

Bridging International Boundaries through Inter-collegial Web-based Programs

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Abstract

The distance learning campus of National American University has evolved from offering a limited number of Web-based courses in the winter term of 1996, into a full fledged entity conferring approved undergraduate and graduate degree awards to students throughout the world.

This paper presents information on the development, design, and delivery of National American University's Best of Both Worlds Instructional Delivery Program™, a collaborative international distance education model. Specific detail on how this unique learning model fulfills the recognized pedagogical and regulatory components of successful Web-based instruction will provide the manager of distance education enterprises a complete view of the operation.

The worldwide e-Learning sector is continuing to emerge as the world community begins to recognize, and subsequently embrace the opportunities available through a quality distributed learning endeavor. New evolutions of the Internet are expected to continue to transform the education and knowledge markets. More than ever before, today's adaptation of distance education seems to offer an analogous academic alternative to the traditional classroom experience for many students wishing to become involved in a remote learning opportunity.

Many of the recent developments that have allowed for the evolving method of delivery in distance learning have been well documented as technology continues to impact the landscape of distance education,

particularly in the global higher learning setting. Distance education programs are becoming somewhat of a necessity for universities around the globe as they strive to meet the changing needs and interests of a constituent base that voice a wide range of expectations in their academic pursuits. Barriers of time and place that once presented obstacles to enrollment are now overcome through the relative flexibility found in Web-based delivery. The increasingly competitive higher learning market is escalating in an evident fashion, and it is projected that the inclination toward supporting these ventures will only continue to manifest. Accordingly, interests to share research and best practices for today's distance education have been well received by the developing entities.

National American University

A private university established in 1941 in Rapid City, South Dakota, National American University has expanded to now include ten campuses and three extension locations in six states in the Midwest region of the United States. In addition to the on-ground program opportunities, many NAU students attend the distance learning campus. The academic programs offered through distance learning extend the university's stated mission "to provide career education to students of diverse backgrounds, interests, and abilities."

After years of offering the more conventional modalities of distance education (correspondence, audio and video tape, independent study) the university leadership recognized the vast potential for

the development of the World Wide Web as a learning tool and began to appropriate fiscal resources toward the development of a solid system of enriched distance learning applications. NAU first launched online offerings in 1996, embracing the concept of “just my way” learning. In fact, NAU was one of the first regionally accredited universities in the nation approved to offer full degree programs via a web-based format.

In June of 1999, the Commission on Higher Learning approved NAU’s distance learning methodology allowing academic programs through the Bachelors degree granting level to be delivered entirely online. A subsequent request for a change in institutional status to enhance NAU’s on-ground MBA program through the introduction of an online component was approved by the Commission in 2001. These approvals effectively increased the span and range of program delivery, from the limitations of the residential campus option, to an electronically enhanced program available to students around the world. NAU was actively delivering coursework on-line at a time when other institutions were simply theorizing about the impact that the World Wide Web might have on the future of education.

During the initial years of operation, NAU’s online program grew exponentially to the current day where it effectively serves thousands of students each year from throughout North America. The appeal of a reliable e-delivery infrastructure has also attracted contemporary institutes of higher learning who have contracted with NAU to transparently deliver curriculum under their own private label.

As with many other distance education programs, NAU’s virtual campus has evolved in response to increasing enrollment and the expanding range of services necessary to effectively provide for students, regardless of time and place. Rapidly evolving technology has allowed the

university to serve students who, because of geographical or scheduling constraints, are unable to attend classes offered on the university’s physical campuses and extension centers. NAU has made a substantial investment in an advanced delivery system and accompanying infrastructure to ensure a dependable learning experience by creating an effective online venue as evidenced by:

??A history of rich online student achievement as validated by an active program of institutional assessment demonstrating continuous obtainment of measurable performance indicators at the undergraduate and graduate level.

??A pedagogically sensitive, planned delivery design that enhances learner discourse in the asynchronous and synchronous modalities.

