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Four Considerations in Differentiating Your Online Graduate Program

Stand-out and Make Your Program Easier to Market

On-campus higher education graduate programs have traditionally been offered to students based on the university's research expertise, geographic reach, and other attributes of the institution. They have also largely focused on specific areas of study such as mechanical engineering or electrical engineering. Visit most College of Engineering websites at large, well-established universities and list of program names will be very similar.

As online graduate programs have been introduced to the market place, they have most often been viewed as a new delivery mode for the "on-campus" program.

It is important to rethink this approach because online fundamentally changes some of the basic parameters including, as example: geographic reach – expanding from state to national, and therefore the number of directly competitive programs – all in the same or similar field of study.

These and other factors continue to increase the requirement for each graduate program to be much more differentiated. The following are areas to consider in thinking through how you can further differentiate your online programs, and a few questions that need to be answered:

1. University Strengths, Brand and Mission

How can the individual online program leverage the university's or college's brand and strengths more effectively? Can the innovative research being conducted within the college be incorporated into the

curriculum of the online program? Can this research be leveraged to offer an online program that is in a new field of study or offer a new area of concentration? An example could be offering a concentration in “Design for Aging” within an Architectural Master of Architecture Program

2. *Competition*

Closely analyze the competition: the number of direct competitors, their program and course names, the reputation and prestige of the professors, program concentrations or tracks, course content, program rankings, and tuition. All these factors will all be instructive in helping to position and differentiate your program.

3. *Industry and New Areas of Demand*

Take a fresh look at the industries where your students work: what are their new challenges? Are there new skills that they need to know to move ahead in their career? How is technology and research changing their jobs and therefore the required know-how? Could courses from other disciplines within the university add important proficiency or knowledge to a newly emerging area within the field? Can your field of study be specialized for the industry? Such as a Healthcare MBA, using case studies specific to Healthcare.

4. *Service*

Are you offering exceptional service to the prospective graduate student in every aspect of their interaction with your program? Does your website differentiate your program? Is it easy to use? Can prospective students easily get questions answered about the program? Does the academic advice consider the unique requirements of the student’s current career environment?

Finally, differentiating an online program is not a one-time event. As markets and industry change so will the student audience and their needs. Ongoing review will be required to keep the online program offering innovative, engaging and relevant. Developing a process for differentiation will pay large dividends for everyone involved with the program and make the marketing of the program more effective.

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