

# Online Education Without the Huge Investment (Learn How One College Did It!)

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## Province of Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia is Canada's Seacoast Province and is located on the eastern end of the country. It has a population of just under one million people with over 40% of the population in and around the capital city of Halifax. No part of Nova Scotia is more than 50 miles from the sea. Nova Scotia is home to 11 degree granting post-secondary institutions and the Nova Scotia Community College.

## Nova Scotia Community College

Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) is Nova Scotia's only community college. It covers the entire province with 13 campuses and 5 learning centres. NSCC has just short of 10,000 full-time students and another 12,000 that it serves through part-time studies, distance and continuing education. The College has just over 800 faculty within the overall staff complement of 1400. NSCC is Canada's youngest community college having been formed in 1988 and receiving board governance only 10 years ago.

The College's programs exceed 120 and cover disciplines in five academic schools: Access, Applied Arts & New Media, Business, Health & Human Services, and Trades & Technology. The primary aim of these programs is to confer one-year certificates and two-year diplomas, but NSCC also has significant enrolment in post-graduate diplomas and in apprenticeship programming.

NSCC's mission is "to build Nova Scotia's economy and quality of life through education and innovation". This mission is an important element in guiding some of the actions outlined below.

## **Formation of the School of Business**

Prior to 2000, NSCC was a loosely organized network of 13 campuses stretching from one end of the province to the other. It had a small corporate structure at the centre of the organization and had very little sense of a united College with a provincial mandate. Each local campus had its own mix of programs and there was inconsistency in content and quality from site to site and classroom to classroom.

In the summer of 2000, all academic programs were organized under the five academic schools outlined above and the schools were asked to bring consistency, quality and a sense of “one college” to programs across all campuses of the College. The Schools were given direct responsibility for programs under their disciplines at each campus. In the case of the School of Business, that included 25 programs, over 2000 students, more than 150 faculty, and staff of about a dozen, spread across the province.

## **State of Online Learning at NSCC in 2000**

NSCC’s Online Learning unit had been established in 1997 primarily to serve as a delivery mechanism for the theory-based elements of apprenticeship training, had developed some significant expertise in this type of programming, and had developed a reasonably strong infrastructure for online learning. Over 900 apprentice students per year took advantage of the online programming available.

Other programming outside of apprenticeship was very poorly represented in the online offerings. For example, the School of Business had a few Office Administration courses that had been put in place to serve some customized military training contracts. As well, the School had a Library Information Technology program that was beginning to be delivered completely online but that was very rudimentary and poorly supported with minimal faculty resources.

NSCC’s online learning platform is The Learning Manager (TLM) and, at the time, was not seen as a mainstream system such as Blackboard or WebCT. However, the vendor was engaged and interested in expanding the platform’s presence and saw NSCC as one of its prime customers and development resources.

In addition to the support from the vendor for TLM, the system itself had some very unique capabilities not available in other more well-known systems. For example, its testing capability was second to none. As well, the four years of history with apprenticeship program delivery provided a solid framework for expanding into other disciplines. Also, NSCC had a few very passionate souls who believed in the potential for online learning, particularly in a college with over 60% of its students based in rural areas.

## **Problem, or Opportunity?**

Beginning in the fall of 2001, the School of Business launched a new Business Administration two-year diploma program. The program featured a common first year of study followed by seven possible concentration areas for study in the second year, including Accounting, Information Management, Investment Management, Marketing, Financial Services and Management. However, because of small populations of students at many rural locations, campuses were unable to offer more than one or two concentrations at any one location with the exception of Metro Halifax.

For example, students at the northernmost location in Sydney (the province's second largest community) were able to concentrate only on Management. Many students were denied a broad choice of opportunities for business studies. Since most NSCC students are studying to stay in their local area, the School was not able to deliver on its mission to build those local economies through providing adequately trained graduates.

Campuses were hampered by a small number of students, limited funding to expand options and lack of expertise of faculty to deliver several business disciplines. Students understandably began to expect and demand more. For example, Accounting was an interest of at least some students at every campus. In addition to these problems, the School did not have any additional budgetary capacity to invest heavily in online learning development or delivery.

## **Steps to Success**

This situation could have been seen as an insurmountable set of circumstances – few resources, widely dispersed, inability to develop and deliver additional programming, and student needs left unfulfilled. Instead, the School Leadership Team set out to address the situation and see what could be done to offer more options for students. How did they get to where they are today?

### **Set the Context**

The first task at hand was to create the context for change. This had nothing specifically to do with the online decisions but related to the overall direction of the School and its programming responsibilities. One of the first things done after the School was created, and the Dean appointed, in August 2000 was to begin to develop a vision of what a School would be within the context of a widely distributed, provincial college system. For the first time business faculty from across the College came together to begin to define what business education meant at NSCC.

The specifics of setting this vision are not relevant to this discussion but it was important to take the pulse of the School across the province and then enlist key members of the School (not just management) to craft a picture of the future. Once School leaders looked at “what should be”, they identified the need to

provide more options for students, the desire of faculty to explore online learning, and the capacity available to move forward.

One important element of this vision was to ignore, or at least de-emphasize the potential of online learning to generate revenue. Instead the focus was put on adding more access for current fee-paying students to enhance their experience of NSCC and give them a wider set of skills to acquire. If the courses were developed, then other students would come, but the School was somewhat worried about going after this broader market. After all they were functioning on a shoe-string budget and didn't know if the product was up to the standards of a big online school. Instead they focused on creating an online version of what was done in the classroom to give students more choice.