??A robust and reliable electronically mediated infrastructure, including extensive accessibility to a substantial collection of electronic resources.

??A progressive provision of student and faculty support services by means of multiple interface options, regardless of time or geographical location.

Based on the University’s success in disseminating full degree Web-based programming to multiple domestic campus locations, it was determined that an opportunity to expand the online learning enterprise toward international program affiliations may be a viable service extension. Since 1998, agreements with institutions from around the world have allowed the university to develop higher learning opportunities on an increasing global scale including universities in South America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

Best of Both Worlds IDP™

National American University’s Best of Both Worlds-Internet Delivery Platform

(IDP)TM provides international students with a realistic option to combine the curricula of a qualified home country institution with that of a recognized North American university. Through this progressive academic offering, students are able to remain in their home county and attend a local college while being consecutively enrolled in an accredited degree program from the United States through electronic delivery.

The development of a Best of Both Worlds IDPTM arrangement generally originates through contact with, or by, a higher learning organization expressing their interest in the expansion of transitional opportunities for their student population. Over the years, NAU has developed a sound qualification process to which interested parties must satisfactorily achieve in order to progress beyond the initial phase of preliminary dialog. Qualities to be addressed during this initial qualification phase include a review of the agency's mission and characteristics, their level of registry with the appropriate government authorities or regulatory bodies, and evidence of long-term fiscal stability. In addition, professional references from the peer community attesting to the integrity of the academic operations are also widely solicited, as well as preliminary indication of an appropriate governmental endorsement for the blended approach to program delivery.

Following a thorough review of curriculum, qualified institutions may formally articulate their curricula with NAU in the fields of business or information technology. Subjects are mutually defined to be delivered by NAU with an interest to enrich, or extend, the degree plan of the host institution while also achieving the necessary residency requirements for an NAU degree award. These subjects are most often sequenced for delivery under a consecutive schedule over the span of the plan of study, leading to the time efficient satisfaction of program requirements for each of the

schools. Having successfully satisfied the graduation requirements of each of the academic institutions, the ultimate award outcome is the conference of two separate degrees from each of the collegial entities.

National American University's Best of Both Worlds-IDPTM combines the highly developed technology of the Internet with conventional classroom instruction. The result provides students with a truly global experience through a learning environment that leverages the full benefit of the "best" of both on-site and online instruction. By harnessing the might of emerging technology, the online faculty provides students with an interactive learning environment that surpasses the boundaries of the traditional classroom setting. Through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous interaction, students are actively engaged in educational dialog and development with instructors and classmates at times and locations despite geographical boundaries.

Online Asynchronous Interaction

Asynchronous interaction among students and the NAU instructor, including delivery of course content, is provided to students through the WebCTTM delivery platform. Using WebCTTM, students access online courses delivered in computer labs provided and supported by the international affiliate ensuring that reliable Internet connectivity is more readily available.

Online Synchronous Interaction

Synchronous interaction among students and the NAU instructor, together with delivery of additional course material, is provided to students primarily through the use of InterwiseTM technology. This proven software application allows for dynamic synchronous voice interaction over the Internet with minimal bandwidth requirements. Using this platform, the NAU instructor, students, and the local facilitator

are able to communicate in real-time to enhance the students learning experience. Over the past few years, Interwise™ has proven to be a reliable and effective media for NAU's domestic real time Web-based instruction. Enhanced features including application sharing and white board imagery have gained the favor of students and faculty alike. Students who were unable to participate in a particular Interwise™ session would be able to download a recorded file of the session and view it at another time, or as many times as necessary to satisfy the students individual learning needs.

Face-to-Face Facilitated Group Sessions

A primary component to this enhanced online model is the requirement for students to engage in a more traditional interaction through face-to-face sessions conducted by a local facilitator, under the direction of the NAU online instructor, at designated in-country locations.

In accordance with the Best of Both Worlds IDP™ model, classes meet at regular intervals each week of the term using facilities furnished by the affiliate institution. The NAU instructor provides instruction and supervision virtually, while the local

facilitator is present as an additional support resource.

