



A Longitudinal Case Study of Transnational Distance Education Informs Future Transnational Partnerships

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1. Introduction

1.1 Culture and context

To the untrained observer, Hawaii and American Samoa may appear to be markedly similar in terms of location and population. Both are islands, in the Pacific, with warm weather and a predominantly local population. However, the two islands differ significantly. Developing an understanding of the cultural, political, and financial issues unique to each place was a vital component in building an effective transnational partnership. For example, introducing a 100% online degree program in American Samoa sounds like a good idea. That is, until one considers the fact that not all teachers have access to reliable Internet connections or that teachers in American Samoa place great importance on face-to-face, oral communication with their instructors [1].

We need to consider the contexts in which teachers and their students operate [2]. Too often, in this era of standardized teacher education programs, we simply go forward with what sounds like the best idea, without considering the underlying factors that may render the choice unsuccessful. To achieve UHM's goal of creating caring, knowledgeable, and effective teachers, one must carefully study the context in which the teachers will teach. Anything less would be disastrous. Thus, transnational education programs must consider adapting course content and delivery methods if the context of one campus differs significantly from the other.

1.2 Teacher licensure

The transnational partnership between the UHM and the ASDOE was created to provide undergraduate and graduate education degrees to teachers in American Samoa. The same standards for degree completion are used in Hawai'i and in American Samoa, although teacher candidates in Hawai'i complete the State of Hawai'i licensure requirements while teacher candidates in American Samoa work towards fulfilling ASDOE certification requirements. Teachers in American Samoa competing the UHM programs are eligible for licensure in Hawaii and in other U.S. states depending on the state's licensing requirements and passing Praxis scores.

2. Background

2.1 American Samoa cultural issues

Every educational institution exists within a larger social system. The ASDOE is part of American Samoan politics, economics, and culture that have been influenced by over 100 years of affiliation with U.S. educational philosophy and values [3] [4].

The successful partnership between the UHM and the ASDOE has had a profound influence on American Samoan teaching theory and practice. Total enrollment has significantly increased since the project's inception (see Figure 1). In fact, the number of *different* individuals has steadily increased to a high of 224 in 2007.

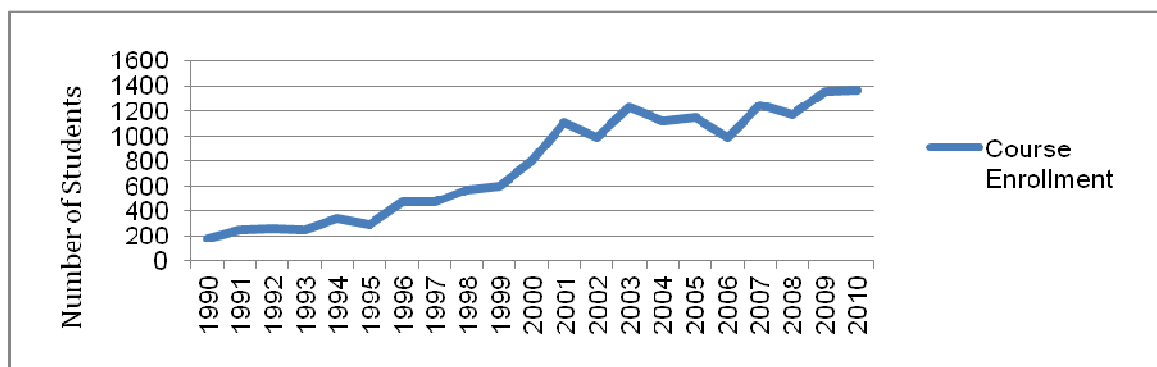


Figure 1. Course Enrollment from 1990 - 2010.



The number of courses has also increased (see Figure 2). These enrollment numbers illustrate the UHM teacher education programs' influence on American Samoan teaching theory and practice. The seventy-one courses offered by UHM in 2010 represents the most taught in the history of the project and is nearly seven times the number of courses offered in 1990.

