Implementing an Online Program: Guiding Questions

1. **What program-wide resources do we need to develop?**

   Suggestions:
   a. Orientation tutorial for students
   b. Orientation tutorial for faculty
   c. System for mentoring and supporting new faculty
   d. Document that lays out program expectations for students
   e. Document that lays out program expectations for faculty
   f. "Quickstart" guides for commonly-used software
   g. Self-assessment for prospective students (is online learning for you?)
   h. Self-assessment for faculty (is online teaching for you?)
   i. Recommended specs for participant computer equipment, Internet connection, software (including web browser), and plug-ins (e.g., Adobe Acrobat Reader for pdfs)
   j. Test page so that participants can verify that they have the plug-ins installed correctly (e.g., if you can see this, you're okay – if not, click on this link to install …)
   k. Bibliography of core texts -- with links to full-text online (e.g., HIPPA regulations, "classic" texts, netiquette agreement, materials that explain the program and its curriculum, faculty bios w. pics, etc.)
   l. Links that you want accessible in every course (e.g., links to the library, professional associations, etc.)
   m. Program marketing materials (and a system for program marketing)
   n. Guidelines/system for advising students (policies for how many courses students can take at once, suggested course sequence)
   o. Document that explains who to contact for what (tech support, advising, etc.)
   p. System for assessing and revising pilot courses
   q. System for assessing ongoing courses

2. What will be the common features of all program courses? What will be the default features and contents loaded in our programs course template? Note: the more continuity between courses, the less time participants will spend learning the interface and the more time they will spend learning the content.

   For example:

   a. What language will we use? Will courses be divided up into "sessions" "modules," etc.?
   b. What are the minimum components for every course (e.g., discussion, modules, labs, etc.)?

3. How will we communicate with our students? How (and how often) will faculty members communicate with one another? What structures will we put into place so that we feel like we're part of a program (community) that cares about them, as opposed to sitting in isolation at a computer at home?

For example:

a. Generate a template for letters/email messages that will be sent to students at the beginning of each semester … includes program updates, login information, etc.
b. "Social" events and online areas set aside for chatting
c. Beginning each course with some sort of community-building exercise in which students introduce themselves and share their hopes for the course – faculty member follows up with a welcoming email to each student.
d. A strategy for following up with students who "go AWOL" (e.g., follow-up phone calls for students who do not post in a given week)

4. What's our programs approach to teaching and learning? What core beliefs about pedagogy, our field, etc. do we want to be evident in all our courses? How will this information be communicated to faculty and students (and what's the strategy for buy-in)?

5. What's the strategy for professional development to ensure that course developers and faculty are adequately prepared to teach online?

6. What's the process for course development? How will courses be developed (by individuals? … by teams?)? What is the process for feedback and quality assurance? How will they interact with instructional designers, colleagues, formative assessment data, etc. to improve their courses before and during pilot implementation? How will they be compensated?

7. Who will handle copyright clearance for articles/images, negotiate licensing fees, etc.? What's the system for storing that information and where will it be kept? How will we keep track of that information so that we know we're in compliance with Intellectual Property laws?

8. Who will provide ongoing technical support for students and faculty? How will that work be documented so that if there is a change in personnel, this type of knowledge isn't lost?

9. What's the process for course/program assessment? How will this information be used to improve/revise courses? Since most online courses require several rounds of revisions to iron out the kinks, how will program faculty members manage this cycle and workload?

10. Do we want to have an overarching framework for assessment (e.g., students keep work samples that leads up to the development of a program portfolio, students revisit past coursework and compare it with current work to reflect on growth)?

11. How do we want to interact with our program graduates? … follow-up interviews to assess long-term impact of our program? … ongoing alumni group? … as the program grows, perhaps engage graduates as course facilitators or as peer mentors?

Institutional Framework: Roles and Responsibilities For Developing and Managing Online Programs

Departmental Responsibilities

1. **Student Communication:** Departments need to be particularly sensitive to the communication needs of distance students. Because they may not be on campus, it is challenging for them to know when the semester begins, how to login to class, if course books have arrived, etc. The program director should establish a strategy for communication that includes pre-course orientation (via email or US mail).

   a. *Recruitment:* Help prospective students assess their learning style and readiness for the program.

      Is distance learning "right" for you? Successful programs engage students in self assessment. They also provide information about the type of computer, Internet connection, and software that will be required for participation.

      Sample assessments and readiness surveys:
      http://www.lesley.edu/online_learning/readiness/home.html
      http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/self_assessment.asp
      http://www.pbs.org/campus/003_Advice/003-06.html

   b. *Advising:* Help students understand that online learning can take as much (or more) time than face-to-face learning. Students, particularly those who work fulltime, should have realistic expectations for the required time and commitment.

