

# **Successful DL through University-Corporate Partnerships The University of Cincinnati and CompassKnowledgeGroup**

*James C. Rauch*

**Abstract:** Why has a legal, dedicated contractual partnership between a university and a professional, experienced, for-profit business has been so successful? This partnership between CompassKnowledgeGroup (C.J.-Direct) and the University of Cincinnati (CECH-Criminal Justice Department) has produced a program that has a 95% retention rate with 300+ students from 50 states, in just over 3 years. This program results in a Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice in 2 years of study, and has become a model for several other programs at the University of Cincinnati, including Educational Administration.

## **Introduction**

The partnership between the University of Cincinnati and CompassKnowledge may be unique. The facts indicate, however that careful planning, clarity of differing roles, and motivation towards success contribute.

## **Success: Data Indications**

### **Enrollment as a measure of success.**

Do the numbers indicate “real” success? Upon examination of the numeric data, the program has grown significantly over the past three years. The increase in enrollment has been significant. Examination of quarter-to-quarter enrollments shows a continuous growth. [figure 1].

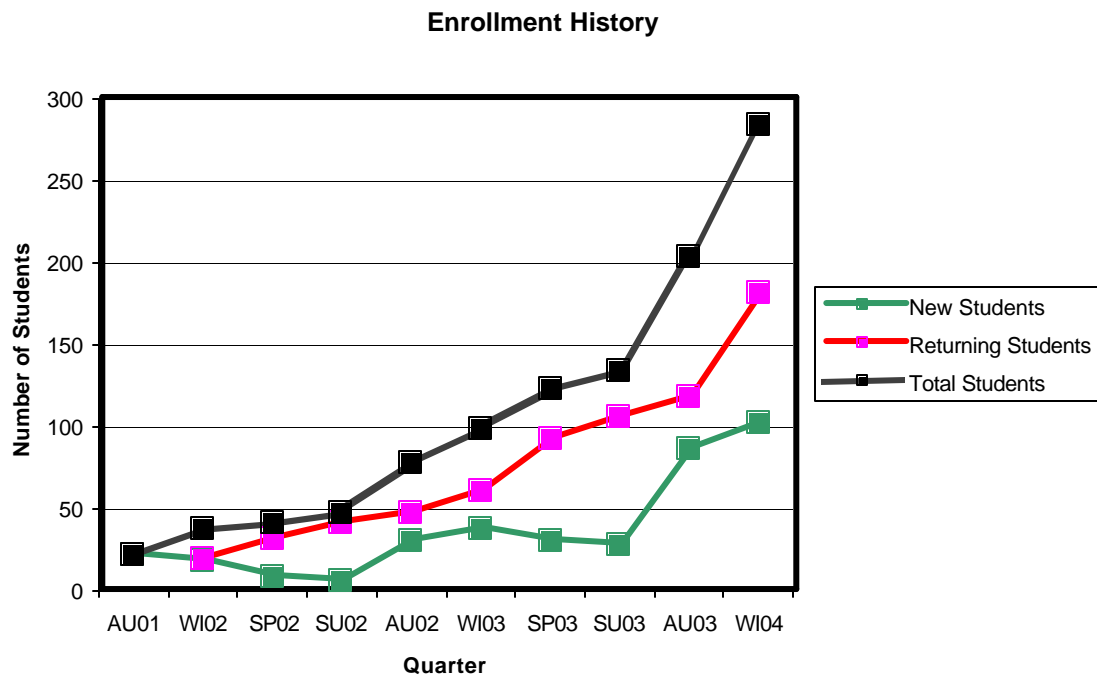


FIGURE 1

The total number of enrollments per quarter is important as it reflects an initial vision of the impact that economies play in this program. To deny that the income generated by this program is important would be to exclude the impact that money has on motivation. With current enrollments, income derived from this program exceeds \$550,000 per quarter. Though the university will not see all of that money, it will see 50% according to the contractual agreements with CompassKnowledge. This is a significant issue. Motivation for success, financially, drives both the University and CompassKnowledge to maintain, and develop a product that works. This program currently generates over 3 million dollars per year for the university.

### **Retention as an indication of success**

But success is not only measured in financial significance, but is also in the retention rate. Retention reflects a significant measure of student satisfaction in the product they are receiving.

Along with that satisfaction comes substantial support, product quality, consistent and dependable delivery systems. For the most part the retention rate has been consistent from the beginning of the program [figure 2] , with the average retention rate for returning students at 95%.

