

## The Time is Right for the Internet Course Exchange

The Internet Course Exchange (ICE) developed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) could not be rolling out during a more trying period: the economy is in a deep slump, institutions are slashing budgets, faculty vacancies are going unfilled and, to top it off, demands on institutions to educate and retrain students are increasing.

The timing ... could not be better. That is because ICE is a tool institutions can leverage to operate more efficiently and to advance strategic initiatives during these tight financial times. Consider these examples:

- ▶ Your institution has a strong online program in a specialty area. But it is under-enrolled and you do not know if you can justify the expense. ICE allows you to export empty seats to other institutions and generate revenue.
- ▶ A vacancy on your faculty leaves you with a course that no one on campus is qualified to teach. ICE allows you to see if other institutions have vacant seats in online versions of the same course that you can import and make available to your students.
- ▶ There is pressing need in your region to develop and deliver a program to help professionals meet certification requirements. But new resources are scarce. ICE allows you to identify other institutions in the same situation, to pool faculty expertise, and to share the work and expense of developing a new online program. The resulting program is more robust because it garners enrollments across multiple institutions.
- ▶ Your institution's new strategic plan calls for creating an organization that is responsive to change and that better utilizes technology to expand and enhance its academic offerings. Rather than watching this vision fade while waiting for "a better day," ICE offers affordable opportunities to push forward.

ICE is a comprehensive model and set of tools for institutions looking to expand online offerings through collaboration. Peruse the ICE website (<http://www2.wiche.edu/ice>) and you will develop an appreciation for the groundwork WICHE has put in place to facilitate exchange. ICE includes:

- ▶ a database that displays detailed information about individual online courses and the number of seats in them available for exchange;
- ▶ entire academic programs that are jointly developed and delivered by institutions to fulfill common curricular needs;
- ▶ detailed policies that ensure smooth handling of important administrative issues such as admission, registration, financial aid, and student fee collection;
- ▶ contacts at each participating institution who facilitate the exchange of course seats, answers questions, and act as liaisons.
- ▶ a forum for jointly addressing common educational needs.

Delve a little deeper and you begin to see the strengths of a model that was developed by higher education institutions for higher education institutions. Its design addresses sensitive institutional concerns as well as fulfilling course and program needs. The following top three principles guided ICE's development: 1) a student-centered approach, 2) fulfillment of regional accreditation requirements, and 3) academic quality and accountability.

## The Call for Collaboration

ICE is a forum for institutions to discuss common educational demands, to identify synergies among institutions, and to forge collaborations. In February 2009 this took the form of Montana State University, Boise State University, Northern Arizona University, University of Alaska-Anchorage and University of Wyoming bringing their faculty together for a webinar focusing on the common need to develop online courses aimed at strengthening secondary math and science education. These math-science consortium members are looking beyond exchanging seats in courses and are exploring jointly developing an online program. A consortium already exists for rural social work education. Other institutions are considering forming consortia around additional common subjects. A state system has inquired about utilizing ICE to devise its own statewide online consortium.

It can take several thousand dollars and many months for a faculty member to develop an online course. An entire program likely requires additional faculty lines, plus significant start-up time. Given today's climate, these investments of money and time are simply not possible for most institutions. But even when the economic conditions are good, collaborating across institutions to leverage existing resources only makes sense. The economy of scale that can be gained from a consortium program can make impossible programs possible, expensive programs affordable and marginal programs solid.

The driving forces behind ICE are 1) maximizing resources through collaboration and 2) the boundless potential of online courses. Again, the timing for ICE could not be better. In the span of one week this February there were several declarations for institutions to collaborate, rather than compete, during this period of scarce resources. "While partnerships with business, elementary and secondary schools, and governments are crucial, perhaps the most important links are between universities," said Ohio State University President Gordon Gee in his address to the American Council on Education. "We must see one another as allies, not opponents. Sharp elbows and zero-sum thinking are utterly useless in the work to fuel our country's resurgence." Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University, was quoted in the Chronicle of Higher Education about the partnerships his university has with other institutions to develop new programs, "You cannot go at it by thinking the world stops at this campus. No university is self-sufficient."

Online programs present the ideal opportunity for institutions to work together. Gone are the geographic barriers that would typically stymie attempts to share faculty and pool students. Maggi Murdock, the University of Wyoming's Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Outreach School, sums it up well. "At the University of Wyoming, we are aware that we have some unique courses and degree programs that may have the capacity to serve students throughout the region. Likewise, we know that UW does not have all the resources it needs to offer its students everything they seek. Thus, joining with other WICHE ICE schools to share teaching and learning resources is a necessity that can now be realized through e-learning technology."

## An Effective Model

While the possibilities for academic collaborations are infinite, the behind-the-scenes work that must be done to make a consortium function can be eye-opening. Institutions that have launched such programs without utilizing ICE can attest to the countless hours spent wrangling the details of admission, registration, financial aid, fee payment, credit transfer and assorted minutia. If not tended to correctly, such details can be the undoing of an otherwise good academic collaboration. Oftentimes students suffer because institutions cannot get their processes to align. Fortunately, ICE offers an administrative solution.

