

The Continuing and Professional Education Learning Collaborative Assists the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in Determining Market Demand for Proposed Program

Challenge:

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville was considering the launch of a new online masters degree in communications and information but first wanted to better understand the composition of the target market and the potential market demand.

Solution:

The Continuing and Professional Education Learning Collaborative (CPE-LC) research team examined the potential market through several methodologies:

- Interviews with relevant professional associations and employers of potential graduates
- Review of labor trends data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics
- Examination of potential competitors
- Data-mining of CPE-LC database of interests and preferences of potential continuing education students

Results:

The research proved that demand for the program was not as high as expected. The decision to cancel the program saved time and money that would have been spent on the design and launch of the unwanted program.

About the University of Tennessee, Knoxville:

Location: Knoxville, TN

Carnegie Classification: Doctoral

Ownership: Public Institution

Size: 20,400 Undergraduate Students (2007)

About the Continuing and Professional Education Learning Collaborative:

CPE-LC helps universities and colleges identify new revenue and growth opportunities, improve organizational operational performance, and stay abreast of leading management practices within the continuing and professional education community.

Determining Program Viability

Dr. George H. Hoemann, the Assistant Dean of Distance Education & Independent Study at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville was facing a challenge. A new dean at the College of Communication and Information had proposed the launch of a new online masters degree program in communications and information with an emphasis in management. However, implementation of the program would be complicated given the fact the college was relatively new and had been created by the merger of two stand alone units and reorganized into four separate schools – the School of Advertising and Public Relations; the School of Communication Studies; the School of Information Sciences; and the School of Journalism and Electronic Media. Furthermore, while the office of Distance Education had a longstanding successful relationship with the School of Information Sciences, the other schools were hesitant, given a bad experience with distance learning in the late 1990's.

Knowing the complexities that would be involved in creating and running the proposed program, Dr. Hoemann first wanted to better understand the composition of its target market and determine whether sufficient market demand existed for such a program. To help him with this analysis, Dr. Hoemann turned to the Continuing and Professional Education Learning Collaborative (CPE-LC) for assistance.

Examining Market Demand

To help the University of Tennessee better understand the market for the proposed program the CPE-LC research team conducted research in several areas. First, several relevant professional associations and employers were interviewed to provide insight into career backgrounds and educational needs in the communications and information fields. Next, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics was analyzed to examine labor trends in related occupations in Tennessee. Institutions offering related programming were then scrutinized to better understand potential competitors and identify how the University of Tennessee could differentiate itself via program content and delivery methods. Finally, existing CPE-LC databases on the interests and preferences of potential continuing education students were examined to identify the demographics and preferred marketing channels of potential program applicants.

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Assistant Dean
Distance Education & Independent Study
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Data and Insight to Inform Decision-Making

The results of the research were surprisingly mixed. On the positive side, the economic data was encouraging with occupational trends in Tennessee suggesting an attractive job market for graduates of a masters degree in communications and information. In addition, while there existed eleven competing online programs in related communications and information disciplines, the majority of these programs were being marketed towards communication and media professionals and lacked the information sciences component included in the proposed program; therefore a market niche existed.

However, on the negative side, the interviews with the relevant professional associations and prospective employers were troubling. While some of the interviewees saw the value of the degree, most were more skeptical and felt the proposed program, as planned, would not be valued by the job market and would frustrate graduates of the program. According to Dr. Hoemann, he was initially surprised by this feedback but after reading the comments from these interviews he realized the comments made a lot of sense and support for the program in the field would not be as high as the university had originally hoped.

Saving Time and Money Not Spent on an Unsuccessful Program

After sharing the research with the Executive Committee at the college the decision was made not to launch the program. Said Hoemann “The decision was like finding that the glass was half-empty, but I’d rather know upfront that there will be no market demand for a proposed program than spend a year and a half in program development wasting time and money building something no one wants.”

The research has also had benefits in addition to the time, money and effort saved that would have been sunk into an unsuccessful program launch according to Dr. Hoemann. Said Hoemann “Like every other school, the need to identify alternate sources of revenue has become more important for us and distance education is seen as an important part of this effort. However, we need to be smart and use our limited resources wisely. Having data from an objective third party like the Learning Collaborative can be hugely helpful when navigating internal demands and requests. When faculty and administrators approach us about potential programs they want to launch I now share this research with them to demonstrate that market analysis needs to be done upfront and not at the end of the process – you need to find out what people want first.” In addition, the decision to not launch the program has given the Distance Education office increased credibility internally as it has demonstrated their desire to only launch programs that have a strong chance of success.

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