

The Online Higher Education Learning Collaborative Assists Fort Hays State University in Examining Feasibility of Proposed Program

Challenge:

Fort Hays State University was interested in launching a new Professional Science Master's Degree (P.S.M.) program but first wanted to examine the market landscape and demand for P.S.M. programs to determine its feasibility.

Solution:

The Online Higher Education Learning Collaborative (OHE-LC) research team examined available secondary sources to quickly analyze the market for P.S.M. programs. Among the questions addressed in the research were:

- What institutions currently offer P.S.M. programs?
- What institutions will be launching P.S.M. programs in the near future?
- What is the online market penetration for P.S.M. programs and what are potential barriers to entry?

Results:

Information from the research was used to put together a formal program proposal which was submitted to the Board of Regents, and final approval to launch the program was received in June 2008.

About Fort Hays State University:

Location: Hays, KS

Carnegie Classification: Masters

Ownership: Public Institution

Size: 8,250 Undergraduate Students (2007)

About the Online Higher Education Learning Collaborative:

(OHE-LC) undertakes market and operational research to help universities and colleges grow their online enrollments, develop strategies for online higher education, and reduce costs through increased operational efficiencies.

Identifying the Potential for a New Program

In the spring of 2007, Dr. Larry Gould, the Provost at Fort Hays State University, identified an interesting opportunity. After learning about a Professional Science Master's Degree (P.S.M.) from a peer at a conference, Dr. Gould realized that Fort Hays was well positioned to fill a potential niche for such a program in Kansas and the Midwest region.

Based on its mix of science, business, and professional research courses, it was clear, that a P.S.M. degree would tie in with the state's workforce development initiative. Dr. Gould later stated, the degree "would fit well into the heart of what Fort Hays State can do for the bio-science industry, particularly the university's role in human capital workforce development."

In order to convince key stakeholders of the program's viability, Dr. Gould turned to Eduventures Online Higher Education Learning Collaborative for the background information and data they needed to move forward.

Examining the Existing Marketplace

To get a sense of the current market for P.S.M. degrees and the prevalence and potential for online delivery, Fort Hays commissioned a Custom Inquiry report from the OHE-LC research team. Designed to assist members facing immediate challenges, Custom Inquiry provides members with secondary research investigations and high-level overviews of topics previously investigated for other OHE-LC members.

To assist Fort Hays, the OHE-LC research team quickly analyzed the market by reviewing available secondary data, including college and university Web sites, the Sloan Foundation's P.S.M. Web site, and other sources to verify the program's potential online penetration. Findings and recommendations were summarized by OHE-LC analysts in a concise research report issued to Dr. Gould.

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Dr. Larry Gould
Provost
Fort Hays State University

Data and Insight to Inform Decision-Making

The key takeaways from the Custom Inquiry report showed that there was tremendous opportunity for Fort Hays to launch the new program:

- The P.S.M. degree has gained significant momentum with nationwide increases in enrollments, diversification of offerings, and the number of institutions providing the degrees.
- The spread and future prominence of P.S.M.s appears eminent, due to expected demand among students and solid support from the Graduate School Council and the United States Senate, as well as financial support from the Sloan Foundation.
- Online market penetration is insignificant thus far despite the continuing boom in P.S.M. programs. Only three online providers are offering P.S.M. degrees – presenting an opportunity to capture enrollments via early market entry.

Receiving Approval to Launch the Program

Because the P.S.M. program would be offered on top of Fort Hays’ existing science degrees and courses, initially there was a great deal of internal skepticism surrounding the proposed new curriculum. However, after reviewing the research data, stakeholders saw there had been successful P.S.M. programs launched in other states, and given the lack of online penetration in the Midwest there was an opportunity for Fort Hays to enter the mix for both traditional students and online students for a P.S.M. degree.

Information from the report was used to put together the program proposal, which was submitted to the Board of Regents, and the program received final approval in June 2008. The proposal for program funding will be submitted this year, and Dr. Gould is hopeful that funding will go through, even in these “lean” times. In the meantime, FHSU plans to hire a director for the new program, who will be traveling to businesses across the state to get feedback, from an employer perspective, on what content they would like to see in the P.S.M. degree program. According to Dr. Gould, “The research allowed us to convince people both internally and externally that the P.S.M. was a doable project, and was instrumental in helping us gain the support we needed to launch the program.”