The key to the ICE model is that institutions agree up front to the important learning outcomes of each course and the way it is taught. Before there is any importing or exporting of class seats, the appropriate academic department chairs must ensure that courses taught by the other institution are truly interchangeable with their own. An important distinction here is that chairs are not evaluating these courses for transfer; the chairs are determining whether to endorse these courses as their departments' own. If a chair approves, the imported course will bear the stamp of that department, that college. The course is set up in the institution's own registration system and is reflected on its own transcript.

This up-front focus on learning outcomes results not only in sound academic programming, it paves the way for smooth administrative processing. Because institutions set up imported courses as their own in their student record systems, there is no need for students to worry about additional admission applications, registering through another college, or getting their financial aid manually adjusted. The usual headaches surrounding credit transfer disappear. This approach works equally well whether it's a single course or an entire program that has been jointly developed. ICE is also flexible enough to allow institutions to customize agreements to meet unique needs of a particular consortium. Best of all, ICE can be an institution's administrative solution for a wide variety of collaborations, present and future. There is no need to reinvent the wheel each time a new opportunity presents itself.

### Effect on Enrollment

Given today's rocky financial landscape, colleges and universities are wary of introducing a new variable into the equation that determines their enrollment and student fee revenue. A common question about ICE is "Why would I want to give enrollments away by having my students enroll in another institution's course?" The answer is simple: you don't. The following rules apply in ICE:

- ▶ Institutions that are importing courses are buying and setting up those courses as their own and, therefore, count the student enrollments in them (thus they are called the "enrolling institution");
- ▶ Institutions that are exporting courses are the "teaching institution" and receive fee revenue, not enrollments.

This is truly a win/win arrangement. Institutions that are importing courses are creating additional capacity for enrollment; institutions that are exporting courses are leveraging excess capacity to generate revenue. Almost all ICE institutions do a combination of both, importing courses where they can't meet student demand and exporting classes where they have empty seats. Institutions exercise complete control over their participation – down to the number of seats in a specific course. Given these arrangements, is there a reason a seat in a good online course should ever be left empty?

For those institutions collaborating to deliver entire programs, they are expanding their program inventory and capacity in ways they might not otherwise be able to afford. While consortium agreements vary, a common arrangement is for each institution in the consortium to develop and deliver a certain number of courses in an agreed-upon curriculum, which all institutions adopt and transcript as their own. Each institution then registers in this program a certain number of its own students, whom that institution gets to count in their enrollment. Institutions share in the work (the course development and delivery) and the rewards (the enrollments and the revenue). Considering common educational needs across the West, the possibilities for joint degrees and certificates seem endless.

Officials who are concerned about losing enrollments as a result of an online exchange and/or consortium might be surprised to find out that they already have hundreds of students on their campus who are simultaneously enrolled in online courses being offered by other institutions. (Ask your registrar for a Clearinghouse report of your students who are simultaneously enrolled at multiple institutions.)

Students are hungry for the flexibility that online courses provide and are supplementing their university schedules with online offerings from other providers. Because these transactions are occurring outside of any consortium, the home institution has no way of capturing these enrollments. Additionally, there are those students who have left the home institution to enroll entirely in another provider's online program. Participating in ICE is a way for institutions to better satisfy student's desire for online options and to recapture lost enrollments. Is there an institution anywhere that wouldn't benefit from more online offerings? Online courses and programs are among the first to fill at universities. Increasing the number of quality online offerings results in expanded access, greater flexibility for students, and stronger enrollment. ICE offers institutions the ability to ramp up their online programming.

### Getting Traction on ICE

The more institutions that actively participate in ICE, the more powerful a resource it becomes. Institutions are not even close to realizing its full potential. WICHE encourages more institutions to become involved. Every institution should assess what ICE has to offer. To do so, take these steps:

1. Browse the ICE website;
2. Share this article with your deans' council, distance education director, and continuing education leader;
3. Have a campus discussion about: a) strategic initiatives you could advance using ICE; b) online programs that you would like to jointly develop with other institutions; c) online courses that you can import and/or export; d) existing online consortia that you might want to administer through ICE; e) and any questions or concerns about ICE.
4. Contact Pat Shea, Director, WICHE ICE (303-541-0302, pshea@wiche.edu) and share the results of your institution's discussion.

If you decide to become an ICE member, you will need to establish implementation teams to ready your institution for course exchanges, program collaborations, or both. Once again, you can leverage WICHE's experience; there is a recommended implementation plan on the ICE website. If you have attempted multi-institutional collaborations in the past, you will appreciate the step-by-step advice ICE provides for gaining traction.

Lastly, know that other ICE members are available to answer questions and help you along. Consult with steering board members at participating institutions. They welcome your involvement. Ask questions, explain your goals, and share your concerns. After all, ICE is all about collaboration. Sharp elbows have been replaced with extended hands.

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