5 Steps To Expand Your University's Online Portfolio

An Effective Strategy To Build Reach and Engage Students

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Online learning has become the norm for most universities today. By developing a broader portfolio of offerings to include residential, online and hybrid programs, institutions can expand their reach, open access to new learners and increase enrollments among more diverse populations. It also enables extensions into micro-credentials and certificates that support job readiness and skills acquisition beyond the degree.

In fact, the 2021 Changing Landscape of Online Education report (CHLOE 6) indicated that 80% to 90% of chief online officers (COOs) saw online learning as a greater priority than it was in the past, and 57% reported that a focus on online learning had become a part of their institutions' strategic plans.

"Student expectations of online learning have evolved," said Ashish Patel, portfolio president and chief information officer of AccelerEd. "To future-proof, remain relevant and deliver quality learning experiences in this changing market, universities need to couple a strong digital strategy with the ability to make data-driven decisions."

Fast-forward to 2022, CHLOE 7 indicated that COOs were still reporting that online learning would play a much bigger role in the typical student experience as soon as 2025. However, perhaps more importantly, they reported a strong emphasis on hybrid experiences, with enhanced experiential learning opportunities at the top of student priorities. Examples of these opportunities include off-campus learning, internships, and combinations of paid work and study.

Establishing an expanded portfolio requires identifying the right mix of online and hybrid programs. It involves analyzing current programs, reviewing the competition and keeping an eye on the demands of the labor market. Success can be found in a holistic approach to planning, including components such as:

Portfolio Planning and Goals for Online Expansion
Set your university up for success and enable data-driven decision-making.

Instructional Design and Faculty Support
Promote buy-in and engagement with faculty.

Marketing and Recruitment
Determine the right student segments for growth.

Student Retention and Success Services
Invest in the resources students need to succeed. Provide tutoring, mentoring and/or access to resources that support the student journey.

Enrollment Management
Guide the student from application to enrollment.
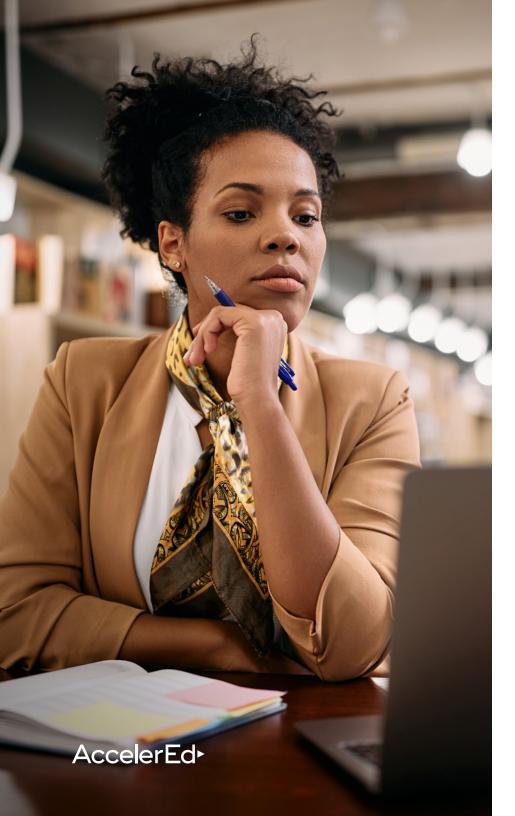
Technology Infrastructure and Analytics
Manage the delivery and ongoing support of student engagement, community and retention with data.

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Success can be found in a holistic approach to planning. That includes components such as goal setting, marketing and recruiting, enrollment management, instructional design, student success services, and sound technology infrastructure and data analytics that enable continuous improvement.

"Online learning has to be a core institutional priority that supports the university's mission in order for it to take hold," said Wendy Colby, senior board advisor and former AccelerEd CEO. "Robust, relevant, quality services require steadfast leadership, vision, faculty buy-in, the right online leadership and patience. The question is not if these services should be provided but how they should be provided."

So, with that in mind, we've prepared five steps to successfully expand online and hybrid learning platforms within the university portfolio to guide you in executing your vision.

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▶ 1. Chart the student journey.

Before expanding your university's hybrid portfolio, it's important to speak with students and understand their online preferences and behaviors. How do they learn about the programs you offer? What motivates them to apply? Is it an easy and seamless process?

Erich Hochmeister, associate vice president, learning technology and innovation, AccelerEd, noted that historically, the model has been more faculty- or education-centric versus student-centric. "The push to truly student-centric course design is going to come from the learners and what they expect from an online experience," Hochmeister explained. "We need to put students at the center and provide the necessary connection points and resources they need to achieve their goals."

From a pure program or course perspective, it is important to examine how well the programs perform. Are students persisting or lagging? Is the course relevant to today's job market? What more can be done to engage students and differentiate your programs?

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▶ 2. Look for ways to create a scalable program design.

To effectively scale a portfolio of online programs, it helps to have a common blueprint so students know what to expect and have a common experience when they move from course to course. It's an experience that should align to the university brand and mission as well.

From a course-design perspective, it can be as simple as creating a model where the objectives are presented in the same way and the course navigation is clear and consistent across courses and programs. Interactive activities or videos may be personalized by school and program but align to the same quality standards that ensure a unified experience.