Once the vision was articulated, it had to be translated into tangible goals that everyone could understand. Here are a few examples to illustrate:

- With Accounting being so popular, it was easy to choose to put the entire accounting concentration on line first.
- The Office Administration program only required half of its courses be added to make it completely available on line, so that development came next.
- The Library and Information Technology program was online and had a large number of enrolled students. However, it was very vulnerable, so it required a reinvestment. It became the next element of the development efforts.

Following on throughout the project, several key milestones were established for each year of the effort to keep everyone focused on the road ahead.

### **Create an Impetus for Change**

The impetus for change would come from both faculty and students. Faculty wanted to explore online learning and saw it as a way of creating more standardization and higher quality for their program. Students wanted more choice and they were not reluctant to make their faculty, Academic Chairs and the Dean aware of their expectations of this level of choice.

### **Find Capacity and Strengths**

The Dean with the help of key people among faculty and staff was able to identify excess capacity within the School. Many faculty were only partially deployed and classrooms were below capacity. Often this was a result of the distributed nature of the College and the lack of a critical mass of programming at any one campus. Therefore, a weakness became a strength.

Many faculty were looking for something new to explore and online learning allowed them to pursue some personal learning and development. Online Learning itself had a solid history of support for apprenticeship training and the minimum infrastructure in place on which to build.

What also became apparent after the first two years of the efforts was that there was a pent up demand for the flexibility of online learning. In other words, people across the province wanted business courses to take but previously had no way of accessing them without attending the College during regular classes. Once the online courses became available, part-time numbers increased dramatically.

### **Appeal to the Passion**

NSCC School of Business was and is blessed with a very passionate group of faculty who take teaching and learning very seriously. They are focused on student success both academically and in preparing students for future careers. Many of them jumped at the chance to try something new and explore the boundaries of their teaching practice. As well, the School took advantage of their great skills by building a model that was faculty and staff supported in a manner that is unusual for online programming. Faculty were always at the other end of the computer connection or a phone call away for students while taking a course. Students were not interacting just with a computer.

### **Choose the Right People to Lead**

There were several individuals who believed passionately in the potential for online learning. They were asked to assume key roles as the efforts moved forward. For example, one key person was Sue Nelson, Manager of Online Learning. She became the conscience and mother-hen for the efforts, constantly reminding of courses needing to be developed, faculty needed for delivery, systems that needed to be fixed. As well as reminding, she often led the change effort and supported faculty and staff as they struggled to reach objectives. Sue was the only dedicated resource to these efforts for the first two years.

In addition to Sue, many other dedicated faculty and staff pitched in time and effort. Eventually, another full-time staff member was added to the team to support online learning, but this was the only staff member added over the past five years to support online learning within the School. During this time Online Learning added some resources as well to improve their basic online learning infrastructure.

### **Watch and Adjust**

Another important element of success was the ability to adapt as the landscape changed. Everything did not run smoothly and systems and processes had to be changed. Some faculty did not work out as developers or deliverers and had to be replaced or have their assignments changed.

One of the key mechanisms of the success was the formation of an Alternate Delivery Steering Committee for the School. They would often address the many systems and process issues that would arise. These affected the service level to students and, if not addressed, could turn a good course into a poor experience for the student.

## **Other Key Elements**

- Don't worry about the money

The NSCC School of Business created the vision first and connected the vision to that of the organization. This allowed for easier access to both internal organizational and external third-party funds. As well, faculty and staff will buy in more readily to something that they see is essential to achieving a mission that they had a hand in crafting. That will allow for the leveraging of unused capacity and will get the team to commit resources to the effort.

- Respect the faculty and other team members

Early on in their efforts the School, through the Dean, sent a clear message that online capability would not be built on the backs of committed faculty. In other words, they did not just add to the workload of those who were the early adopters. This pledge was honoured throughout and the efforts continued to rely primarily on finding excess capacity to achieve the goals. Some people did put in extra efforts but they were frequently rewarded and recognized for their efforts. As well, the cooperation and collaboration between the School and Online Learning kept uncovering ways to move forward.

## **What Was Accomplished in a Little Over 5 Years?**

In 2001 the School of Business had only 9 courses available on line and enrolled only 19 students per year. Revenue generated from online learning amounted to only \$5700 annually. Almost no faculty from the School had online capability and students had very limited choices particularly those in rural or smaller campuses.

Now the School has over 70 courses available online and over 600 students enrolled in courses during this last semester. The courses were built and they did indeed come. The School now generates over \$600,000 per year from online course registrations. These registrations are over and above the regularly registered diploma students.

As well, the involvement of faculty and staff in the online learning process has expanded greatly. Over 50% of faculty have delivered an online course and a significant number of faculty now have online delivery as part of their normal teaching load. Every course is delivered at least once on a three-year rotation and many courses are delivered every academic year or several semesters during the year.

In addition, the International Business advanced diploma is fully online along with the Library Information Technology diploma program, the Office Administration program and the entire Business Administration – Accounting diploma program.

Indeed, online learning has become an integral part of the NSCC business programming for faculty and students. Faculty keep their skills current and students are more prepared for life-long learning once they leave NSCC. They can embrace the experience of online learning for their life-time.