



Targeted Innovation Case Study:  
the DEMSN

By: Dr. John Donohue



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*Over almost a decade of operation, Synergis Education has had the opportunity to work with colleges and universities seeking to meet student demand with high quality, accessible and innovative programs—what we call “targeted innovation.” In recent years, we have continued to fine-tune our approach to partnerships. Our recent experience working to design and launch Direct-Entry Master of Science in Nursing (DEMSN) programs serves as a basis for a case study on successful institutional innovation.*

### Creativity is Not Enough

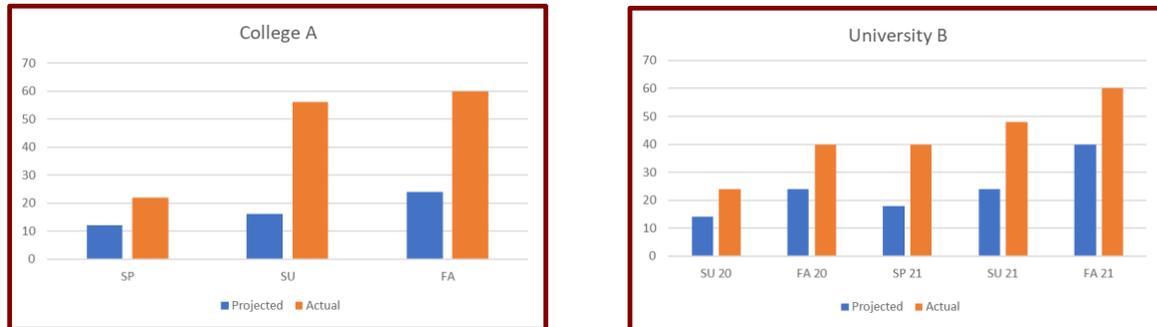
Years ago a writer in the Harvard Business Journal reflected on the enthusiasm for innovation and noted ...“advocates have generally failed to distinguish between the relatively easy process of being creative in the abstract and the infinitely more difficult process of being innovationist in the concrete”.<sup>1</sup> In academia, where ideas abound, this is especially true. In many ways, thinking is easy but doing is hard.

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This has been brought home to us by recent experiences helping multiple clients launch a relatively innovative program, the Direct-Entry Master of Science in Nursing (DEMSN)—a program designed for individuals holding bachelor’s degrees in a non-nursing field looking to become RNs. There are, at last count, fewer than 70 of these programs in the country. They offer students the opportunity to qualify to sit for nursing licensure and utilize graduate financial aid—something the more common Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) cannot.

At Synergis, we recognized the potential for such a program and were fortunate in identifying partner institutions interested in launching the DEMSN. We were always confident that unique program design, academic partners with high quality nursing programs, and strong market demand were a recipe for success. The results to date show demand exceeding our projections by between 177% and 265% for the first year of these programs at different institutions in discrete markets. The proof of concept was dramatic and gratifying. Our partners have been

pleased with the results, but also surprised with the strength of student response. Actual performance metrics for two partner institutions bear this out (the blue bars represent original projections; the orange bars show actual demand):



Clearly, this is a great problem to have—a high-quality program, coupled with a strong market demand and most importantly, a high-quality prospective student. But in higher education, institutional environments are not always well-adapted to flexibility. And an entrepreneurial mindset is often not widespread in the academy. Our experiences dealing with both the strengths and challenges of institutions have provided invaluable insights about the process of scaling up a program as powerful as the DEMSN. As a result, we can identify important factors critical for success.

When we look back on our experiences, certain issues consistently emerge. While not insurmountable (and our successful experience with partners underscores that point), they can nonetheless contribute toward growing pains for a new programmatic initiative like the DEMSN.

Here's some advice:

- **Break down the silos**
- **Answer the question, "What's in it for me?"**
- **Admit that great opportunity demands great effort**
- **Acknowledge that old wine in new bottles just creates a mess**

### **The Silos**

Colleges and universities are highly compartmentalized organizations, and the occupants of these silos often do not communicate very well. The appeal of a scalable degree program with high market demand and strong return on investment is very apparent to senior management. For faculty and others who will be charged with delivering and supporting such programs, however, it is important for leadership to clearly and repeatedly communicate the strategic importance of an initiative like the DEMSN and the basic outline of how it will be implemented.