The affiliate institution's facilitator works very closely with the online NAU instructor, providing students with an additional resource to answer questions pertaining to subject matter and issues concerning WebCT, as well as online projects and assignments that students must complete. The facilitator moderates group discussions, as directed by the online NAU instructor, and provides additional opportunities for students to engage in the review and discussion of materials they are studying. The facilitator also may serve as a mentor/tutor for students and, together with the online NAU instructor, offers an additional resource for students in completing their academic courses in a timely manner consistent with the course requirements. The local facilitator provides the additional educational benefit to the student of being able to relate practical issues and case studies appropriate to the respective regional business culture. The following representation amplifies the elements described above.

Table 1. NAU Distance Delivery Format

Distance Delivery Format	
Asynchronous Interaction	Synchronous Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WebCT™ Delivery Platform Delivery of Course Content NAU Graduate Instructor/Student Interaction Student/Student Interaction Group Interaction Including Facilitator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interwise™ Delivery Platform Real-time enrichment of Course Content NAU Instructor/Student Interaction Group Interaction Including Facilitator Facilitated Face-to-Face Group Sessions

Advantages of the Best of Both Worlds IDP™ Model

One of the major advantages of this hybrid delivery model is that it embraces the assurance of quality. The delivery of the curriculum is consistent with that of the domestic campus-based and online programs, so replication of the outcomes can be further ensured. Similarly, admissions procedures and instructional supervision remains the responsibility of the NAU distance learning campus in collaboration with the local affiliate, helping to guarantee uniformity in standard and protocol across the NAU system.

The blended delivery approach, with the benefit of the on-site facilitation, further engages the student in collaborative learning and maintains a highly personalized academic environment. In addition, facilitated sessions leverage the business world experience of appropriately credentialed local mentors, lending a regionally sensitive cultural perspective to the academic endeavor.

The university's technological expertise for distributing online education is another advantage of the delivery format. The university has provided online education for many years, and the existing technological infrastructure and expertise helps to assure the continuation of a quality experience for international students studying online.

A Typical Week in the International Online Program

As defined above, the proposed model has been fashioned from the domestic online program. Having completed the free online student orientation, students are familiar with, and fully prepared for, the electronic learning experience.

During a typical week in the online program, the student will first log into the WebCT™ software and review the requirements for that week. During this time,

the student also will be able to read the online lecture notes and begin to prepare for the week's assignments. To ensure reliable Internet connectivity, this activity will be made widely available through the local affiliate's computer lab facilities, but students may also have additional access to their Web-based class at an off campus location, whether it be their home, place of work or the local Internet café, or any source with an active Internet connection rate of 28.8 or greater.

During the typical week, the also student has the opportunity to take part in supplemental live lectures delivered over the World Wide Web. Such synchronous interaction among students and the NAU instructor is made possible through the use of Interwise™. Using this application, instructors and students may interact in a real time mode, thus enhancing the students' learning experience. Demonstrating a commitment to innovation, NAU is recognized as being one of the first institutions of higher learning in the world to effectively incorporate Interwise™ technology in their on-line course delivery package.

During midweek, students will be able to interact further with their local peer group and facilitator, and oftentimes the NAU instructor as students are also mandated to participate in assignments and react to the material being covered either through the use of asynchronous threaded discussion or email. This interaction provides an opportunity for the students to work together and query the instructor/facilitator on the material being covered and the requirements for that week's assignments. Students also will be actively discussing the topics and issues in the discussion forum of the WebCT™ software. At the end of the week, students will complete and submit individual and group assignments.

The Best of Both Worlds IDP™ program reflects a similar rendition of

NAU's domestic online program offering, with the sole exception of the global placement of the students being served and the required supportive services offered by the affiliate institutions.

