



Creating a World-Class Online Degree Program

A Case Study in Academic/Industry Partnerships

Dr. Susan Aldridge



Having spent nearly three decades in higher education leadership, I have become a big believer in the power of mutually beneficial partnerships with the industries that employ our graduates.

These partnerships pave the way for programs of study that empower students with highly marketable workforce skills and credentials, while also forging valuable connections with prospective employers. Likewise, these alliances provide the workforce with highly qualified candidates. As an added benefit, they help boost enrollments at a time when institutions of higher education are struggling to remain both workforce-relevant and financially stable. Lastly but equally important, they lay the groundwork for highly lucrative fundraising opportunities.

However, in order to maximize these outcomes, **college and university presidents must become partnership “evangelists,”** providing both constant support and adequate resources for promoting active participation within the context of a clearly articulated vision and strategy.

I championed this type of collaboration when I served as president of what is now the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC). This collaboration inspired the first-ever comprehensive postsecondary initiative to meet the ever-growing demand for cybersecurity professionals.

The Challenge

Developing new approaches to adult-focused higher education content and delivery

As a separate, degree-granting institution within the University System of Maryland, UMGC was the only one dedicated to serving the unique academic needs of working adults and other nontraditional students. UMGC was also a pioneer in distance education, having launched its first online degree programs in the 1990s. So, by the time I arrived in 2006, UMGC was riding the wave of an ever-expanding adult student market while also building a solid track record for innovation, a flexible academic model, and a global network of learning partners.



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At the same time, our university was facing its share of significant challenges. To sharpen their competitive edge in the emerging global economy, adults were reentering college in record numbers, seeking academic options that were affordable, accessible, and market-driven. That meant constant and costly investment in new approaches to adult-focused higher education content and delivery.

Moreover, given its relatively small share of the state’s higher education budget, UMGC had become heavily dependent on tuition revenues (over 90 percent)—a risky situation in the face of high enrollment targets and an in-state tuition freeze. To get my arms around the issues, I worked with key university leaders and faculty to devise a living roadmap for consolidating and building upon our success in a way that was both synergistic and sustainable.

With roadmap in hand, we spent the first few years “reinventing” the student experience from end-to-end, using quality metrics, intensive staff training, and the latest technologies to streamline and strengthen student recruitment, enrollment, retention, and service support. After evaluating our process improvement efforts, we then took a long hard look at our academic offerings, with the goal of launching a few new market-driven “signature” programs of study, high-quality courses designed to help meet pressing workforce needs.

By choosing “right fit” programs, we maximized our reputational capital while also expanding and strengthening our revenue streams through increased enrollment and effective institutional opportunities, professional development, and research funding opportunities. After two years exploring all possible degree options, I kept coming back to the same place—*the rapidly expanding field of cybersecurity*.

The Solution

Meeting a growing national demand for cybersecurity degree programs

Given the critical need for 30,000 qualified cyber professionals in the Washington Metro area alone, UMGC was uniquely positioned to become the nation’s center of gravity for cybersecurity education, beginning with its close geographic proximity to the newly proposed U.S. Cyber Command. What’s more, with three divisions worldwide and a well-developed virtual campus, UMGC boasted both a vast global reach and a diverse student population, including thousands of military service members with security clearances.

UMGC was also a reputable public university with a proven track record in such related fields as information technology and assurance, having earned the National Security Agency’s coveted designation as a Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance Education. In addition, there were no accredited cybersecurity degree programs available in 2009 (beyond a few face-to-face professional development options). So as “first to market,” UMGC would have the competitive advantage.

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With all signs pointing to cybersecurity, the university’s senior leadership team was eager to get started:

- Obtaining program approvals.
- Writing a quality curriculum.
- Designing media-rich online courses.
- Launching student marketing campaigns.
- Hiring qualified faculty.

To ensure our success, I led efforts to convene a think tank of recognized experts in the field who had their fingers firmly on the national pulse. These individuals would not only provide exceptional guidance in all of these areas, but would also help us connect with prospective employers, interested funders, and influential policymakers.

After consulting a group of stakeholders comprising alumni and board members who worked in the field, I secured retired Lt. General Harry D. Raduege to help launch the effort. As a member of the CSIS Commission on Cyber Security for the 44th Presidency and Chairman of the Deloitte Center for Network Innovation, he used his deep knowledge and extensive professional network to assist us in assembling an impressive group of corporate, government, and military leaders known globally for their cyber expertise.

Key Outcomes

Working closely with these knowledgeable professionals on every aspect of the project, our team readily embraced and steadily implemented their invaluable suggestions. The result? A highly effective collaboration that produced the following key outcomes.

We created a series of innovative, industry-focused degree and certificate programs. From the outset, our goal was to develop academically rigorous, outcomes-driven programs mapped against industry standards, grounded in real-world problems, and replete with opportunities to test-drive new skills. Within a year, we were offering three such full-degree programs—an MS in Cybersecurity, an MS in Cybersecurity Policy, and a BS in Cybersecurity—along with a series of certificate programs, all of which garnered nearly 3,000 enrollments within 12 months. For the first year, enrollments were pre-sold to corporations, providing revenue as well as time to create a broader marketing strategy for the general population.