As individuals, we each think in a specific way and often assume other people share our perspective, knowledge, and opinions. But anyone operating in a complex organization knows that this is not so. Different groups have different types of expertise and different concerns. For academic leaders, embarking on an initiative like the DEMSN requires providing multiple constituencies with the information they will need to effectively —and enthusiastically— assist in program implementation. Taking the time to create a shared vision for the program and explicitly linking it to the institutional mission is vital.

Too often in our experience, we have been confronted with key campus constituents largely unaware of the initiative at hand —and their role in it! Not a recipe for success. On the other hand, our most successful partners have ensured that all stakeholders are consulted and well informed. And the extra effort needed to do so pays off in terms of efficacy, morale, and program success.

### **What's in It for Me?**

For senior leaders concerned with institutional finances, high-demand programs with strong returns on investment seem like a no-brainer. Farther down the organizational food chain, however, these advantages are not often apparent. This underscores the need for effective communication from institutional leaders. And effective communication must speak to people in terms they understand and discuss things they value.

In higher education, growing a new program typically provides little or no direct incentive for instructors and support staff—their salaries and schedules are fixed. Offering financial incentives for attracting and retaining students is rightfully prohibited—it poses a significant potential conflict of interest and could undermine academic standards. Professors in particular are focused on quality, not quantity. The financial needs of an institution at a macro level has little or no relevance for the instructional rank and file, and they would rightfully reject out of hand any suggestion that they modify standards in pursuit of ROI.

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But, as anyone familiar with Maslow's hierarchy knows, people are motivated by multiple factors. Higher educational professionals are convinced that their work is an intrinsic and social good. While a new programmatic initiative may appear on first blush to offer a professor the prospect of more work and little direct reward, the idea, for instance, that a new program like the DEMSN can help create new highly qualified nurses at a time when they are desperately needed, certainly appeals to the fundamental values of academics. And effective organizational leadership can help in pointing this out.

In addition, a clear explanation of how growing enrollments can provide new resources to undergird the institution’s mission is a powerful point. Expanding tuition revenue is a means to an end for staff increases, facilities improvement, the expansion of library holdings, and increased professional development. As such, a new program like the DEMSN is a powerful opportunity for needed, welcome, and tangible benefits to the academic endeavor.

### Great Opportunity Demands Great Effort

In higher education, there are no silver bullets and no magic ingredients. There are good ideas but pulling these ideas out of the air and making them touch the ground requires a great deal of work. We may as well admit it, and act accordingly. The amount of planning and the degree of attention to detail needed to launch new, high quality, scalable programs can be daunting—at Synergis our implementation playbook contains over 600 interdependent tasks.

We have found that implementing these types of programs not only takes more work, but also calls us to attack challenges differently. In higher education, a great deal of activity is codified and standardized. Whether it’s budgeting or staffing, calendars or scheduling, new activities are copies of the ones that have gone before. In some ways this may be a good thing—the best predictor of performance is performance, and the tried and true should not be discounted. What we have found, however, is that launching a highly successful program like the DEMSN presents conceptual and operational challenges to the status quo.

SECTION COST CALCULATOR by FACULTY TYPE											
YEAR		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Credits	TOTAL	43.0	150.0	613.0	698.0	873.0	896.0	896.0	896.0	833.0	496.0
	Didactic	33.0	145.0	393.0	501.0	607.0	620.0	620.0	620.0	620.0	385.0
	Clinical	9.0	3.0	160.0	131.0	197.0	207.0	207.0	207.0	120.0	75.0
	Simulation	1.0	2.0	60.0	66.0	69.0	69.0	69.0	69.0	93.0	36.0
Faculty Cost											
PT (Adj/Overload)	1 cr										
Didactic cost	\$600	\$19,800	\$87,000	\$235,800	\$300,600	\$364,200	\$372,000	\$372,000	\$372,000	\$372,000	\$231,000
Clinical Cost	\$750	\$6,750	\$2,250	\$120,000	\$98,250	\$147,750	\$155,250	\$155,250	\$155,250	\$90,000	\$56,250
Simulation Cost	\$750	\$750	\$1,500	\$45,000	\$49,500	\$51,750	\$51,750	\$51,750	\$51,750	\$69,750	\$27,000
All PT Cost		\$27,300	\$90,750	\$400,800	\$448,350	\$563,700	\$579,000	\$579,000	\$579,000	\$531,750	\$314,250
FT											
Annual Load	30										
Avg salary	80000										
Per credit	1 cr										
All FT Cost	\$2,667	\$114,667	\$400,000	\$1,634,667	\$1,861,333	\$2,328,000	\$2,389,333	\$2,389,333	\$2,389,333	\$2,221,333	\$1,322,667
Fac Type Ratio											
Type	Proportion										
PT	100%	\$25,800	\$90,000	\$367,800	\$418,800	\$523,800	\$537,600	\$537,600	\$537,600	\$499,800	\$297,600
FT	0%	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
	NET	\$25,800	\$90,000	\$367,800	\$418,800	\$523,800	\$537,600	\$537,600	\$537,600	\$499,800	\$297,600