Involvement of International Affiliations

Over the past decade, NAU has developed strong relationships with institutions of higher learning from around the world. The first of such affiliations was in 1989 when an agreement with Human International University Japan was consummated. This affiliation continues to date. These associations, in select instances, have led to additional collaborative agreements between the institutions. A substantial investment of resource is directed toward international affiliate development, and continued project growth and sustainability, as evidenced by the regular onsite visitations conducted by members of the administrative, academic and international affairs staff.

In order to achieve the best results for students and participating educational institutions alike, and in accordance with the principles of good practice in overseas international education programs for non-US nationals, the following requirements guide NAU in identifying and qualifying prospective international affiliates. Candidates for Best of Both Worlds IDP affiliation will:

1. Offer curriculum that is philosophically, academically, and operationally comparable to the NAU programs.
2. Possess a commitment to high quality instruction within a caring and supportive learning environment and offer programs that are professionally and/or technically oriented, consistent with NAU's core values.
3. Make available official documents validating the institutions approval/licensure by its Ministry of

Education or other appropriate approval body.

4. Identify an administrative liaison, which will interface with NAU to facilitate timely decision-making throughout the term of the agreement.
5. Have access to an academically prepared student population with interests and abilities commensurate with the university's enhanced delivery model.
6. Have the financial capability to launch, develop, and market the program. It is desirable that the university/college make available financial performance records for the past five years. This is essential to ensure that students entering the affiliated program are assured that appropriate resources are available to support the program through their completion date.
7. Have access to requisite technical infrastructure for offering courses via a reliable Internet service through a dedicated connection rate of 128k or greater.

United by a common interest in the development of educational exchange in higher learning, the expansion of current cultural, and cooperative exchanges between the institutions and the furtherance of the mission and purposes of each institution, a small number of formal affiliations are currently documented through contractual or general memorandum of understanding arrangement with NAU. Some of these institutions include:

~~///~~ *Skyline College* – United Arab Emirates. A private degree granting college located in Sharjah, and operating under the authorization of the UAE Ministry of Education. Skyline offers business certificate, diploma and degree award programs to more than 1,000 students representing 35 countries.

<http://www.skyline.ac.ae/newhome.htm>

Skyline Business School – India. Skyline Business School is a branch campus of Manipal Academy of Higher Education, a deemed university under the University Grants Commission, Ministry of Human Resource Development, and Government of India.

Universidad del Mar – Chile. Universidad del Mar is recognized as an institution of higher learning by the Chilean government according to the provision of its law-enforced decree, and is registered under number thirty-two in the Chilean Universities Register. With an enrollment of 1500 students, the institution has nine campus locations.

<http://www.udelmar.cl/>

Kenyatta University – Kenya. A public university located near Nairobi, Kenyatta University is the second largest university in Kenya with an enrollment of 8,000 students. The University offers diploma through doctoral awards in the areas of education, arts, science, home economics, environmental studies and business and commerce.

<http://www.ku.ac.ke/>

Pomor State University - one of the largest universities in the European North of Russia, PSU is recognized in Russia and countries of Barents region as a full member of the Eurasian Association of Universities. The university was founded in 1932 as the evening pedagogical university. In 1993 the university gained international status, and in 1996 the university was renamed to Pomor State University, receiving the status of a classical university.

<http://www.pomorsu.ru/english/index.html>

The above referenced list of current international affiliates is offered only as a representative sample of close collegial counterparts that NAU has developed up to the present time. However, this summary is not intended to be an exclusive record of potential associations or geographical areas from which future development may well realize additional qualified institutions. In actuality, recent market reviews conducted by the university have identified populations of underserved students in countries throughout South America, Asia and Europe, and additional qualified institutions have requested that they be considered for affiliate candidacy if, and when, National American University is positioned to expand the Best of Both Worlds IDP™ online to other regions of the world.

Availability of Learning Resources and Support Services

Student Support Services

Student support services influence the accessibility and convenience of distance learning and affect student success. Every reasonable effort is made to further ensure that the scope of services available to students enrolled in distance learning courses is consistent with services available to students attending classes at a physical campus. The primary difference is found in the collaborated modality between NAU and its international counterpart, by which many student support services will be available directly through the affiliate institutions. Of course, students will also access many student services by means of electronic contact with NAU. In addition, continued personal contact with the local facilitator serves to reinforce the quality of services.

