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Regional Public Universities Need Help Going Online

Online program management companies are facing criticism, but many underresourced institutions need outside partners to succeed, David Klock writes.

By [David Klock](#)

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Online program managers have come under intense criticism lately for their role in helping universities achieve their digital strategies. [Recent critiques have claimed](#) that OPMs charge universities too much for services they don't need and often exclude faculty engagement in developing online curriculum and class content.

In all, **these reports** from the Century Foundation make it seem like universities are getting ripped off. Nothing can be further from the truth. The studies have painted the wide variety of OPMs -- which all differ in their approach and business models -- with one single broad brush.

Most of the comments about OPMs ignore how public universities, especially regional state institutions, have drastically improved their mission of affordable access to a quality education by going online. As a former business dean at two large public universities that went online with different OPMs, I know the only way we were able to build successful graduate and undergraduate programs was with an outside partner.

In my eight years at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Florida International University, I found three factors in particular were critical to our success in working with OPMs.

- First, the OPMs understood the historical critical importance of shared governance and insisted that faculty members be a key part of the decision-making process around online programs every step of the way.
- Second, the OPMs endorsed the foundational bedrock of academia: faculty members are responsible for curriculum and course content.
- Third, all of our online programs followed the same academic standards as our traditional face-to-face programs and were taught by the same professors.

The OPMs I worked with never provided a set, centralized curriculum nor suggested course content to individual professors. What the OPMs did do was help our faculty members in the often difficult transition from teaching in traditional classrooms to leading online classes. This assistance from the OPMs was always considered optional, not required. And the level of assistance provided by the OPMs was driven by each faculty member and her needs.

What's more, decisions about how many students we would enroll online and how much we would charge them were made by university leaders and faculty

members, not the OPMs. At the two universities where I worked, we initially requested an enrollment goal that was below what the OPMs wanted, so that we could confirm our assumptions about growth and monitor quality in those early days. Once we were comfortable with the quality of the programs, we agreed to grow.

In each case, the two different OPMs I worked with invested more than \$1.5 million in our initial marketing and support efforts. While we shared tuition with each OPM, our expenses were very modest. One unexpected outcome was that our traditional programs -- for which we didn't share tuition with the OPM -- also grew significantly as the spending by the OPMs on digital and traditional marketing lifted all boats.

The net tuition revenue we generated from our OPM-driven online programs allowed both the business schools and the universities as a whole to support other initiatives on campus: improved retention, increased graduation rates and new faculty hires.

And that revenue wasn't the result of excessively charging students, as the recent reports charged. Indeed, one of the OPMs I worked with, Academic Partnerships, focuses largely on working with often underresourced regional public universities that charge competitive tuition rates because they mostly serve working adults seeking an affordable, quality education. These universities don't have the resources of elite private or flagship universities to pay the up-front costs of establishing an online program nor the expertise required to pull off digital marketing campaigns year after year. *(Note: The author does occasional consulting for a bank that invests in Academic Partnerships.)*

Because of the lower cost model of the OPMs we worked with, we were able to generate discretionary dollars to help in all aspects of our access mission. That would not have been possible without outside help.

https://insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2019/12/18/regional-public-universities-need-help-going-online-and-opms-can?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=8d364b5e55-

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