

**Research article**

# Developing an Online Masters of Education Program

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## Abstract

Online educational options have become an increasing requirement at most colleges and universities. Many institutions are faced with the daunting challenge of creating viable methods for delivering their existing face to face and/or traditional programs in either online or hybrid delivery formats. This case study details the process whereby the University of Alaska Fairbanks, School of Education, converted their primary Introduction to Research Methods course ED 601 to become a completely online asynchronously delivered course. The faculty then partnered with the e-Learning division of the University of Alaska to create the Online Innovation and Design (ONID) Masters of Education program option. This program is delivered entirely online and includes courses in Online Pedagogy, Current Issues in Technology, and core Research Methods. The process of creating interdepartmental partnerships, addressing faculty senate concerns, meeting graduate academic affair committees' requirements, as well as departmental biases led to a unique journey that other institutions may find beneficial as they tackle similar issues.

**Keywords:** Online Education, Masters In technology, New program

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## Developing an Effective Online Masters of Education Program at The University of Alaska Fairbanks

In today's educational landscape more and more educational institutions are either converting existing course content to an online format, or specifically creating new online course offerings to augment existing curriculums (LeBaron, J., & McFadden, A.,2008). This project discusses several considerations, aspects, and processes of such educational situations, with a primary focus on developing a coherent online degree offering. The second primary element of this study discusses how a program may create a curriculum that prepares faculty to deliver course content in a meaningful and educationally sound manner via online delivery systems (Miller, T., & Ribble, M. 2010).

## **Introduction -The Educational Setting and Challenge:**

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) serves a state that encompasses an immense physical size. We serve an area of approximately 5860,000 square miles, with over 3,000 miles of coast line, 3,000,000 lakes, and over 200 towns or villages that can only be accessed by boat, plane, or snow machine. Even our state capital of Juneau must be accessed by either, plane, boat, or online services. UAF must therefore utilize various educational methods to deliver our educational course offerings to these local areas in a clear, consistent, cost effective, and educationally effective manner, a large part of this effectiveness is online courses, and content (Crawford-Ferre, H., & Wiest, L. R., 2012).

### **The Philosophy of our Faculty:**

One of our faculties' primary goals was to create a program that operated as an educational whole, or as Skip Via one of contributing faculty so eloquently put it. "The team that conceived of and formulated the Online, Innovation, and Design degree (ONID) set out to design the program as a continuous, sequenced course of study rather than as an amalgam of courses picked from a catalog."

We felt it was critical for each of the courses to build upon previous course work and blend together as one comprehensive experience as a whole. This was done by assessing what we truly wanted the students to not just know, but what did we want them to be able demonstrate through-out the entire process. Once we established these educational outcomes we reviewed existing departmental program requirements, and discussed what courses we had to utilize, what courses we could utilize, and finally what courses would we have to create from scratch. The final degree program is listed as follows.

### **Master of Education in Online Innovation and Design Program Requirements**

Note: A [Degree Checklist](#) is also available.

1. Complete the [general university requirements](#).
2. Complete [M.Ed. degree requirements](#).
3. Complete the admissions requirements for the Master of Education degree.
4. Complete the following course requirements:  
ED F601--Introduction to Applied Social Science Research—3 credits  
ED F431 Web 2.0 Fundamentals—3 credits  
ED F432 Fundamentals of Media Design—3 credits  
ED F650 Current Issues in Technology—3 credits
5. Complete one of the following cross-cultural foundations with focus on Alaska context courses:  
ED/CCS F610--Education and Cultural Processes--3 credits  
ED/CCS F611--Culture, Cognition and Knowledge Acquisition--3 credits  
ED F616--Education and Socioeconomic Change--3 credits  
ED F620--Language, Literacy and Learning--3 credits  
ED F631—Culture, Community and Curriculum--3 credits  
ED F669--Reading Language and Culture--3 credits
6. Complete two of the following content classes  
ED F653 Instructional Design  
ED F654 Digital Citizenship, Internet Legal Issues, Copyright and Fair Use  
ED F655 Online Pedagogy  
ED F676 Supporting Learning in Diverse Systems  
ED F677 Digital Storytelling
7. Complete the following for the Thesis option  
ED/CCS F603--Field Study Research Methods--3 credits

or ED/CCS F604—Documenting Indigenous Knowledge Systems—3 credits  
ED F699--Thesis--6 credits

8. Complete the following for the Project option:  
ED/CCS F603--Field Study Research Methods--3 credits  
or ED/CCS F604—Documenting Indigenous Knowledge Systems—3 credits  
ED F698--Project—6 credits

Complete the following for the Comprehensive Exam option:  
Nine graduate-level elective credits approved by candidate's graduate committee--9 credits  
Comprehensive Examination

### **Materials and Methods-Working within Established Departmental Programs:**

During the early stages of the ONID program development it was decided that we would should create the program of study as a strand to our existing Masters of Education (M.Ed.) and graduate programs. There were many benefits to this decision. As many of our faculty were skeptical of a completely online program. This skepticism is normal (Crawford-Ferre, H., & Wiest, L. R.,2012) but must be accounted for.