"Content will change from course to course, but the overall navigation should be consistent across courses so that students know what to expect and can move through the courses seamlessly."

BARRY SUGARMAN
Vice President, Learning Platforms, AccelerEd

"In all our 'voice of the student' research, we find that students want a consistent and quality design experience that removes the guesswork. If courses vary in homework values, navigation, or access to links or resources, it just creates more friction for students, which impedes student success."

ERICH HOCHMEISTER
Associate Vice President, Learning Technology and Innovation, AccelerEd

"We have the ability now to help faculty reimagine the overall course and program experience," said Barry Sugarman, vice president, learning platforms, AccelerEd. "It really elevates the role of faculty as a guide, facilitator and expert, and allows them to focus on the core business of teaching and learning."

It can often be useful to create frameworks for faculty to see the value of a more seamless experience that easily scales, allows for flexibility and provides students with the kind of experiences they expect in a digital world.

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3. Invest in faculty support and professional development.

Faculty need training and guidance to succeed in online teaching. Options can range from pairing an instructional or learning designer with a faculty member to developing a broader suite of resources, training and courses that enable them to be comfortable in this modality. And, while some institutions meet the needs of online learning programs internally, outsourcing to a qualified service provider is a common alternative.

According to CHLOE 7, many institutions have started to include these critical investments in annual budgets. Regarding services that support the online learner, the survey found a 17% increase in staffing levels since 2020 in key roles such as instructional designers, educational technologists, advisers and coaches. And, in most areas of faculty professional development, such as online technical capacity, teaching, instructional design and quality assurance, higher education appears to be reaching the saturation point, with only 2% to 6% of institutions not providing these services.

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▶ 4. Understand and be deliberate about the overall technology ecosystem.

It's important to have the right technology and tools across the learning ecosystem to aid in usability, efficiency and scalability. Review your tech stack today. Does it support your overall program strategy? How do you address course design and analytics? What tools are available to your users, and what is their purpose? Is it a seamlessly integrated experience?

Whether it's project-based learning, community and peer-to-peer engagement, assessment and accessibility, live or recorded classes, determine if you're prioritizing the aspects most important to the overall student experience. Furthermore, make sure you have sound data-governance practices that allow you to continually improve on this experience through analytics.
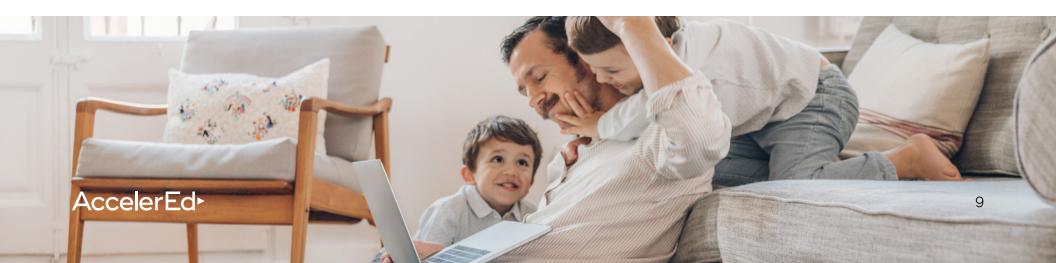
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▶ 5. Emphasize how you differentiate through student success.

Students who take online programs also seek community and connection. It often requires a different suite of resources and supporting tools to actively engage and support students — particularly adult learners who may have other needs when balancing busy family and work commitments.

The types of resources you provide will depend on your student needs and segments. If they are transfer students from a community college or other university, you want to make that seamless. If financial aid is a component, you want to be sure that is easy and clear. If a student needs help with basic math or writing, or just general guidance on how to succeed in an online course, you want to provide those resources. If students seek a sense of belonging or access to a peer or mentor, you want to make that available. These are all critical components of an online learning experience.

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ASHISH PATEL
Portfolio President and
Chief Information Officer of AccelerEd

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The online experience is a vehicle to growth and differentiation.

Higher education realizes that while core residential programs remain attractive and vital for a segment of the market, the pathway to growth will depend on identifying new learner segments. Understanding the right mix of degree, certificate, hybrid and online programs will be unique to each university. Universities have an opportunity to build on the strengths they have — through faculty, curriculum, partnerships — particularly partnerships that align education to industry and job outcomes.

The question higher education leaders must ask themselves is how they can make the greatest impact — a powerful, intentional impact that can scale.

To learn more about ways you can seamlessly start to expand your university's portfolio, visit www.accelered.com.

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AccelerEd is built on a history of innovation and a passion for education. We have deep roots in providing the expertise required to support and scale a broad set of solutions to attract learners and drive revenue growth.

We got our start developing and engineering innovative technology solutions to help the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) become one of the world's largest and most effective distance learning institutions. Our work has encompassed improving virtually every facet of higher education operations, from enrollment management and marketing to academic affairs, faculty management, and career services. We're a diverse team of academic, business and technology innovators with vast experience in higher education.

Simply put, AccelerEd enables institutions to leverage technology more efficiently, freeing educators and administrators to focus on student outcomes.

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