

Live Discussions

Regis University

Thursday, October 12, at 12 noon, U.S. Eastern time

William J. Husson, vice president for professional studies/strategic alliances at Regis University, a Colorado institution known for its innovative continuing-education programs, will answer your questions about how traditional colleges can give for-profit institutions a run for their money in trying to reach adult students.

The Guest

As vice president for professional studies at Regis University, William J. Husson oversees a program that enrolls more than 12,000 working-adult students, half of whom take their courses online. The School for Professional Studies is known nationally as a leader in adult education, distance learning, and corporate education. Since 1997, Mr. Husson has been chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jesuit Distance Education Network, a collaborative distance-learning effort of 24 of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States.

A transcript of the chat follows.

William J. Husson:

Welcome to this discussion about successfully managing adult programs in a traditional non-profit university. Regis University has been successful in developing and managing extensive programs for adult learners and has maintained a strong and vibrant traditional program for 18 – 22 year old students as well. Regis has been able to develop a significant online outreach to thousands of students on a national and international basis. The keys to success are strong university leadership, support for innovation, adoption of effective business models, and attention to customer service. How can we frame this discussion to be most helpful to you?

Goldie Blumenstyk (Moderator):

And hello everyone on behalf of The Chronicle. I'm Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer in *The Chronicle's* Money & Management section. We're happy to have Bill Husson with us today, from Regis University in Denver, where they are doing some very interesting things in adult education, online education, and higher-education marketing. So if you have questions, please send them in now.

Question from Goldie Blumenstyk:

About 15 years ago, Regis started a division called New Ventures, which is under your supervision. I understand that initially, it's mission was to help other colleges create and market their adult-ed programs.

This is one of the entrepreneurial activities that has helped put Regis on the map. But I guess the focus of New Ventures has shifted. What changed?

William J. Husson:

New Ventures of Regis University has been a very successful outreach of the University. They have provided a wide range of consulting services to over 30 colleges and universities in developing accelerated degree completion programs for working adult students.

Since the growth of online programs, many classroom-based adult programs have experienced a decline in their participation rates and have been looking for online solutions. The New Ventures group is now coordinating a national online learning consortium to assist mostly private and independent colleges to participate in online education and become more familiar with online program development.

Question from Goldie Blumenstyk:

One of the new activities for New Ventures is the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities - a way for participating colleges to make their online courses more easily available to students at other institutions. You've said that this turned out to be more popular than you expected. In what sense? Numbers of colleges participating? Numbers of students enrolled?

If there are cost advantages that colleges can realize from participating in a consortium of this sort, what are they?

William J. Husson:

The development of the Online Consortium of Colleges and Universities (OCICU) has been more successful than we anticipated in that we now have over 60 colleges and universities as members. In the few months that the Consortium has been operating over 300 cross enrollments have been registered.

Colleges can learn more about online programs through membership and have their students take online courses that can fill in gaps in their curriculum or meet the needs of hard to fill courses. The sending institution buys the seat at a deep discount and charges their own tuition fee. The faculty choose only those courses they wish to supplement their own curriculum and the students are aware that the course will be given by another university on behalf of their own school.

Question from Bill Belew, TheBizOfKnowledge Online Media Company:

I don't doubt that traditional colleges can compete with for-profit institutions when it comes to meeting the needs of adult students.

My questions is - "Why DON'T more traditional colleges take the step to serve adult students?" or "What are traditional colleges afraid of when it comes to serving adult students?" or "If traditional colleges are/can be prepared to serve adult students, why don't they?"

Okay, that's three questions, but the last two are offered for clarification.

I look forward to participating.

William J. Husson:

Many traditional colleges feel that working adult students do not fit in with their institutional mission. If a traditional college wishes to serve adult learners, they usually will be called upon to make a number of significant changes to accommodate these students. These changes are in areas like curricular and course delivery adaptations, more efficient customer service systems, and significantly different marketing and sales functions. Many colleges simply do not feel that they need to move in this direction and are not willing to make the kind of changes that would be required.

Question from **Albert Galloway, Seton Hall University:**

Some of the for-profit schools have not received regional accreditation. However, now that for-profit colleges are receiving regional accreditation they seem to pose more of a threat. What can be done to impress upon students the importance of accreditation and how much work goes into this review by schools that are accredited?

William J. Husson:

I think that most adult consumers have come to realize the importance of regional accreditation. Some non accredited schools will use terminology that seems to indicate that they are accredited and this poses some serious threats. For profit schools that are regionally accredited have appropriate quality systems that have been thoroughly reviewed. The primary difference between regionally accredited for profit and non profit universities comes in their community base and differentiated mission. The US government is very supportive of impressing on the public the quality assurance that comes from appropriate accreditation.

