

NOTE:

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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
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CASE STUDY for the *Commonwealth of Learning*

A Joint Degree Program between Regis University, Denver, Colorado, USA and the
University of Ireland at Galway, Republic of Ireland

By William J. Husson

Vice President and Academic Dean: School for Professional Studies
Regis University, Denver, Colorado, USA

Regis University is a Jesuit, Catholic University located in Denver, Colorado, USA. The University was founded in 1877 and has provided liberal arts based education mostly at the undergraduate level through all those years. In 1978, the University introduced a variety of graduate and undergraduate degree programs designed to serve working adult learners in a variety of non-traditional formats. Today the adult programs division of the University, named the School for Professional Studies (SPS), serves some 13,000+ learners on an annual basis. The University has 7 extension sites and operations in Colorado, Wyoming, and Nevada. This past year over 7,000 students participated in one or more online courses offered by the School for Professional Studies. Online learners come from all states in the USA and from a growing number of countries around the world.

The basic characteristics of the learning models used in the Regis University SPS programs are accelerated undergraduate and graduate degree programs, the extensive use of adjunct faculty, and a unified curricular approach. These characteristics are enhanced by a strong customer service orientation, and the extensive use of partnership arrangements. Most classes are offered in accelerated 8 week terms, 2 per semester, over 3 semesters annually. Since most students are employed full-time, they are counseled to take no more than 1 class per term. This allows students to concentrate their learning on one course at a time. Much of the class instruction is given by adjunct faculty. These faculty are chosen both on their appropriate credentials and their rich experiential backgrounds. A centralized curriculum is utilized to facilitate the standardization and complex logistics of such a comprehensive program. Since the average age of the adult student is about 36, matters of appropriate, friendly, respectful, and efficient service are paramount.

With about 12,500 students, The National University of Ireland (NUI) at Galway was founded in 1845 as one of the Queen's Colleges. The University boasts academically strong programs of teaching and research throughout its seven faculties, namely, Arts, Science, Commerce, Engineering, Celtic Studies, Medicine and Health Sciences, and Law. Irish Studies is a designated Area of excellence at the University.

Recently, Regis University set as one of its goals to expand its international outreach. To that end, several years ago, a number of senior administrators visited many of the universities in Ireland to determine any potential partnership opportunities. A friendly working relationship was established with personnel at the University of Ireland at Galway. NUI, Galway had established a number of creative programs designed to serve “mature” learners trying to enter the higher education system in Ireland. They had also developed strong industry-related educational programs with an eye toward economic development in Ireland.

Over a period of a couple of years, visits ensued between the two universities related to adult learning and entrepreneurial approaches to higher education. During that time both universities speculated on how they might begin to work together on projects that would enhance both institutions. Regis University was motivated by the desire to expand internationally and to continue to grow and develop its programs for working adult learners in a wider context. NUI, Galway was motivated by a desire to expand some of its showcase programs and to develop new models for serving mature learners in Ireland and Europe. NUI, Galway was also anxious to begin to develop the technology for online courses.

There are a number of reasons why universities can approach partnerships with each other or with other organizations: 1) to extend resources, 2) capital infusion, 3) affinity, 4) idea sharing, 5) growth and expansion, and 6) enhanced reputation. *Extend resources:* Oftentimes universities can extend their resources by combining their strengths with other institutions and that extension will create a wealth of resources that are greater than the simple combination of the individual resources of each institution. By the combination of the resources, the universities merge the cultural and academic resources of the two entities to create a stronger unified resource for a common purpose. *Capital Infusion:* Partnerships can be created to take advantage of the capital of the other organization. That capital may be monetary or informational, such as intellectual property. *Affinity:* When two organizations work together, there needs to be a sense that each is enhanced in one way or another simply by working with the other. It may be reputation, predetermined inroads, accreditations, or the like. *Idea sharing:* When two organizations determine that they can co-create programs or services, it motivates each partner to bring to the table new ideas that can be molded and shaped in a cooperative effort. *Growth:* Expansion of programs or influence is a strong motivation for working with partners. The brand identity of each organization can be enhanced and used to support significant growth to new markets and services. *Reputation:* Each partner needs to bring to the table their strengths and what they have become known for in their spheres of influence.

There are a number of goals that can be achieved in partnership arrangements between universities. These goals range from student/faculty sharing to articulations of credit bearing programs to actual joint ventures. Most of these arrangements do not qualify as true partnerships. However, the joint venture model does create a unique partnership opportunity. NUI, Galway and Regis decided to pursue this type of arrangement. In the business world, two organizations will often combine their strengths in a particular area to work together on projects that will increase sales and enhance the strength of both companies.

Regis and NUI, Galway discussed a two step process. The first step would be to create a joint certificate/diploma in Irish Studies; the second, a more comprehensive joint graduate degree program in Software Engineering and Information Systems. The Irish Studies Certificate program would provide an opportunity for NUI, Galway to extend their reach into an area of faculty expertise and national pride. It would also familiarize the Irish faculty with online learning methodologies. For Regis, the project would assist the University in working out arrangements in an international context, expand the scope and reach of its online programs, and bring modest growth with the potential to expand into other larger growth areas.

