroom. Finally, there is the Web itself. We saw the Web as not just a mode of delivery, but also a very rich resource for learning materials, some of which would be far too expensive for us to develop by ourselves.

*The fifth critical choice* we made at UMUC was in the selection of a delivery platform. We had to decide whether to stay with our own or buy one of the commercial packages, of which there were quite a few in the mid 1990s.

We developed our own proprietary delivery platform, which we call WebTycho (after the Danish astronomer). This system has been very successful for us. The platform is largely invisible; it does not seem to get in the way of students or faculty in carrying out the learning process. It is quite friendly and extremely reliable, and it is very scaleable, enabling us to grow rapidly.

Over the past twelve years, some have advised our university to get out of the software development business and move to one of the commercial delivery platforms. However, each time we have done an evaluation of the leading commercial systems, we found we were quite satisfied with our own system, and moved to develop its next generation. We liked its responsiveness to the needs of our faculty, and we liked the advantage of being able to control our costs rather than being subject to the commercial market and outside vendors.

So these five areas involving quality, online support services, course development, delivery paradigm, and delivery platform were critical ones for us. We think the decisions we made were the right ones for UMUC as we were confronted with challenges and opportunities in the external environment over the past decade.

## **Governing Values and Defining Issues for the Future**

I would like to talk now about the governing values that are reshaping our institution, some of the challenges ahead, and some of the issues that are defining the way in which we deliver services to our students. UMUC has been successful, yes. But the environment continues to change. Our survival as an educational institution depends upon our ability to continue our transition.

UMUC is first of all, a *public* university. As such, we think the governing values for our university must relate to *access*. Some would say access is equivalent to “open,” and I’ll talk more about that shortly.

*Quality* is another governing value. Quality might also be equated to “accountability.” There are many ways to define quality, and every institution says it has quality programs, but quality also brings with it accountability to society and to our students. Do our students grow and learn and how do we know that? This is an issue that is being discussed a lot in North America right now, within the government and across the country, as the cost of education continues to increase. That leads to the third value, the third responsibility, we have as a public institution: *affordability*. Are our programs within the financial reach of our students? More and more students in North America are paying for their educations through very large loans. This is a national issue that is being debated and tied to quality and access.

So these three values: *access*, *quality*, and *affordability* are ones that we are taking very, very seriously at the UMUC. We believe that how we perform in carrying out these values will define us in terms of whether we are just another university or will be a great university. Each of these, in its own dimension, drives a number of issues that we think will define us as a university as we make the transition to a new level of operation over the next decade.

### **Access**

*Access* drives a number of issues that are part of our everyday conversation at UMUC. If we are to be accessible, this means to us we must turn away no qualified applicant. Thus our entrance requirements are minimal. As essentially an *open university*, we must deal with *growth*. Many students will seek UMUC as the university where they have the opportunity to fulfill their educational goals. In fact, in our State of Maryland we are being looked to as the solution to a student capacity problem in our state. These are the children of the baby-boomers, the baby-boom echo, who are emerging from the high schools expecting to attend college to improve their career opportunities. They are why our 25-and-under age group is growing very rapidly. There are no seats for many of these students in the public university system, so the State is looking to UMUC to deal with this capacity problem.

If we are to be accessible, we must also deal with students who come to our door with very *diverse academic backgrounds*. Some of these candidates are well prepared, some of them less so, and we must be able to help them. We cannot control what society delivers to our doorstep. This means our University must develop and provide the resources necessary for under-prepared students to acquire the skills they need to succeed.

Access means *growth*. Thus we must attend to *scalability* in our operations, and in services we provide to students. This is a question we find ourselves asking frequently whenever we consider a new initiative or a new idea: “Is it scalable?” Growth means we must have scale. We must also look for opportunities to achieve *standardization* in services so that we can consistently deliver a high level of service for large numbers of students.

To cope with growth, we shall rely heavily on *technology mediated processes* and reengineering to standardize many services we provide to students. We also know that students have individual needs, so we must look for opportunities to achieve *mass customization*. This term is one we use more and more and I like very much. We look to the mass customization of our services as the means to support individual needs, but at a lower per unit cost as a result of our efforts to scale and standardize the basic level of service. I like this term and I hope you will think about it a lot. Frank Gehry, the architect, is a master of using mass customization in the design of his buildings, and, of course, his buildings look very distinct, don’t they? I think this concept is one that has a place in the delivery of higher education.

Finally, to provide access and to serve large numbers of students, we must attend to *measurement*. We must measure everything we do in providing services. Are the phones answered on time? What is the response time for e-mails? What is the abandonment rate of our phone calls? What is the course loading of our academic advisers? How long does it take to transfer credit evaluations? And so on. All of these *metrics* (and many more) will be critical to our operation, and we are working hard to have these indicators available to us instantly.

### **Quality**

When we speak about *quality*, there are a number of issues of concern to us that will shape us and become part of our daily vocabulary. The *curriculum*, of course, is first. Is it *current*? Is it *innovative*? Is it guided by what an individual will need in today’s complex society and workforce? We must attend to that.