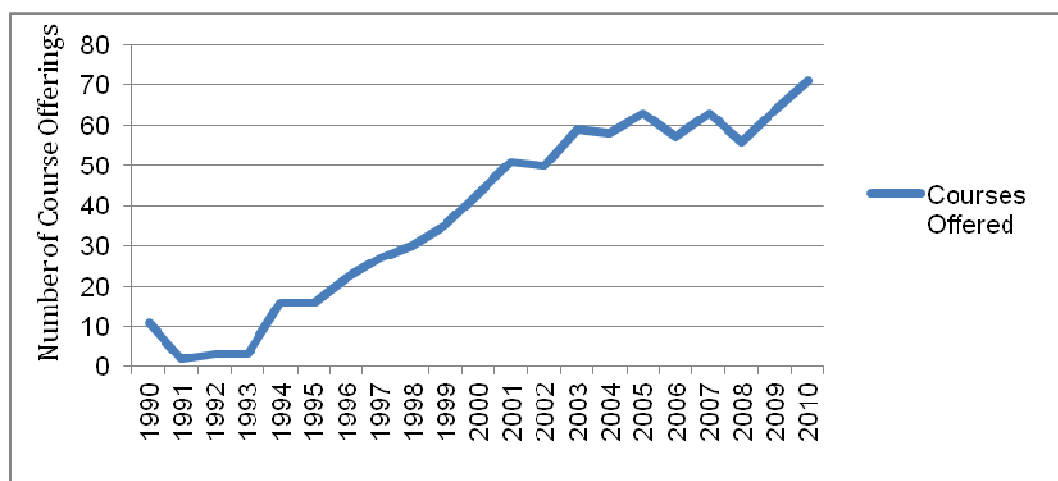


Figure 2. Number of Course Offerings from 1990 - 2010.

2.2 Method of transnational degree delivery

The UHM provides an in-service teacher education program for a Bachelor of Education degree in Elementary Education. Teacher candidates are clustered into cohorts, ranging in size from 13 to 35 members. Each cohort is aligned with Samoan cultural *aiga* values because experience has indicated a positive impact on candidate retention. Each cohort has an on-island cohort coordinator who is a vital component of this transnational distance learning model, since they provide students with face-to-face access to someone familiar with both the local culture and customs of American Samoa and UHM.

The Cohort Program provides an established sequence of courses using UHM resources like *Laulima* and *Illuminate!*, and readily available resources like, *Skype* and *Google Docs*. On average, students complete the program in 2-1/2 years. Sequenced instruction, consistent mentoring, peer support and team building are core components of the model and students who fall out-of-sequence can be moved to another cohort.

Teacher candidates entering the University of Hawaii American Samoa Teacher Education Program (UHASTEP) have between one to 20 years of classroom teaching experience. In 2010, there were four cohorts serving 147 teachers. Classes are currently held at local public schools because UHM has never had an independent instructional facility. All required UHASTEP courses are offered either "live" or through distance learning technology. The three full-time university cohort coordinators and one field supervisor that reside in American Samoa offer instruction for the majority of the courses. Temporary instructors, both indigenous and non-indigenous, are also hired to teach UHASTEP courses in American Samoa, generally over the three to five week Summer sessions. These courses can be 100% face-to-face, 100% on-line using *Illuminate!*, *Laulima* and other resources, or an online-face-to-face hybrid.

2.3 Issues

Typological analyses of the UHASTEP and participants' interview transcripts revealed emergent themes for consideration when establishing transnational education policy. The major lessons that emerged are issues such as cultural relevance, authentic pedagogy, and programmatic risks like communication.

2.3.1 Cultural relevance

In Samoan culture, communal structures such as the village and family are strong. The cohort model is based on these values. American Samoan teacher cohorts each design uniforms unique to their group, as is the custom in a Samoan village, business, *aiga*, or church community.

Figure 1 shows the positive impact of the cohort structure on candidate retention rates and course attendance. Similarly, online course attendance is much greater when candidates meet together and the online *Illuminate!* class



is projected to the group. When UHM first began offering online courses, graduate candidates were given an *Illuminate!* link and told to independently log into the classes. Class attendance rates dropped. Candidates face real pressures to perform family and community duties and may choose to miss class to fulfill these obligations when they are not held accountable to a group of their colleagues.