The Irish Studies Joint program is a wonderful success at this time. It has met or exceeded the expectations of both institutions. Five courses have been developed. The first four courses take a multidisciplinary approach to four major historical periods in Ireland. The fifth course serves as a capstone with an emphasis on social and political issues in contemporary Ireland. The program was launched in September 2002 and has been working successfully since that time. The first certificates were awarded by the President of NUI, Galway on March 18th, 2004 at a special ceremony at Regis University in Denver, Colorado.

The courses were designed by faculty experts at NUI, Galway and were converted to rich media online context by instructional designers from Regis University. Regis provided all the production components, including extensive filming in Ireland. Since each of the first four courses are multidisciplinary, several faculty members participate in the various grading components of each course. This technique has involved many faculty who would not otherwise have familiarized themselves with either distance learning or online instruction. By agreement most of the marketing and advertising components are the responsibility of Regis. Regis and NUI, Galway both share equally in the expenses and profits from this program.

Some of the issues that have been most problematic involve the financial planning and the academic cultural differences between the two systems. Both institutions have worked diligently to piece together a financial plan that outlines the projected enrollments, expenses, anticipated revenue, and sharing mechanisms between the two schools. In time it has become clear which mechanisms work best and both schools have had to adjust their thinking and their planning.. In the academic arena, the instructional and grading components have had to be adjusted to take into account the differences between the Irish and American academic systems. Faculty have been most helpful in designing work-arounds when necessary, oftentimes leading to new innovative approaches that serve both systems well.

As a result of this cooperative effort, both institutions began planning a process leading to the development of a joint graduate degree in Software Engineering and Information Systems. The thinking that motivated this project was to combine the successful online Computer Information Technology graduate program at Regis (specializing in database management) with a European approach to software engineering education. The program which is now set to begin in Ireland in September 2004 will include 10 standard modules and will be completed with a final capstone research and/or development project. Each university will contribute half of the required modules and each will offer a version of the capstone course. Students will earn academic credit from both universities and the degree will be conferred by

both institutions. The students will be considered as students of each institution throughout the program. The program will be delivered entirely online in accelerated eight week terms. The program will be delivered over two academic years on a part-time basis, though it is designed in a modular fashion which will allow students to complete it in other time frames. Examinations will be held at the end of each eight week session.

The planning process has taken place at multiple levels and with multiple groups at both universities. The academic process began with faculty visits and conversations over the development of an appropriate curriculum, faithful to the faculties of both schools. Each faculty has supported the project and followed all the standard approval processes. It was determined that the principal marketing effort would be the responsibility of Regis. To that end Regis commissioned a marketing study of the acceptability of online graduate education in the countries of the European Union. This study concluded that many of the countries and most of the major employers will support quality online education in the computer sciences area.

Students will be able to use both libraries simultaneously. The Library staff has had to determine the most efficient way that people from North America to Europe can have ready access to library resources online at any time of the day or night. The administrative staff of both universities has been working to meet the challenges of an efficient admissions process, registration, and tuition collection systems. New questions of e-commerce are being addressed by both entities. These questions will lead to solutions that both universities will be able to use in the future to serve their respective populations better.

This project has been able to overcome a series of obstacles that usually color any discussion of partnership: cultural differences, distance, internal politics, governance, and even terminology. To facilitate this project, a glossary of terms was developed so that personnel on each side of the Atlantic would be familiar with the terms used by each institution. One of the greatest problems has been the distance and the time zone issues. There are 7 hours difference between US Mountain time and GMT. Phone discussions are usually held in the mornings in the US and the late afternoons in Ireland. Things happen quickly during face to face site visits and often very slowly at all other times. New communications mechanisms have had to be developed that allow more internet communication both the asynchronous and synchronous modes.

The Galway-Regis project has helped both universities expand their horizons and think out of the box to make things happen that are new and different. While parts of this project are still to be determined, there have been many lessons learned. The most important lesson is to establish trust. Both parties need to work together for some time to build trust both at the personal and professional level. Visits between institutions are necessary to be able to understand the issues that each school is dealing with. Buy in from senior leadership is also a must. Senior staff and faculty at both institutions need to have an appropriate level of ownership as to move ideas and projects forward. Initial goals need to be established early on so that visits are focused and each party is held accountable to further the discussion. When it is apparent that a partnership cannot develop, each side needs to move on.

The other most important lesson is to be extremely creative and look at all challenges as problems that need to be solved. Oftentimes the details can become overwhelming. It is always important to keep all the participants and planners aware of the larger goals so that the details can always be seen in proper perspective. When all is said and done, partnerships provide tremendous opportunities for growth and expansion at universities. They fuel new ideas, engage staff and faculty in creative thinking, and push universities to new levels of learning and service.