Standard scheduling and staffing models are basically sound. They can accommodate student demand within the range of typical institutional experience. A nursing program that admits a

single class of 30 students annually, for instance, is designed for just that. What happens when you admit 3 classes annually (Fall, Spring and Summer) and the cohorts contain 60 students each semester (and there are people on the waiting list)? A great problem to have, but how do you plan for course offerings, staffing, clinical placements, and budgets over multiple years? We've found that existing models break down under the strain. And, as a result, we've had to create planning tools to assist our partners.

### **Old Wine in New Bottles Just Creates a Mess**

A difference in approach need not imply a dilution of quality. But it is often the case that non-traditional programs require non-traditional approaches.

With a high-demand program like the DEMSN, institutions are faced with unexpected volume combined with a consumer mentality. Prospective students are older, highly motivated, knowledgeable about their options, and convinced that the program will provide them with a concrete career pathway.

As non-traditional learners, they value three things: access, efficiency, and relevance. The question of relevance is well-established—these are individuals who have decided on a career in nursing. But they are also highly goal oriented, which means that their selection of an institution is strongly influenced by issues of access and efficiency. These students have typically created a list of quality institutions, with the program they want, prior to application. As a result, they are not focused on one specific institution as much as the one that best meets their scheduling needs and provides nimble services related to admissions, advisement, and enrollment.

With these students, the ability of an institution to offer multiple starting points in any given year is paramount. In our work with colleges and universities, institutions that seek to restrict entry points put themselves at a competitive disadvantage with the highest quality students. Students also look for programs that provide clear and compact pathways to completion. While for academics, more courses equate to better programs, these students are looking for the most time-efficient and direct method of gaining the skills and credentials they need to achieve their goals. In this environment, a five-semester program has significant advantages over a six-semester program. For these students, every extra three or four months of a semester means additional time when they will not be working as nurses (and not getting a return on their educational investment). Their goal is to get out of school and become registered nurses; the program that provides the quickest path to this goal is the one they will select.

The sheer demand for these programs is also a challenge. Institutions must always act in ways to ensure academic quality, but they also need to plan for expansion and growth—often at a pace and level that is new to them. Looking at the strong interest from qualified applicants,

schools may gaze with satisfaction at waiting lists for their available program slots—it is, after all, a tribute to the merit of their programs. But from a larger perspective, this does nothing to solve the societal need for more nurses. Nursing schools turned away 75,029 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2018.<sup>ii</sup>

Societal issues aside, the institution that defers admitting students in the expectation that they will abide comfortably on a wait list doesn't understand their market audience. These students want a specific program and will enroll in whichever institution provides them access to it. Placing them on a wait list merely sends them to the next institution on their list.

*Academia, like nature, abhors a vacuum.*

In addition, academia, like nature, abhors a vacuum. An institution that launches a successful DEMSN program will not have to wait long before other institutions follow suit. Long-term success for a college or university hinges on the ability to establish a high-quality program that meets a broad spectrum of student needs while simultaneously capturing a significant market share of interested students.

The bottom line is that the sheer success of a program like the DEMSN will challenge an institution to do things differently, with a greater eye towards the student as opposed to institutional needs, and at a speed and scale that is unfamiliar.

The good news is that, while challenging, it is possible to launch a successful, high-quality DEMSN program. With planning, transparency, and flexibility, institutions can meet the challenge in strategic and tactical terms, providing students with a quality educational experience leading to rewarding careers as nurses.

And Synergis stands ready to help.

### **The Author**

John J. Donohue is a higher educational professional with more than thirty 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</sup> Levitt, Theodore. 2002 Creativity Is Not Enough. *Harvard Business Review*, August 2002. <https://hbr.org/2002/08/creativity-is-not-enough>

<sup>ii</sup> American Association of Colleges of Nursing. 2019. Nursing Faculty Shortage. <https://www.aacnnursing.org/News-Information/Fact-Sheets/Nursing-Faculty-Shortage>