

STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATING AND ADOPTING A SYSTEMWIDE SOFTWARE SOLUTION

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In 1996, the Florida legislature established an innovative approach for the coordination of distance learning within the community college system by establishing the Florida Community College Distance Learning Consortium (Consortium). This statewide distance learning entity has provided statewide coordination and services in such areas as policy development, infrastructure planning and development, SACS accreditation, courseware funding and licensing as well as the first statewide electronic catalog of distance learning courses and a website of resources. The Consortium coordinates the development of all facets of a technology-enhanced delivery system to ensure accessible, quality higher education programs at all 28 community colleges.

Florida has a critical need for skilled information technology workers. According to Enterprise Florida's *Strategic Plan for Florida's Economic Future, January 1, 1998 – June 30, 2003 Update*, a major area of concern is the "competitiveness of Florida's workforce." The Florida Community College System has assumed the challenge to improve and develop the technology skills of Florida's workforce.

The first step involved the Consortium obtaining a Florida legislative appropriation for the licensing of Instructional Technology curriculum in the amount of \$1.5 million dollars. In order to identify the commercially available products that would meet the needs of the 28 community colleges, a subcommittee was established of six Consortium members to develop the criteria for the Request for Proposal (RFP). Committee members were selected to provide balanced representation for college size and urban or rural location. The criteria were established in the following major areas, with a total potential score of 100 points:

1. Accessibility (15 points)
 - Availability of the courses via the Internet, LAN, WAN, etc.
 - Dial-up access via a modem
 - Web-hosting options
2. Courseware (15 points)
 - Number of titles
 - Customization of courses for each school and student
 - Availability of course in other languages
 - Ease of courseware integration into existing curriculum
3. Support Services (15 points)
 - Training for the colleges on utilizing the courseware
 - Mentoring for faculty and students
 - Accessibility of updated titles and courses
 - Administrative assistance

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4. Instructional Evaluation (25 points)
 - Content of the courseware presented in a logical and well-organized manner
 - Clearly defined goals and objectives that distinctly stated learning outcomes
 - Easy to operate
 - Consistency throughout the lessons in terms of text design and layout
 - Material appropriate for the intended population
5. Implementation (25 points)
 - On-site support for colleges to install the software and make it operational
 - Length of the implementation and training period prior to offering the courseware
 - Begin contract before or after implementation and training, and correspond with the semester timeframe
6. Cost (5 points)
 - Cost per college and cost per user
 - Options for discounted pricing with an increased number of users
 - Licenses could be utilized by different users
 - Reselling licenses for corporate training

Several committee members involved additional faculty at their institution in the evaluation of the courseware. Other members reviewed the products themselves. During this initial review, the vendors were required to funnel all information through the Distance Learning Consortium and were specifically requested not to contact the committee members. Each committee member, based on their own review or additional input, ranked all seven products on the above criteria to produce a total score for each product. Those scores were added together to produce the final rankings. Four of the seven products received significantly higher total scores; the committee chose to make the top four ranked products available to the 28 colleges due to the vastly different needs at each college. The RFP stated that at least one vendor product would be chosen and was specifically worded so as not to limit the RFP to one product.

The four vendors were notified of the committee's selection. Next, the colleges were notified of their vendor/product options and were asked to evaluate and select the courseware for their colleges and request an appropriate number of licenses for one or more products. Colleges were also informed that in order to write a contract, four colleges must select a product with a minimum of 50 licenses for each college.

Each college obtained courseware access through the web to use the four vendor products and developed a final selection process to review and select one or more appropriate products. This courseware was to be used for faculty and staff training, as well as credit and non-credit courses. Several colleges throughout the state held half-day sessions where all four vendors were invited to send a representative to present their products to a regional gathering of college representatives. These sessions, aptly named a "shootout," allowed the college

evaluators to make comparisons between the products and ask the sales representatives direct questions.

During this same time period, vendors were asked to determine pricing for a 20-month contract, January 1, 2001 through August 21, 2002, which would align the contracts with the academic year. This time period was selected to avoid any disruption during an academic term in case additional funding was not obtained. The other advantage to this contract period was the opportunity to request funding through two legislative sessions in Florida. Since the initial implementation period takes approximately 6 months, the longer contract period allowed the colleges sufficient time to demonstrate their success with each product before renewal.

The total cost of licenses requested by the colleges significantly exceeded the one million dollars available for the RFP. As a result, a funding formula was developed to equitably distribute these funds. A base amount of \$20,000 was given to every institution plus 71 cents for each student headcount enrollment at a given institution. The amounts ranged from approximately \$23,000 for our smallest colleges to \$90,000 for our largest institution. Colleges were asked to submit their license requests, not to exceed the funding allocated for their institution. This involved the college president signing a commitment form that guaranteed their college would commit to at least 50 licenses for each product requested and incorporate the IT courseware into at least one credit course during the contract period.

As of April 2001, the implementation period is progressing. Colleges are realizing that small software design issues can become important considerations. For example, after licensing a product, one college discovered that students had access to an entire library of courses rather than a specific course selected for use. The college is now working with the vendor to develop a management solution.

If the Consortium were to undertake this evaluation and adoption process again, there are two changes that should be implemented:

1. **Cost.** Cost as a criteria in the RFP process should be increased in point value. One product was very good, but cost three times as much as another that was also very good. Is there three times as much educational value in one product?
2. **Implementation.** Not only should implementation be reviewed as a criterion, but also the contract dates and payments should be tied to implementation at the colleges. While one vendor was quick to train colleges to use their product, two other vendors have not completed training after 100 days into the contract period.

The written Request for Proposal becomes the critical guide for the entire process. It must be a carefully developed tool. Our evaluation and adoption process, while lengthy, provided input from a committee and also from the faculty at the colleges who would be incorporating the courseware in their courses. It is absolutely essential to have buy-in from the faculty, as they know what they need. Obtaining a written commitment from the college president also provides a high level of exposure and expectation from the president that is essential for the success of a program.