We also look closely at our *faculty*, of course, because they are the ones who deliver the curriculum. We are concerned about the addition of new faculty, and their qualifications. It used to be that we treated faculty as a staffing problem, that is finding someone qualified and available to assign to a class so that it would not have to be cancelled. But we now know we must go beyond that thinking. As we bring in new faculty, we must provide a higher level of training than how to use our online delivery system. New faculty must know our values and culture as an institution, our expectations for faculty, and how we want faculty to deal with our students. So we are building a *faculty academy* through which all new faculty must pass before we shall invite them to join our ranks and put them into the classroom with our students.

Quality also means an increased emphasis on *standards*, expectations for our students and for our faculty, and an emphasis on achieving *consistency* in the level of instruction our faculty are expected to deliver to our students across class sections.

I have earlier mentioned the importance of academic *support* resources for students who have had less preparation in their previous educational experiences. This assistance is critical to helping these students acquire the skills they need to succeed, persist and graduate. A

very large initiative that we have right now concerns *persistence and retention* of our students. We're about 18 months into this initiative, and I expect it will continue for the next 3 to 5 years. We have already learned some interesting things in this persistence/retention effort. We discovered there are barriers in the external environment with which we can give students some help. Financial aid is an example. Some students arrive without the resources to pay their tuition. But if we provide better services and ways for students to get the funds they need, they can overcome that particular barrier more easily. Students on financial aid tend to stay with their program and are more likely to finish their classes than those who are not.

We also discovered that students most likely to withdraw or fail in their class are those who register after the class has begun. In U.S. higher education, it is common to have a week of late registration after the semester begins. But those are the students who are most likely to withdraw and fail. So why do we do this to ourselves and to them? This past year we have tried to change that culture by moving registration ahead a week so that the last registration ends before the class starts. In a few weeks we will know if we've had any effect on withdrawal rates in those classes.

We have discovered there are administrative barriers as well. We learned that every term we disenrolled about 1100 students after the class has begun because they had not paid their bills. This makes no sense because the students are already in class; we know who they are; we have their addresses; we shall almost certainly collect our tuition from most of them. So why do we throw them off the plane after it has taken off? We have now stopped that practice.

*Mass customization* is another concept important to quality. We are building what we call the standard syllabus, in which certain parts are common across all courses and all our programs. Other parts of the syllabus can be tailored or adjusted by the faculty members according to the needs of their particular classes and from the perspective of the individual faculty members' expertise and discipline.

*Assessment and measurement.* If we take in students who come from diverse backgrounds, we must pay a lot of attention to *learning outcomes*. What do our students learn? How are they different when they graduate from when they came to our institution? We need this information, first for ourselves in order to confirm that we are making a difference, that our students are learning. We also need this information to show others in the external regulatory environment that indeed, we are making a difference with our students.

### **Affordability**

*Affordability* drives its own set of issues. To generate the revenue we need for our programs, we must have *growth*. Growth generates tuition revenue, but in order to have margin left over to strengthen the university's infrastructure and program enhancements, we must look to *scalability*. Services and business practices must be *standardized* and we must rely heavily on *technology* to do that.

Affordability means we must pay a great deal of attention to *cost management*. I am very pleased to say that over the past three years we have changed our budgeting process to achieve that objective. Previously we had a system where all major departments had operational budgets with funds they worked hard to spend by the end of each fiscal year, at which time they worried about what would be available for the next year. We stopped

doing that. We said that in order to build a stronger university, the leadership would set aside investment money of our own that is only to be directed towards infrastructure and improvements to the academic programs, and that money is protected independent of operational crises. Now, when we design the budget for the coming year, we first set aside the reserve fund; then the money for investments. Only after that do the departments do their operational budgets with what's left. It has worked well, because every year we now have investment funds to go into new improvements and enhancements.

To be affordable, we must also pay attention to *differential pricing*. Not all students will pay the same tuition. Students supported by businesses and corporations pay one rate. Students in our state who have limited means will pay a different rate. And students outside the state may pay still another rate. All in all, we are very careful about pricing.

Finally, everything that we do, again, must be *measured*. I have already mentioned its importance. Measurement is becoming a byword in our institution. If it moves, measure it. If it will be a new initiative, how shall we measure its achievement or effectiveness? Only by having a clearly defined set of metrics shall we know that we are going in the direction we intend. Measurement is critical to our achieving affordability.

## **Conclusion**

I have described some of the key ideas or issues that are defining how UMUC will achieve its governing values of access, quality, and affordability. As I hope you have detected, some of these cut across more than one value set. How well we address these issues over the next several years will play out in the type of university we become.

I want to conclude my discussion with a word about our mission. We are in the middle of a strategic planning process at UMUC in which we are revising our mission. I think this is probably the first public gathering to which I am making the following statement. This mission has still not been approved by our Board of Regents, but we expect it will be this year. For the first time, we are stating that:

“UMUC will be the *open university* of the State of Maryland and of the United States with one focus: the educational needs of nontraditional students.”

What does ‘open’ mean to us? It means *access*. It means, as I said, that we will turn away no qualified applicant. We will deal with students who come to us with highly diverse educational backgrounds, but we will provide the support that motivated students need to succeed. We will minimize barriers to retention and graduation. We will work very hard to do that. We must also embed in our culture the assessment of learning outcomes so that we can confirm to ourselves that we are making a difference with those students. And finally, of course, we value lifelong learning for our students of all ages.

Well these are some of the things about which we are thinking. These will define our actions and our future. I hope you found these thought-provoking and that we shall see some discussion in this conference, and perhaps in your future papers, about these issues. Thank you.