1. Utilizing an existing M.Ed. Program eliminated the need to create a whole new Master's Degree Program.
2. We could utilize existing core research courses as a basis for the ONID program.
3. We did not need to justify hiring as many new faculty since existing core research was on established work loads.
4. We could utilize existing advising, which was found to be critical to the entire process.
5. No new infrastructure was required and that meant almost no new physical resources impacting the budget.
6. Faculty were more open to a new strand of existing programs.

We also held several open forum meetings to discuss the direction the ONID faculty were going in course design and program philosophy. The team also openly shared access to the courses being developed, spoke at faculty meetings, posted drafts on Google docs, etc. This helped build acceptance of the process and thereby the program.

However as we continued to shape the course content and delivery system it became very apparent that the SOE faculty would need to seek outside expertise as most of us were very adept at more traditional content delivery methods, but we were not fully up to speed with online delivery modalities.

This aspect can be a large initial hurdle to university faculties (Baltaci-Goktalay, S., & Ocak, M., 2006). Fortunately for the UAF SOE faculty we had an established E-Learning Department that was willing to partner with us in this process.

### **Creating the Partnership: Subject Matter Experts partnering with E-Learning Instructional Designers.**

The importance of creating this partnership cannot be overstated. E-Learning brought a whole new level of Online Education understanding to the developmental canvas of the ONID program. There were many aspects to this partnership that helped establish the pillars to our success but here a few of the most important aspects.

1. Experience in Online delivery systems.
2. Support staff that could answer both technical and educational questions.
3. Utilized an existing university online infrastructure system that included but was not limited to: LMS knowledge, phone support, course shell creation, online pedagogy, digital citizenship, online support.
4. Administrators that understood both university and online policies.
5. E-Learning faculty that could teach courses SOE faculty did not have required subject matter expertise in.
6. Training in how to work with faculty with limited technology skills.
7. Knowledge of varied technological tools to meet the educational objective.

This type of varied and sustained support has been found to be a key aspect of long term faculty development in online content delivery and success (Wang, H., Gould, L. V., & King, D., 2009).

### **Content and Course Selection:**

Once we solidified the partnership with SOE and UAF E-learning, we revisited discussions in earnest as to the overall outcomes we were looking for the students to demonstrate. Since the group decided to incorporate ONID as part of the existing M.Ed. umbrella. There were existing departmental requirements that had to be included in our program, these requirements are as follows.

1. Complete the general university requirements.
2. Complete M.Ed. degree requirements.
3. Complete the admissions requirements for the Master of Education degree.
4. Complete ED 601 Introduction to Research Methods—3 credits
5. Complete one of the following cross-cultural foundations with focus on Alaska context courses:  
ED/CCS F610--Education and Cultural Processes--3 credits  
ED/CCS F611--Culture, Cognition and Knowledge Acquisition--3 credits  
ED F616--Education and Socioeconomic Change--3 credits  
ED F620--Language, Literacy and Learning--3 credits  
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6. Complete the following for the Thesis option  
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7. Complete the following for the Project option:  
ED/CCS F603--Field Study Research Methods--3 credits  
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ED F698--Project—6 credits

Complete the following for the Comprehensive Exam option:  
Nine graduate-level elective credits approved by candidate's graduate committee--9 credits  
Comprehensive Examination

The major benefit of using an existing master's degree program framework is the ONID program created a level of acceptance from other faculty who questioned our direction on online masters programs. This acceptance can be difficult for many faculty to accept (Mitchell, B., & Geva-May, I., 2009).

### **Degree Specific Courses:**

Once the design team accounted for required courses we realized we had fifteen units or about five courses that we could incorporate for ONID degree candidates. This number is half of the degree and was equivalent to the other M.Ed. offerings. This limited number of course credits did require that we be very judicious in our requirements, while leaving room for elective courses that would allow candidates to meet their personal educational goals.