2. **Faculty Communication:** Because course instructors are also often hired to teach at a distance, a system for intentional communication between instructors and the department should also be put into place. Many programs insist that first-time instructors communicate with a departmental mentor on a weekly basis.

3. **Faculty Professional Development:** Most faculty members, even those who are excellent face-to-face teachers, are unprepared to teach online. To ensure quality teaching, successful programs require that online course instructors take an orientation seminar. Pre-course professional development needs include:

   a. *Course Authoring:* Learning how to write sessions and discussion posts that are coherent, substantive, and thoughtfully presented.

   b. *Course Facilitation and Management:* Becoming proficient with the online course management system. For example, learning how to post session materials, facilitate online discussions, provide timely and substantive feedback, and manage the course gradebook.

   c. *Program Expectations for Instructors:* Understanding and agreeing to the program's norms and expectations for teaching. For example, policies for faculty involvement and responsiveness, vacation dates, course start dates, grading, etc.

      Orientation samples and guiding principles:

- http://inquirylearning.org/faculty_website
- http://www.ihets.org/progserv/education/distance/guiding_principles

4. **Support Infrastructure:** While the College helpdesk can address the needs of most students who come to campus for class, it is not in a position to respond to all the needs – technical and emotional – of first-time distance learners and teachers.

   Successful programs develop their own internal system for support such as a teaching assistant who can talk through technical problems over the phone and monitor requests for assistance posted to an online "Help!" Discussion.

   Successful programs also develop programmatic frequently-asked question lists, "Quickstart" guides for required software, netiquette agreements, collections of full-text master documents, etc.

5. **System for Formative Assessment:** It can be difficult to gauge the success of an online course because teachers can't see the learners. For this reason, it is important to have an overarching system for formative assessment in place. It is recommended that, the first semester a course is taught online, that the program solicits formative feedback from the students at the end of each session/module. That information should be collated, shared with instructors and tech support, and analyzed by all involved in the development group. In this way, people responsible for program implementation can work toward continuous improvement.

6. **Intellectual Property Rights:** Manage course developer contracts, copyright clearance, negotiate fees for use rights.

Faculty Responsibilities

1. **Become Proficient with the Course Management System (CMS):**
   a. Attend training, do tutorials, and read about how the system functions.
   b. Spend time online, becoming comfortable with the CMS prior to the beginning of the semester.
   c. Check to make sure that the computers you will be using have the proper software and plug-ins installed.

2. **Learn About Best Practice in Online Teaching**
   Attend the orientation seminar, read, and familiarize yourself with the literature about how to teach online. Learn how to write sessions and discussion posts that are coherent, substantive, and thoughtfully presented.

   For example:
   - The e-moderators discussion http://groups.yahoo.com/group/emoderators/join
   - *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* by Gilly Salomon
   - *Engaging the Online Learner* by Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson
   - *Facilitating Online Learning* by George Collison et al

3. **Be Present for (and Supportive of) the Learners**
   a. Respond to email messages from students within 48 hours
   b. Carefully compose and spell check all messages
   c. Contact any student who is "absent" in a given week or whose work is insufficient

Technology Responsibilities

1. **Faculty Support**
   a. *Provide Opportunities* for training, consultation and professional development, including faculty lunches, workshops, conferences, etc.

      1) Identify facilitator "readiness"
      2) Work with faculty member to determine the areas of focus which best meet the identified need
      3) Provide faculty member with a number of opportunities (either on-campus, Simmons-sponsored activities or external workshops and conferences) to increase preparedness.

   b. *Increase Faculty Awareness* about resources (both on campus and off) and examples of best practice.

      1) Work with faculty to make them aware of technological and pedagogical possibilities for online courses
      2) Direct faculty to existing resources as examples, or create mocked-up examples, designed to help facilitators envision possibilities, and make pedagogical choices about course deployment

   c. *Be Present for (and Supportive of) the facilitators*
      1) Respond to email messages from facilitators within 48 hours
      2) Be available for ongoing course revision

2. **Course Design and Deployment**
   Provide Expertise on strategies for assessment, course design and production, and technical production.
      1) Manage course design and development process
      2) Offer recommendations on issues of instructional design
      3) Oversee pilot deployment
      4) Monitor formative assessment results
      5) Offer suggestions for, and implement change as necessary to remedy identified issues with pilot version course (as identified by formative assessment results)
      6) Direct revisions to course design as course is transitioned from pilot version

3. **Maintain and Support Course Infrastructure**
   a. *Ensure that systems are in place for course delivery*
      1) Ensure that log-ins and authentications function properly
      2) Maximize server availability

   b. *Provide user support*
      General support of student and faculty users through the Help Desk

   c. *Troubleshooting of reported user and faculty problems with the CMS*