DeVry University’s iOptimize Integrated Learning System – Supporting the Best of Both Worlds

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Abstract

This article chronicles the experience of developing and implementing the iOptimize Integrated Learning System (ILS) across DeVry University’s graduate and undergraduate programs. The process included re-designing more than 300 courses, training more than 1500 faculty and administrators, and preparing more than 1000 students for the transition to iOptimize ILS.

As background, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) regionally accredits DeVry University. Through a system of 24 campuses, 43 university centers, and online delivery, the University offers career oriented undergraduate and graduate programs in technology, business, and management to more than 52,000 students (over 8,000 graduate and 44,000 undergraduate students).

Background to DeVry University’s iOptimize Integrated Learning System

iOptimize ILS is a model of instruction that integrates instructor guided onsite and online modalities in supporting the various components of teaching and learning. The combination of onsite class once per week with the support of faculty and fellow students through online interaction throughout the week most effectively supports the processes of teaching and learning.

Key to the effective implementation of the iOptimize ILS was a common course management system for online and onsite courses across the undergraduate and graduate schools. Faculty, students, and academic administrators all needed preparation to understand, accept, and, ideally, to embrace the iOptimize ILS.
Conceptual Framework

DeVry University’s iOptimize ILS model is based on semester credit hours but is delivered using 8-week sessions. The onsite and the online guided instruction is distributed as follow:

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<tr>
<th>Course Credit Hours</th>
<th>Weekly Onsite Guided Instruction</th>
<th>Weekly Online Guided Instruction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 credit hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
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<td>3 credit hours</td>
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Essential Elements For Adapting the iOptimize Integrated Learning System

The necessary components for successfully adapting this model of delivery have been identified as: Curriculum Redesign, Technology Tool, Faculty Training and Mentoring, Academic Leader Training, Student Training, and Quality Assurances.

1. Curriculum Redesign

Keller Graduate School of Management of DeVry University has used a successful model of centralized curriculum development, evaluation, assessment, and implementation for the past thirty plus years. The same established approach was used for development of iOptimize courses. For each graduate course, the existing curricula for the onsite and online course was examined. The examination was conducted by a specific curriculum development committee that consisted of experts in the content areas, faculty with experience teaching a course in the onsite and online modalities, the director of the program in which the given course was housed, and experts in instructional design.

2. Choice of Technology Tool

Online platforms and course management tools that could provide an efficient and manageable way of interacting with the students as well as the variety and user-friendliness of the platform’s course functions were considered. eCollege was chosen as our main online platform provider and the DeVry eLearning Platform (DEP) was developed.

The key DEP tools and functions include the manageability of course materials including documents and links to files, images or web links in context of their course materials, as well as threaded discussions areas, and the grade book that allows students online access to their grades.
3. Faculty Training and Mentoring

A strategic plan was developed and implemented to train graduate and undergraduate faculty to teach courses in the iOptimize model and to provide systematic support and mentoring during both the training process and delivery of iOptimize courses. The major components of the training plan included a) Training Facilitators, b) Implementing the Faculty Training Program and, c) Faculty Mentoring.

a) Training ‘Master’ Trainers:

To certify and train a large number of faculty, academic leaders, and staff to become Master Trainers of faculty, a ‘train-the-trainer’ model was used. The train-the-trainer program initially consisted of three courses: a Platform Technology Course (PT101), an iOptimize Methodology Course (OM101), and a third course, ‘How to Train and Mentor Faculty’ (HTM101). In turn these Master Trainers trained and certified 35 facilitators (Trainer/Mentors) to deliver PT101 and OM101 to faculty.

A similar strategy was adopted to train and certify academic leaders, including Curriculum Managers, Department Chairs, and Deans to train and mentor additional academic leaders.

b) Training Faculty:

From April to December 2003 more than 1400 faculty members were trained and certified to teach graduate and undergraduate iOptimize Integrated Learning System courses. The faculty’s training program included these elements:

- Specific electronic course ‘shell’ for each iOptimize course (Master Course Shell). Each Master shell is formatted for each of eight weeks and contains items such as lectures and/or presentations based upon terminal course objectives, course syllabus, examples of homework, exams, case studies, web-links, topics for discussion, and lesson plans.
- Training component focused on both the web-based course management tools (eCollege) and on the methodology of the (hybrid) iOptimize delivery.
- Mentoring support for the first eight hundred faculty training participants to assist in customizing the given master course shell into their own personal course shells.

A faculty member would be certified to teach iOptimize courses only after successfully completing all elements of the training including quizzes, assignments, and active participation in online threaded discussions.

c) Faculty Mentoring:

Initially, faculty mentoring was a very important component for the success of the iOptimize initiative. It provided one-on-one faculty support by a certified mentor. For 12 weeks each
faculty received four weeks of mentoring support prior to his or her first iOptimize course delivery and additional support for 8 weeks during the first iOptimize delivery.

As the numbers of certified faculty throughout the system increased and exceeded one thousand certified faculty members, the formal mentoring program was discontinued. The decision to discontinue formal mentoring was based upon the fact that faculty new to iOptimize could now access support and assistance via any number of certified colleagues and academic staff at their own campus or center.

d) **Ongoing Faculty Support:**

It became evident that once faculty had become familiar with and confident using the standard eCollege tools and functions to deliver their iOptimize courses, the need for further training developed. To meet this need and best support faculty in taking iOptimize teaching and learning to the next level, self-study tutorials were developed focusing on the more advanced functions of the platform. To date eight tutorials have been developed.

5. **Student Training**

In addition to training and supporting faculty, training and preparing students to participate in the iOptimize ILS courses was equally important. A number of strategies were developed and implemented to prepare students. These strategies included the following:

- Development and distribution of a comprehensive training course for students focused on the course management tool (eCollege platform)
- Open discussion forums with students, faculty, and support staff
- Establishment of the 24/7 Help Desk
- Development and distribution of answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs)

**The Challenges of the iOptimize Initiative**

Like any new initiative, and in the case of iOptimize ILS, an initiative impacting more than eleven thousand students, a variety of challenges were encountered.

- Lack of technology skills on the part of faculty and/or fear of learning new instructional tools and technologies.
- Geographical challenges—miles and time zones separating the iOptimize team and facilitators, administrators, and faculty.
- Initial platform issues—volume of work relative to eCollege server capacity.
- Incessant pace for iOptimize faculty training facilitators—timelines necessitated that training of faculty be a continuous process with new sections rolling out just as prior
sessions ended. Consequently, the teams of facilitators had to be scheduled continuously.

- Time constraints of faculty participants-faculty were required to participate in the courses at least every other day over 24 consecutive days, placing a strain on many faculty participants who also have full-time careers in industry.

- State requirements regarding the actual student class meeting hours. Such requirements differ from state to state.

Conclusion

Through the iOptimize Integrated Learning System, DeVry University provides students with both face-to-face in class interaction and online asynchronous teaching and learning. Students are thus able to access knowledge and become efficient and effective in processing information.

The iOptimize Integrated Learning System also provides opportunities for faculty and staff to develop and grow professionally, intellectually, and personally. Faculty and staff are gaining the necessary knowledge, skills, and education to best perform in an extraordinarily competitive business environment.

Today, the iOptimize ILS initiative continues to be a journey to enhance student performance, increase student satisfaction, improve student retention, and continue high quality placement of DeVry University graduates. We are confident that moving forward this paradigm will only continue to improve teaching and learning as well as student success.