The design team decided on three ONID base required courses. These courses required a certain level of technical skill sets from our students and allowed future courses to know that the candidates had a specific core knowledge that the other instructors could expect from candidates entering their courses. This was very helpful as the faculty could almost eliminate any technology based skills remediation in many of the other courses.

These three courses are as follows:

ED F431 Web 2.0 Fundamentals—3 credits  
ED F432 Fundamentals of Media Design—3 credits  
ED F650 Current Issues in Technology—3 credits

The program design team then narrowed the educational focus to the following options.

Complete two of the following content classes  
ED F653 Instructional Design  
ED F654 Digital Citizenship, Internet Legal Issues, Copyright and Fair Use  
ED F655 Online Pedagogy  
ED F676 Supporting Learning in Diverse Systems  
ED F677 Digital Storytelling

The emphasis being on how to teach candidates to teach using online philosophies, pedagogical techniques, and identifying appropriate technical tools. The design team also emphasized the importance of digital citizenship and that some candidates would be the “tech “ person for their program at that there would be a need on how to implement, design, and maintain various networks, hardware configurations, and server based environments.

### **Curriculum Review Committee:**

The next substantive hurdles faced by the ONID design team was the curriculum review committees. At UAF there are both departmental curriculum review committees and university wide curriculum review committees. The university wide committees are then sub-divided into graduate and undergraduate programs. Since ONID incorporated 400 level courses as well as 600 level courses, course materials went before at least two of the three curriculum committees.

The biggest challenges we faced were as follows:

1. Equating online courses to traditional course “contact hours”.
2. Developing understanding of multiple forms of student instructor communication. (Brown, A.2014)
3. Online courses are less rigorous then face to face courses (Bates, A. W.,2000)
4. Review time of committees, once submitted the courses may not be reviewed for several months.
5. Existing university policies are outdated for online course options.

Through great patience, and the willingness to compromise, and thoughtful communication the program was approved. The group did learn that when implementing a new program at university level requires a couple of years from inception to official recognition.

### **Results and Discussion-Aligning to the Standards:**

The University of Alaska Fairbanks is a National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Therefore any program from SOE must be aligned to national standards. This is an interesting and often overlooked piece of program development (Pape, L., Wicks, M., & International Association for K-12 Online, L.,2009), which in this case is complicated by the fact that NCATE is now combining with TEAC to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). As a starting point the design team aligned the ONID program to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards. This type of standards alignment is critical as developing a program that does not meet or is not aligned to national accreditor’s standards could be viewed as sub-par.

The initial ISTE alignment is as follows.

### **UAF Master of Education in Online Innovation and Design**

### Key assignments

Course	Assignment	ISTE Standards	AK Teacher Standards
ED 431 Web 2.0 Fundamentals: Participate, Produce, Publish	Personal Learning Network and ONID Portfolio	1. a, b, c 2. a, b 3. a, c 5. a, c, d	1, 7
ED 432 Fundamentals of Media Design	Video Podcasting	3. a, b, c	8
ED 650 Current Issues in Technology	Personal Technology Management Plan	4. a, b, c, d	3, 6, 7
ED 653 Instructional Design	Online learning module	1. a, b, c, d	2
ED 654 Digital Citizenship, Internet Legal Issues, Copyright and Fair Use	Contemporary legal issues research paper	4. a, b, c, d	4, 7
ED 655 Online Pedagogy	Project-based lesson plan Personal philosophy statement	2. 4. b	1, 2, 5
ED 676 Supporting Learning in Diverse Systems	Capstone Project	1. a, b, c, d 2. a, b 3. a, c, d 5. a, b, c, d	6
ED 677 Digital Storytelling	Peer Review Individual Project	1. d 2. a, d 3. a, b, c	3, 4, 6
ED 6— Cross cultural foundations course	Summarizing Paper		3, 7
ED 601 Intro. to Applied Educational Research	Literature Review		1, 2, 4, 5, 6
ED 603 Field Research Methods	Mini Research Project		1, 2, 4, 5

### Conclusions-Summary:

The creation and conversion to online educational delivery systems is a challenging prospect for many university faculties and programs (Journell, W., 2012). The challenge can become a very rewarding process for the program involved if the following conditions can met:

1. Commit to the value of online educational delivery systems.
2. Partner with another department that understands and has the expertise in online modalities.
3. Advising and support staff are in place to manage both technical and programmatic questions.
4. Create a program that meets or exceeds the academic institutions existing standards of rigor.
5. Incorporate the program as part of the current departmental offerings and not a stand-alone entity.
6. Patience and teamwork can overcome all issues.
7. Align the program to the appropriate national standards.

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