



## Partnership, Innovation and Growth: A Case Study

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*When we look at successful partners, a few key characteristics stand out: the ability to work in a way that leverages the relative strengths of the two parties; a willingness to embrace multiple delivery options as an important contribution to the academic portfolio; the capacity to identify and act on new opportunities; and consistent support from institutional and academic leadership that explicitly links new initiatives with the institution's strategic vision.*

Synergis positions itself as a PSP: a Premier Service Provider offering marketing, enrollment management, academic and data integration services. It prides itself on assisting partner institutions to design, launch and grow high quality, innovative classroom, online and blended programs. We are convinced that, together, our different strengths and experiences can be combined to create a powerful dynamic that can significantly advance institutional mission and long-term sustainability.

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Each institution brings its own constellation of factors to the partnership. We are often asked, "What makes a successful partnership?" Rather than speak in the abstract, a more powerful answer can be gleaned from a case study of actual success at a Synergis partner we'll call Dorian University. Throughout its relationship with Synergis, Dorian has demonstrated the qualities and actions that have made our partnership a truly productive one, and they are worth examining as a road map for partner success.

When thinking about what makes our partnership so effective, a few key items stand out:

### **Online Learning Forms an Important Part of the Academic Portfolio**

As I've noted in a previous piece, sustainability for most small, under-endowed institutions will require a strategy that is acutely sensitized to the needs of the higher education market. While much of higher education is flat or declining in terms of enrollments, online education is one of the few bright spots bucking this trend. It continues to grow and today one in seven students is enrolled in a fully online program. Of particular note is that the most significant growth is at

private, not-for profit institutions. And demand for online learning is growing among both “traditional” and “non-traditional” students.<sup>i</sup> As a result, institutions need to embrace online learning as an important part of the academic portfolio. Doing so aligns the institution with market demand and also permits an expansion of the institutional “footprint” to new regional markets.

**Synergis Expertise and Institutional Willingness Can Create New Opportunities.** Dorian initially approached Synergis for assistance in migrating select academic programs into a fully online format. The University recognized that Synergis had service expertise and bandwidth that would enable them to jumpstart an online presence. At the same time, its faculty were filled with entirely appropriate concerns about maintaining academic quality and, it must be admitted, feared that working with a third party service provider would dilute the character of the Dorian curriculum.

Nonetheless, Dorian used the Synergis Academic Services team to their fullest potential. They were honest enough to admit that they did not have tremendous experience with online education. While they certainly had strong opinions about specific topics, they were open-minded enough to listen to what we advised and accepted our help in implementing best practices. The first school of Dorian to use the services was the School of Education. They came to the table thinking that we could help them facilitate the creation of specific courses. They came away from the process with a newfound respect for the level of knowledge and cutting edge techniques that the Synergis team could provide as an advisor for curriculum design. The result? In little more than a year, faculty across multiple schools and programs were reassured about the quality of their online programs and came to value the truly collegial process that Synergis had promised in its program development work.

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So successful was the initial work that the University expanded its partnership activities to include its on ground programs for 21<sup>st</sup> century students as well. These programs were focused on business, education, and nursing. This was a critical decision for Dorian. Given the generally problematic trends in business programs, fielding multiple programs from various schools expanded the academic portfolio of the University and the resulting market presence and enrollment gains created a dynamic that allowed all ships to rise.

As a result of the tremendous work we have done together, Dorian has seen overall enrollments grow by 26% and the proportion of students in fully online programs is growing dramatically.

### **Build on Strengths, Look for Opportunities, and Act Decisively**

A major key to institutional growth and stability is the expansion of an institution's program offerings. A logical and efficient way to do so is to examine current areas of strength and imagine new ways of delivering old programs as well as ways to expand into new, yet related, areas. To do so requires a certain level of confidence, honest evaluation of options and, most importantly, the willingness to work quickly to act on what has been discovered. The measured, conservative approach traditionally used in the academy needs to give way to a process that collects data to make informed decisions, quickly understanding that no decision is 100% guaranteed to be right. Higher education is a highly competitive industry and the ability to identify an opportunity and get there first is a primary ingredient for success.

Dorian worked to introduce online learning to its masters level education programs and simultaneously redesigned the curriculum into a more streamlined package that was specifically aligned with accreditation outcomes. The institution initially thought it would launch the online version while maintaining a more traditional on ground delivery as well, but leadership quickly determined that the growth opportunity evinced by student demand in this area was in fully online programs and that attempting to maintain both delivery modalities was taxing its academic resources and splintering the extremely small face-to-face student population looking at this option. The academic leadership at Dorian reluctantly said goodbye to the old familiar way of delivering their masters programs and threw itself wholeheartedly into the online modality. The result? From a moribund program in an enrollment death spiral with student enrollment in the 70's in 2013, the newly designed online program grew to 366 students in two years.

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In the same way, the University perceived an opportunity to create an innovative Ed.D. program that built on its traditional expertise, but benefitted from its newfound skill in online instruction and curriculum design. The newly launched Ed.D. has experienced enrollments double the University's original projections, with 128 students in this program.

Traditionally strong in Nursing, the University and its academic leadership was open to considering ways to expand access to high-quality nursing education. A study of job and educational trends, as well as a creative approach to thinking about ways to help create an expanded body of professionally qualified nurses, led the University to quickly create an accelerated second bachelor's degree program leading to the RN in 2015 with an ambitious expansion into multiple sites. To date, the first site enrollments have exceeded all targets with enrollments at 213 and the University is poised to launch a second site for the ABSN in 2016.

The University is aggressively pursuing other partnership opportunities in Nursing and Health Care fields as well, convinced that the Synergis relationship provides critical support in identifying and seizing opportunities.

### **Strong Support from Institutional and Academic Leadership**

Successful partners exhibit clear, consistent and widely shared strategic insights into challenges and opportunities. This provides campus leadership with the ability to maintain long-term focus while explicitly linking shorter-term action to wider goals. The constant communication of and discussion regarding goals engages academic leadership at various levels and builds the critical buy-in and support needed to effectively move initiatives forward. Presidential leadership is key, setting a consistent theme throughout the institution that is invaluable in generating enthusiastic support from chief academic officers, deans, and faculty.

Dorian has consistently pursued clear goals in terms of increasing its online expertise to increase enrollments, to linking the success of “non-traditional” programs to overall institutional health, and supporting program development that offers a sound return on investment that also furthers the University’s educational mission. Leadership at all levels has been fully engaged in the process, leading to a true partnership where together we have proven capable of doing great things.

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### **The Author**

John J. Donohue is a higher educational professional with more than twenty-eight years’ experience in higher education teaching, administration and leadership. He has served as tenured professor, dean, vice president, provost and acting president. He is an expert on curricular design and program development and currently serves as Chief Academic and Development Officer for Synergis Education.

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<sup>i i</sup> Keypath Education. 2016. 2016 Higher Education Benchmarks. Retrieved from <http://info.keypathedu.com/the-2016-higher-education-benchmarks>. See also (See IPEDS data <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>