Online success roadmap — Maintaining academics and growing a university

University of Nevada, Reno (UNR)

Pearson

The opportunity

The university provost has many responsibilities — executing on the President's strategic goals/vision for the university while continuously keeping an eye on academic quality and student outcomes and success. University of Nevada Executive Vice President and Provost Dr. Kevin Carman believes he can position his institution for success by understanding students' changing needs, diversifying the student body, and implementing an online learning strategy.

While increasing the university's online presence, Carman seeks to balance a growth mindset with faculty concerns about workload and academic quality. Early on in the process, the faculty was concerned that working with an online program management partner would take something away and that their courses wouldn't truly be theirs. The faculty and staff worried their work would be different, or there would be more of it. With the increase in new applicants that online programs bring, Carman had to provide assurance that academic standards would be maintained.

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Executive Vice President & Provost
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Growing the University of Nevada, Reno

Three years ago, Dr. Goutham Menon, at the time UNR's director of the school of social work, identified a growing long-term demand for clinical social workers. However, Nevada is predominantly rural. Students living in remote communities found it unrealistic to earn the required Master of Social Work (MSW) for these jobs by attending classes on campus. Dr. Menon proposed to Provost Carman that UNR offer an online MSW program. This helped address three of Carman's goals: advancing UNR's online presence, increasing graduate enrollments, and attracting more students from outside Nevada.

Partnering with Pearson, UNR officially launched the program in the Fall of 2016. Since then, UNR has implemented a separate Online Master of Public Health in Public Health Practice program, as the university works toward offering a robust online portfolio.

Carman notes that online programs diversify the university's revenue stream. "It's part of how we deliver our mission, and also reflects a growing recognition in higher ed of students' diverse learning styles. We're looking to expand and diversify our learning platforms and online programs are a big part of that."

Evolving to support the online modality

A year into the MSW program, faculty found that their workload had indeed changed. Online students can be "in class" at all hours, and they no longer learn exclusively from a "sage on the stage," as Carman says. Pearson's faculty resource center helped instructors adapt. Pearson's team also met with faculty: both in large groups, and in "open houses," where Pearson worked with instructors individually to help optimize their online courses.

Top-notch academic quality is crucial to UNR and Pearson. Accordingly, online students face the same rigorous admission requirements as traditional students. Courses and pedagogy are continually reviewed for quality.

According to Carman, deans and program directors have been pleased with the demographics of their new online students, and faculty have expressed personal and professional satisfaction in being able to educate students from rural Nevada and out of state.

Plans for future growth and the Provost's role in success

Carman is enthusiastic about UNR's continued online growth, based both on experience to date and the university's plans for the future.

- *Online revenue is beginning to grow.* Carman is beginning to see increased revenue, and anticipates being able to say "yes" to more of the requests that come across his desk. "The social work program in the past year has had a nice revenue stream," says Carman. "So far we've been basically putting it in a piggy bank. We're going to think about what we're going to do with it going forward. We're still very much in the ramp up phase... Online can potentially be transformative to the university."

- Online is strengthening UNR's brand *and on-campus enrollments*. According to Carman, marketing UNR's online degrees has led to an increase in enrollment in UNR's on-ground programs that has roughly paralleled its growth online.

- *Substantial new opportunities exist.* Based on student and workforce demand and the university's capabilities, Carman envisions adding online certifications, undergraduate programs, and additional master's programs over the next five to six years, reaching 10-20 online programs overall.

> *There's been an increase in enrollment into the traditional programs that roughly parallels the online programs. I think the marketing of the online programs does help with our brand.*
>
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Reflecting his successful experiences, Carman offers the following advice to other provosts:

- *Be open and candid.* Have open conversations upfront about your institutions' ability to launch, expand, and scale online programs.

- *Focus on research.* If you partner, work with your partner upfront to do detailed research and learn from their experience. He and his team agree that bringing in a partner was UNR's best decision, and he credits extensive early research and consulting with Pearson for their success.

- *Explain the benefits.* Clearly communicate the benefits of online programs to key stakeholders.

- *Stress quality.* Provide assurances about their academic quality — not just to faculty, but to student organizations and current graduate students, too.

"Communication is key with all stakeholders," he says. Provosts should stress that going online "is about fulfilling our mission and maintaining our standards." His experiences with online learning have been positive, and the steps he's taken to deliver it have been an important part of UNR's roadmap to success.

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