**Online Readiness Evaluation**

**– 2018 – New Mexico Highlands University**

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**Executive Summary**

New Mexico Highlands University is not unique in its need to move programs online to gain sustainability for the future. What is a bit unique is the fact that it has yet to move to online accelerated teaching/learning in a robust fashion. The institution has now determined that expanding online offerings to a contemporary model of distance education is a survival imperative. While late in implementing the type of online program delivery that students across the nation are used to, the institution is committed to tapping a portion of the available market within its region. While overall enrollment numbers decline, online numbers continue to increase, as is evidenced through annual data collection by The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) report and data on postsecondary enrollment in the U.S. With this in mind NMHU needs to move as rapidly as possible into an accelerated, well-designed online course delivery arena.

After a recent visit and conversations with various stakeholders at NMHU, it becomes apparent that there are both challenges and opportunities for this implementation. Within this report is noted both of those, with a specific focus on maximizing the opportunities and overcoming the challenges in a way that is sensitive to the limited financial resources at NMHU and acknowledges the challenges that surround not only resourcing, but also faculty concerns of quality, workload and training needs. And indeed, it is the former that seems to be the often echoed concern of staff and faculty at the institution. Training on the use of technology. Training on adult learning theory. Training on designing courses to meet learning outcomes, not “seat time.”

Staff and faculty are very much aware of financial constraints at NMHU, but when any who expressed reservations about developing a robust online program were asked, “If you don’t do this, what will you do?” they become somewhat resigned to the need for additional modality in educational delivery. Faculty are obviously crucial to the success of any academic endeavor at Highlands. Yet, as in many institutions, the support available to faculty to gain skills and knowledge to succeed in this arena is minimal. There are few options for NMHU to grow on the physical campuses. There is decreased enrollment within the feeder institutions surrounding the University. High schools and community colleges are not increasing their graduation rates sufficiently to feed into NMHU’s enrollment growth needs. Maintenance costs, staffing costs and technology costs continue to rise. And while NMHU has few options, students who want to return to college for knowledge enhancement, retraining or other professional self-improvement DO have options. Most of the options they choose to access currently are online, accelerated, asynchronous delivery that focuses on information and abilities that can be implemented immediately within their professional lives. For this reason, NMHU must find the resources and the academic cohesion to build just such a program. This report details some recommendations for how NMHU might overcome some of the challenges it faces, while taking advantage of the opportunities that exist for it in distance learning.

Thus, while NMHU needs to gain enrollment numbers in order to achieve sustainability, NMHU has little choice but to identify strategies that will all it and its faculty to become regional academic leaders in online learning. IPEDs and other regional data demonstrate that online learning opportunities still exist within the Southwest U.S. There are some academic power houses for certain: ASU Online, CSU Global and Western Governors, to name just a few. But, there is room for NMHU to gain sufficient enrollment to support the future needs of the campus, both physical structures and staffing; that is, if the expansion of online delivery is approached using critical success factors and recommendations that are detailed later within this report. The existing extended lecture video delivery mechanism is an incompatible approach for this new delivery modality. Literature is rich with data that supports limiting video interaction to six to ten minutes per topic. In addition, shorter course terms, multiple entry points for enrollment, a focus on learning outcomes and the asynchronous, timely interaction between faculty and students are all critical components of the new modality.

Once faculty understand that meeting institutional goals hinges on successful and scaled implementation of distance learning, the administration should help faculty gain buy in to the strategy. Faculty, staff and administrators should be equipped to execute the implementation with a clear line of sight into goals, sufficient training and incentives (or a lack of disincentives) for change. Despite all the potential benefits to NMHU that distance education might offer, there is little defined strategic direction for implementation. This report has as its goal, a contribution to that strategic development for a robust and high-quality online learning program.

Strategic growth (for an institution) is not a "build it and they will come" proposition. It requires planning, research, budgeting, resource allocation, and of course, data. (Shriner, 2018)