

SAINT
PETER'S
UNIVERSITY



About Saint Peter's University

Enrollment: 3,300

Objective

Develop a distinctive online undergraduate degree in business that stands out in a crowded market

Solution

Academic and Grants Services

Business benefit

Increased recognition for the institution; a unique academic offering geared to help students succeed



Game on

St. Peter's University taps Ellucian's Academic and Grants Services to create a unique online learning experience

Seeking originality in a crowded field

St. Peter's University is a private Jesuit Roman Catholic institution located in Jersey City, New Jersey. Ranked among the top schools in the nation by Money magazine for "Colleges That Add the Most Value," St. Peter's strives to provide an intense, personalized education through a small student-to-faculty ratio for its 3,000 students, offering some 60 undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

In January 2015, St. Peter's began work to implement an online business degree program. The institution offered a traditional degree in business, but wanted to establish an online BA/BS

in business to reach adult learners, or those students who were unable to attend traditional college courses.

"What we wanted to do was to put the entire program online," says Elizabeth Kane, dean of St. Peter's School of Professional and Continuing Studies. "But we wanted a twist. We needed something to differentiate the program from all the others available."

Online education is rapidly becoming a crowded marketplace, with nearly every institution in the US offering at least some courses via the Internet—and business courses have become some of the most popular. Therefore, St. Peter's desired a program that would be an attractive alternative to the myriad online business courses currently available.

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St. Peter's University partnered with Ellucian's Academic and Grant Services' instructional design team to develop an online degree program that would be rigorous, challenging, and stand out from the crowd. Most importantly, the courses had to retain St. Peter's high academic standards—and the university wanted to go live with the program as quickly as possible.

Let the games begin

After consulting with Academic and Grants Services, St. Peter's elected to build a business curriculum using gameful-learning elements, more popularly known as "gamification."

Gamification is simply the use of game mechanics and design in non-gaming contexts. It takes the same theories around what makes games so exciting and immersive—such as the ability to increase your score, rewards, and so on—and applies it to an online learning experience.

Here's another way to look at it: When a student begins a college or university course, she begins with a perfect score of 100. Over time, as she completes assignments or takes exams, her score will decrease as she earns, say, an 89 percent on a test and a 75 percent on a research paper. Gamification, however, works differently: All students start with a baseline score of zero, and "earn" points from there—they are "climbing up" rather than "sliding down." "Students can choose how they're going to perform," says Kane. "This was something new and different."

In gaming parlance, students taking these courses "level up," which means that they gain enough points to advance to the next module. They can also earn badges and virtual rewards as they progress. One of the key benefits to this system is that students are in competition with themselves, and the concept of accruing "points" (rather than losing points) lends itself to a more positive, self-motivated learning experience.

But the courses themselves are not a game. These are full-fledged business courses, just as challenging as any conventional university course. The game-based assessments carefully tests what students know (and what they don't know), providing more

advanced questions or lessons to those students who demonstrate proficiency.

To develop a curriculum such as this, faculty involvement is essential. "We had a couple of challenges," says Kane. "First, our faculty wanted to maintain a close personal relationship with the students in these courses. Second, we had to help our faculty understand that these courses are not 'content driven,' as you'd find in a traditional business class. Instead, these online courses are outcomes driven. You have to change the way you look at it."

St. Peter's found that its faculty was eager to provide the direction and content for these courses. "I jumped at the chance," says Karen Beerbower, an adjunct professor at St. Peter's.

Working with Ellucian, Beerbower developed three courses and is currently at work on a fourth. By engaging with Ellucian's Academic and Grants Services on this project, she was able to develop courses such as Accounting I and II—which, she admits, may sometimes be daunting for students—to make sure that the content not only translated to the online version, but were comprehensive as well. "The breadth of information to pass on in courses like these is astounding," she says. "But we were able to create courses that were interesting and effective."

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ELIZABETH KANE, Dean, School of
Professional and Continuing Studies,
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Devin Rafferty, an assistant professor of economics at St. Peter's, partnered with Ellucian to provide content and assessments for the online courses for his statistics and economics courses, making sure that each module contained the right information for the students. The challenge for Rafferty was re-thinking what the students needed to know, and in what order. "When teaching classes in person," he says, "it becomes second nature to field certain questions at certain times, and you know how to help them through the material. But with online learning it's different. You have to think ahead and anticipate those questions before they arise."

Rafferty praises the game elements used in the courses. "Instead of knocking students down, you encourage them to 'level up,'" he says. "It encourages them to be more proactive in their learning." Students are not just passive vessels, receiving information from an instructor, but rather active participants in their own education.

The courses have also lent themselves well to running simulations for Rafferty's statistics classes, in which students analyze financial data and "role play" the

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part of a financial advisor to determine whether a financial decision is a good one or a bad one.

In all, St. Peter's and Ellucian have developed a total of 22 courses—all using game elements to provide a unique learning experience for students. And the project took shape over a short 18-month period.

An ongoing partnership

Thanks to the partnership between Ellucian and St. Peter's, the online courses have proven to be a success. "Working with Ellucian was wonderful," says Kane. "It was a perfect partnership: We are the experts in content, and they're the experts in delivery and design."

Kane notes that students have responded well to the courses. Although data is still being collected, anecdotal evidence suggests that the students appreciate the new approach to learning and feel more engaged and involved. But how have the faculty responded to the finished product? "Very well," says Kane. "For some, it's like their eyes have been opened to a new way of teaching. And good teachers want that."

For her part, Beerbower notes that the simple, elegant design of the interface coupled with the power and flexibility of the design has allowed her to provide a strong education for her students. "It's so user-friendly and organized," says Beerbower. "It's amazing how much information can be conveyed through these courses, using this type of learning."

Perfecting St. Peter's online business courses is an ongoing process—there's still more work to be done



to tweak them as they're rolled out—but Ellucian and St. Peter's continue their partnership to ensure that each course is as engaging and effective as possible.

For other institutions considering courses such as these, the administrators and faculty of St. Peter's offer a few pieces of advice: "Have a champion within the institution to nurture the process along," Kane advises. "You need someone to support it and champion the cause."

"Know where it fits," suggests Rafferty. "Examine your curriculum and find the right place for these kinds of courses."

"My advice to other schools?" says Beerbower. "They should work with Ellucian's Academic and Grants Services. They're miracle workers."

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