2.3.2 Authentic pedagogy

UHM education instructors resisted distance learning until technology advanced to the point where they could practice what they teach. *Illuminate!* and *Blackboard* technologies now enable instructors to model interactive constructivist teaching strategies. For example, instructors can use breakout rooms for small group discussions, engage candidates in Webquests, poll participants, facilitate collaborative PowerPoint presentations, utilize educational gaming, and provide audio/video demonstrations. The university also utilizes *Laulima* for collaborative document sharing, and *Illuminate!* class recordings, blogs and forum postings.

2.3.3 Programmatic risks: Communication

Communicating across an ocean is difficult, particularly when Internet connections are unreliable. Typically, problems arise between the transnational university program administrators and local partners as well as between the teacher candidates and the university. Administrative issues involve the exchange of budgets, contracts and accountability reports. It is not uncommon for budget and contract drafts to be exchanged multiple times via email. Although revisions are carefully dated in the document title, old copies are too often mistakenly processed, causing miscommunication between the two parties.

The communication between teacher candidates and the transnational university can also be a major challenge. In theory, it should be easy to provide teacher candidates with application materials and course registration numbers for online registration, but in practice, each semester is filled with application and registration problems. Internet and computer access limitations combined with old-fashioned human errors complicate the entire process. One solution was to hire an administrative assistant in American Samoa as the point person for communication between UHM and American Samoa.

3. Solutions and Recommendations

Three areas emerged from our work with teachers in American Samoa that present future opportunities.

3.1 Developing a sense of culture and community

The UHM cohort model has been successful in creating and maintaining the personal relationships that are a key component for success in American Samoa by emphasizing participant participation in the creation of shared governance. Access to both synchronous and asynchronous communication allows both students and instructors to remain in close contact. Face-to-face meetings, however, are essential because they help build a sense of community among all participants. The authors agree unequivocally with Ho and Burniske who suggest that “without honoring the local community, and making time for its renewal on a regular basis, the online community would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain [5].”

3.2 Dealing with new technology

Having access to technology does not mean that it will be fully utilized. This statement is true in American Samoa for a variety of reasons. First, cost prohibits many teachers from affording a dedicated computer or high-speed Internet access at home. We have found that having cohorts meet in groups, at specific sites that have the appropriate hardware, can alleviate this problem. Second, although *Illuminate!* and *Laulima* provide opportunities for transnational distance learning, the learning curve for teachers is much steeper when they cannot talk to someone face-to-face when questions arise. Local cohort coordinators can be invaluable in solving these problems.

3.3 Improving communication

Miscommunication can occur at any time, but it is quicker and easier to clarify things when one is face-to-face. The budget and contract draft problem could have been solved by using something like *Google Docs* or *Dropbox* where the newest version of the written document could be posted and read by all parties. However, because of the sensitive nature of the material, the medium would need to be secure. Gathering digital signatures would decrease the time spent routing documents from one office to another. Hogan and Kedrayate support this view, stating “multi-signed pieces of paper need to give way to online services to serve new educational markets [6].” If voice or video communication were necessary, a program like *Skype* would work.

Teacher-student communication can also be a major challenge. For registration issues, access to sites with clear directions and flowcharts would be a good start, but we have experienced problems even when the instructions and procedures have been clearly explained several times. To solve this problem, we can use of *Illuminate!* where visual



examples can be presented and questions can be answered in real-time to “walk” an entire cohort of students through the procedure at the same time.

4. Conclusion

The trust that is built between transnational partners is essential in helping to create and maintain a long-term relationship. The UHM and ASDOE have worked together for 31 years to make a positive difference in the lives of teachers and students. The relationship that developed over that time is built on a respectful, reciprocal and responsible give-and-take that exists between the faculty, administrators and candidates. With the positive changes that have taken place, it looks like this transnational partnership can look forward to many productive years in the future.

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