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To ensure a cyber education that was second to none, the university’s senior leaders joined forces with our think tank members to:

- Develop customized curricula (rather than generic degrees) that addressed the unique missions of specific types of organizations (such as government, military, private industry, and nonprofits).
- Craft these programs to sequence an increasingly sophisticated complement of skills, much like earning belts in martial arts.
- Ensure that each course comprised three essential components: basic information (foundational learning); interactive case studies (applied learning); and lab tutorials (supplementary material).
- Work with one of the world’s renowned online course designers to create course modules that incorporated robust graphics and integrated simulations.
- Build a remote-access cyber virtual lab to provide students with hands-on experience in solving world problems, using the “red team” approach to decision-making—an important step in understanding the cybersecurity defensive mindset and commensurate tactics.
- Hire an outstanding cyber education faculty from some of the best universities and most prestigious training institutes in the country.
- Design a “Cyber 101” course for all incoming students, which serves as a basic primer in computer security “best practices,” particularly with respect to social networking and personal learning.

UMGC’s marketing team pioneered a highly effective approach for recruiting a broader range of students into the university’s cyber programs. Although UMGC catered primarily to nontraditional students, think-tank members advised us to expand our recruitment efforts to include traditional students—who as “digital natives” were looking for immediately marketable technology credentials. Likewise, they suggested we promote this initiative among potential employers to inspire industry buy-in for both steering current employees into and hiring graduates out of our cybersecurity programs. With their wise counsel in mind, we implemented the following strategies:

- Rather than relying on traditional marketing vehicles (newspaper, TV, and radio advertising) we moved our campaign online where prospective students of all ages were “lurking,” investing the bulk of our dollars in search engine optimization and Google ads, along with popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter.
- We inaugurated a customized cyber certificate program for Booz Allen Hamilton employees, many of whom went on to complete the full degree with the help of tuition reimbursement—a promotional partnership arrangement that caught on with other large organizations.
- To build on these successful cyber learning partnerships, we established a new department called Corporate Learning Solutions to provide personalized education options for meeting an organization’s strategic objectives, yielding more than \$4 million in cyber tuition revenue over three years.
- UMGC hosted the first in a series of virtual cyber career fairs, with 20 prospective employers on board to recruit qualified staff from among participating students. The virtual career fairs reduced corporate costs by \$16,000 per recruit and reduced recruitment time by four to six months.



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UMGC greatly expanded its profile within the cyber community. To build our reputational brand as the leader in high-quality cyber education, while also opening new avenues for student enrollment and job placement, we focused on becoming an active player in the cyber community at large.

- We cultivated a variety of relevant partnerships with government agencies and institutions, providing students and faculty with a plethora of experiential learning and professional development opportunities.
- Our faculty began attending major cybersecurity conferences and events.
- We hosted our own cybersecurity conference that brought in cyber leaders from the United States and Canada.
- We created a team of cybersecurity students, faculty and alumni—the Cyber Padawans—who accumulated numerous awards in some of the world’s most prestigious cyber competitions.
- We hosted two Cybersecurity Gala events attended by notable guest list of elected officials, corporate executives, and intelligence community leaders, which raised more than \$1 million in student scholarship funding.

IMPACT: Thousands of enrolled students, millions in tuition revenue, and a priceless boost to our brand

Looking back, I can truly report that this academic/industry partnership was a resounding success, thanks to a relentless effort on the part of the university's entire leadership team. Indeed, our cybersecurity program initiative not only attracted thousands of student enrollments (to realize millions in tuition revenue dollars), it reinforced UMGC's brand as a leader in innovative, in-demand education.

Think-tank membership also became a position of status among organizations aspiring to carve out their own leadership niche in this increasingly critical field. While we did add two new members during the first two years, we kept the group small to ensure timely feedback and consistent direction. As a result, this highly respected group of industry experts served us well, as trusted advisors and enthusiastic champions for both the program and the university.

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Of course, like any transformational project of this magnitude, it required my constant and visible support and encouragement, as president, to cultivate the level of campus community buy-in essential for achieving successful outcomes. In fact, I embraced the role of cyber partnership evangelist, attending more than 100 cybersecurity program-related meetings, events, speeches, and conferences over two years.

Despite the long hours and hard work, it was well worth it for the thousands of students we served and who benefitted immensely from the industry alliances we forged—particularly with respect to timely job placement and career advancement.

To be sure, program graduates routinely reported being well-equipped to succeed, thanks to the curricula we developed and the doors we opened through this highly collaborative effort. When all is said and done, that's the best return on investment we, as higher education leaders, can ever hope to achieve.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Susan C. Aldridge served as president of University of Maryland Global Campus from 2006-2012. She served as vice chancellor of Troy University's Global Campus and recently retired as president of Drexel University Online. Based in Philadelphia, Dr. Aldridge consults with university presidents and ministers of education regarding new business models and online education. Learn more about her at drsusanaldridge.com.

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