Pre-admission Assistance

Admissions, student accounts, and student services personnel are available to parties requesting information either online

through NAU or through the affiliate campus. These professionals are very well versed and knowledgeable regarding the available programs and the standard practices from the point of application through enrollment.

Free Student Orientation

All new students are required to complete the NAU online orientation prior to being registered for course work. This free orientation course provided by NAU, presents an introduction to the virtual environment and the WebCT? platform. In the orientation course, students complete a sample assignment, take a customized quiz, enter into a discussion group with other Orientation students and a student success coordinator, design and launch their own personal web page, and send private mail to the student success coordinator. The experience also allows for a self-directed learner assessment, reviews the disciplines of a successful distant learner and provides tips for success in distance programs.

Course Registration

International students are assisted with registration through the affiliate institution where a student support representative provides individualized assistance. Local student support representatives are appropriately trained by NAU staff colleagues, and supported by their NAU counterparts, to assist new and returning students with the processes from registration origination to completion. The student may also register for classes directly online.

Through NAU's web site, a student has access to a variety of necessary forms to address course selection, registration, textbook acquisition, and other items associated with enrollment. Through this process, students may also add or drop classes, change student information and complete graduation applications.

Academic Advising

On-ground advisers, working with the academic dean for the distance learning campus, are instrumental in the provision of academic advising. Each quarter, the academic advisor personally contacts students to assist him or her in the selection of their courses for the next quarter. Students are also provided with academic planning services. Because the courses for each academic year are projected two years in advance, student cohorts are established to lend greater efficiency in program completion. Core courses are offered on a routine cycle and elective courses are available in an alternating pattern. Through academic planning, a student is provided with a program of study that guides them in determining the most appropriate courses to take each quarter until graduation.

Learning Resource Center

National American University's Learning Resource Center (LRC) assists students, faculty and staff in finding current information and helps them in achieving their research goals by providing them with free and unlimited access to electronic research databases. Many databases are updated daily in order to maintain timely information. Through the World Wide Web, all faculty and enrolled students have unlimited use of the databases through remote access. The learning resource center web page, provides links to ProQuest®, Infotrac®, SDLN, netLibrary, Net Advantage, Encyclopedia Britannica, and OCLC's First Search. Additional links on the LRC page include popular search engines, metasearch engines, and other useful URLs.

The learning resource center director continuously monitors available electronic resources to provide the best possible resources for all students. To increase its resources and maximize the amount of information available to students and faculty, the university is moving from a primarily

paper collection to digital media with a core of print media. These resources are available to all students, faculty, and staff, regardless of geographical location. Students will also benefit from having local access to the holdings of the affiliate institution.

Connectivity Campaigns

One of the past concerns for remote learning arrangements is the feeling of isolation by the learner. Recognizing the potential implications for such a disconnect, NAU sponsors a variety of efforts to recognize the Best of Both Worlds IDP™ student and their official standing with NAU. Such activities include quarterly newsletter-Worldwide- specifically designed for Best of Both Worlds IDP™ students, individualized student handbooks, program specific marketing materials that highlight the affiliate arrangement, student promotional items, and regular visitations by NAU administrative staff and faculty. Such offerings further bridge the distance, not only between learners and their faculty, but also between students and their university.

Conclusion

As illustrated in this report, the distance education program at NAU has evolved into a successful campus providing approved degree programs to students throughout the world consistent with its mission and purposes. The university has successfully anticipated and met the challenges encountered during such growth. The institution has provided an effective organizational structure, dedicated adequate resources, and collaborated with other institutions of higher learning to provide coherent and rigorous Web-based instruction and support programs. National American University is prepared to accept future challenges and opportunities in virtual learning through an innovative and confident manner based upon extensive experience in the field.