Question from **Deb McGrath, Columbia College Chicago, arts and media college:**

What is the best way for an institution to begin to assess its 'place' in the adult student market?

William J. Husson:

Our motto for the adult programs division at Regis is "market driven and learner centered." Following that motto, I would embark on a market analysis to determine the marketability of your programs to adult students. There are a number of organizations that can do market studies and give you helpful information. Before doing that I would assess the internal support you will need to move such a project forward.

Question from **Kevin Fuerst, Cambridge College, Massachusetts:**

Thank you for taking the time to answer questions about a critical group of students in higher education.

I have been closely following the Commission on the Future of Higher Education and in their final report, they recommend that a National Strategy for Lifelong Learning be crafted to ensure all citizens prepare for and participate in higher education throughout their lives.

Do you have any thoughts on their recommendation? On what steps should be taken to bring together institutions and organizations that educate non-traditional and adult students?

William J. Husson:

I think the Commission has been attentive to adult students and to lifelong learning. I agree with their recommendation, but we will need to see how they will suggest that it be implemented. There are currently a number of professional organizations that support adult and continuing education and can act as advocacy groups. A few that come to mind are the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA), the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and a new group called CAP, The Commission of Accelerated Programs, connected with CAEL.

Question from **Catherine Riordan, large public:**

You mention a key success factor being leadership--would you please elaborate? I am especially interested in the roles of academic senates and faculty.

William J. Husson:

Leadership is the critical ingredient. It means the president, the board, and enough critical mass among the faculty and other key persons to support the process, even when the going gets rough. A good strategy is to incubate the new program(s) in such a way that they cannot be internally destroyed before they can mature. This is where the leadership can guide the process.

Question from **Sherri, for profit college:**

How will publicly held for profit universities being taken private by investors impact the competitive environment?

William J. Husson:

In some ways this phenomenon should actually be beneficial. It will allow a University to take a longer term overview, rather than trying to please the investors in the short term for every quarterly update. In many respects this should make those for-profit universities stronger competitors in the marketplace and improve their long-term sustainability.

Question from **Ralph Stavitz, Mercy College:**

We're thinking of starting a for-profit continuing ed. prgm. and wonder if you have any general advice or pointers...we are a non-profit 4 yr. liberal arts college in Westchester County, NY.

William J. Husson:

Regis has started a for-profit corporate training organization call Regis Learning Solutions. The best advice is to put together a solid business plan, discuss with your attorneys and determine how you will structure the company and how you will capitalize it. Be sure that the new company does not stray to far from your mission.

Question from **David Stone, Southern Polytechnic State U.:**

How do you deal with offering "comparable services" for nontraditional students from an accreditation standpoint?

William J. Husson:

At Regis University we have been able to develop a wide array of services that allow the adult students to receive comparable services similar to our traditional age population. This is important from an accreditation standpoint, but it is even more important from a customer service standpoint. We have been able to work effectively with our internal service support groups to re-engineer most services to adapt to the adult student. In some cases we have outsourced these services.

Question from **Eric Hagan, Drexel University:**

How do you the customer service needs of adult students differ from those of traditional-age students? What has Regis done to address any differences?

William J. Husson:

Adult students are working-mostly full-time-and have significant family obligations. Their time is at a premium and, therefore, we have tried to create user-friendly customer services. Our service hours have been expanded. We have developed internet e-commerce solutions such as online payments and registration. Additionally, we are continuously soliciting feedback from our students on how we can break down the barriers they identify, especially in areas like financial aid.

Question from **Ron Koger, Southern Polytechnic State:**

What are your retention and graduation rates in the school of professional studies? How do they compare with those of the traditional students?

William J. Husson:

Our course persistence rate in our online program is 85%. We experience our greatest attrition in our first 3 courses. That rate is about 40%. Following the first three courses our persistence rate increases to over 90%. It is hard to compare these rates with traditional students, because our undergraduate programs are degree completion, therefore all of our students are transfer students. We have developed a "Student Success Team" to increase retention, especially in the first 3 courses.

Question from **Eric Cunningham, Columbia College, private, not-for-profit with a 32 campus extended network, sizable online campus and long relationship with the military:**

The for-profits spend huge amounts in advertising...what guidelines for marketing dollars can you provide....maybe as a percentage of gross revenue?

William J. Husson:

This is a very good question. Not-for-profits are at a significant disadvantage in terms of the percentage of the budget that can go to advertising when compared to for-profit institutions. We are finding that our costs for marketing our internet students is three

times greater than to our classroom-based students. This requires great creativity on the part of the not-for-profits. Some suggestions would be: use a "buying service" for your advertising and make sure that your website is primarily a marketing tool. I will follow-up with you on the percentage figures shortly.

Question from **Penelope Brouwer of Thomas Edison State College:**

Beyond accreditation, what other measures/factors do you think convey quality assurance for traditional colleges and universities?

William J. Husson:

Quality Assurance can be conveyed in a number of ways beyond accreditation. Traditional universities usually are long-established and have a tradition of being a community resource. The alumni of traditional universities represent the quality education represented by the institution. Traditional universities are also multi-disciplinary and can provide many cross-disciplinary opportunities for their students.

Question from **John Yoder, Friends University:**

For those of us who are already offering extensive adult programming, what wisdom or "tricks of the trade" should we be considering in order to be successful in the increasingly competitive for-profit market?

William J. Husson:

One critical success factor is to differentiate your programs from the more utilitarian types of programs that are often offered by the for-profit universities. In the case of Regis, the fact that we are a religiously-based, value-centered university conveys a very different message than many of our competitors. It is also important to stress the long-term staying power of your institution. Additionally, it is very effective to benchmark newer systems and processes that have been developed by for-profit universities and adapt them to your circumstances.

Question from **Mary Beth Lakin, American Council on Education:**

What have you found to be the main factors affecting retention of adult learners in online programs? How have the consortium members been able to address these factors?

William J. Husson:

The first factor is to choose the right students, those who can manage the rigors of college study in online formats. Another factor is to be proactive in assisting students to manage the myriad of university issues they face both academically and practically. Having someone call students during each of their first several classes and asking them if there are any issues we can assist them with has proven to be most helpful. It also tells us what the greatest problems our students are dealing with as they transition back to school. For the online students, getting them familiar with the software is critical and we recommend that they navigate through demo classes prior to their first class. The major providers have given these type of supports to the partner institutions in the Consortium.

Question from **Bob Harbort, Southern Polytechnic State U:**

Do your programs for nontraditional students have a "migration pathway" from continuing education to certificate programs to degree programs? This has been an issue for us at SPSU.

William J. Husson:

We do not have a specific pathway, but do develop a tiered structure to many of our programs that include transcription of corporate training, completion and academic certificates, and degrees. This allows a wider set of entry and exit points for students.

Question from **Tony Gallini, Saint Louis University:**

What are some of the things that Regis and its Student Success Team do to increase retention?

William J. Husson:

Provide all of our adult students with one point of contact with clearly defined handoff points. Centralize the transcript evaluation and degree planning process, provide academic support from our faculty advisors, proactively register the students for their next terms, and provide support with electronic forms and any appropriate hand holding.

Question from **Shirley, 12 years in CE & looking for a new CE position:**

Many continuing education programs are short staffed so that the focus shifts toward maintenance activities rather than researching and creating innovative programs. Highly creative people are buried in maintenance paperwork. How does one go about winning support from the institution for using in-house creative talent in the most productive way to grow new programs?

William J. Husson:

The answer is you can't do it all yourself and your university must be committed to your success. Adult and CE people have a tradition of being able to do more with less, but the bottom line is that the funding needs to be there to support your programs. One strategy that usually works is to carefully develop a business plan that outlines what you plan to do and the resources you need to accomplish your work and what the return on investment will be for the university. Time spent developing a solid business plan is well spent.

Question from **Diane Chubb--Univ of Georgia:**

I'd like to add to the question that was posed on "adult institutional readiness". What is a good strategy for an "institution" to assess its readiness to serve adult students?

William J. Husson:

CAEL has a number of instruments that can be helpful in determining the readiness of any institution to serve adult learners. They have a project on adult friendly institutions that outlines the key factors that have made many adult programs successful. You can contact Pam Tate and her staff in Chicago for more information.

Goldie Blumenstyk (Moderator):

Folks, that's all the time we have for today's chat. We had so many great questions we even ran a little longer than usual. On behalf of the *The Chronicle*, I'd like to thank all of you for your great questions, and Bill for taking the time to answer them.

Please join us again next Thursday, same time (noon, Eastern) to talk about the future of the Internet with Janna Anderson, who was in charge of the "Imagining the Internet" project led by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Bill, any last words?

William J. Husson:

Thank you for participating in this discussion about creativity in developing and managing successful adult programs in non-profit universities. Keep your institutional mission as the guiding force in all your endeavors. Be creative and don't be easily discouraged – remember, you are in the process of changing people's lives for the better.