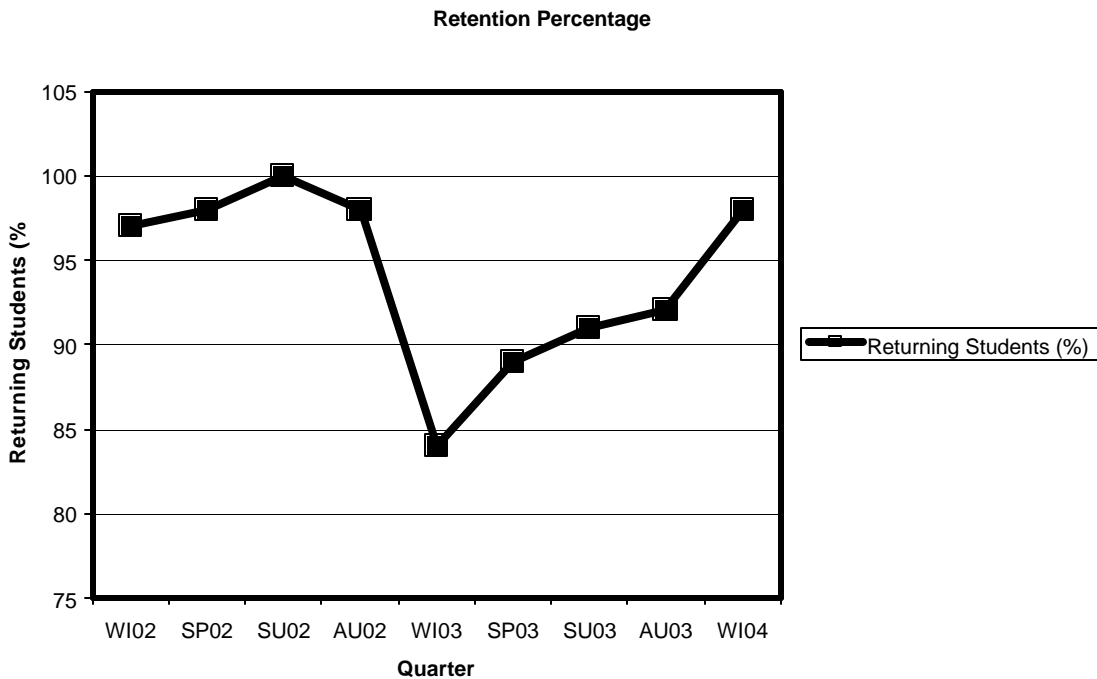


FIGURE 2

### The Client

The average age of the students enrolled in this DL Master of Science degree program in Criminal Justice is 35.49. Most students are professionals in the Criminal Justice field currently. Students come from all 50 states, Canada, Guam and Sai Pan. Their average GRE score is 1177.43. Many students are working in the program to increase their salary, or change to a new position. In general, their writing skills are limited. As a result, frustration bringing these students to graduate-level papers, is a constant issue among their facilitators and professors. In general, however, these students are mature, working individuals with families.

## **The Current DL Structure**

The working legal relationship that the University of Cincinnati and CompassKnowledge, is important to the structure and specific roles that each institution assumes in the processing, maintaining, and supporting students through the program.

### **Recruiting and Following-up with students**

The job of recruiting students is one of the many functions that CompassKnowledge provides to the structure. The University of Cincinnati's Criminal Justice is nationally recognized as the number one Criminal Justice Research Institution. That information provides an easy "sell" for recruiters to use. Many of the professors in the UC Criminal Justice Department are authorities in the field, and are thus presenting to conferences, correction staffs, etc. throughout the nation constantly. So, because of the reputation that UC has, and skills that CompassKnowledge has in marketing and contacting prospective students, the partnership works extremely well.

CompassKnowledge also provides an automatic "in", because they also work for another school to promote their Undergraduate degree in Criminal Justice. A graduate from the undergraduate program automatically is recruited for the Masters degree. Beyond previous students, UC's reputation, CompassKnowledge's marketing/sales skills, CompassKnowledge has 3 fulltime employee who are dedicated to the job of getting new students. They make initial calls, follow-ups, and work to get the students accepted into the program.

## **Acceptance and Registration**

After a student has made a decision to pursue the program, the university takes control. The process of being accepted into the program starts with an application, GRE scores, and transcripts, which are evaluated by the Assistant Director. If entry criteria are met, the student will be accepted by the Criminal Justice Program and sent to Graduate School for approval. These procedures are obviously controlled by the university.

Students are then instructed to register for the appropriate classes. The first time a student registers is a manual process and again the Assistant Director will hand walk this through the system. After the student's first quarter, the student is responsible for registering online. Again, as in the acceptance/application process, the university is totally in control.

## **Support Systems in place**

The communication, structure, and people in place, provide a unique system of support for all students. CompassKnowledge has an 800 number where students can communicate with the Program Manager. That person will try to solve the problem first. If that doesn't solve a problem, the manager will contact, or have the student contact the appropriate individuals that can solve the problem. Support systems exist for registration, technology, Blackboard, library access, financial aid, textbooks, required software; but the most important support in this structure is the facilitator. Facilitators are trained to deal with current problems that students are having, whether content, technological, or in some cases emotional. Though all professors have a desire to monitor each and every student, it is virtually an impossible task. The facilitators on the other hand, have a limited number of students, make contacts (often daily), and not only keep track of student progress, but provide a much needed personal contact for the student.

Also, the University of Cincinnati's Instructional Technologies department provides much assistance for all students. There is a technologies "Help Desk" that provides assistance from login problems to plugins and activating accounts. All students automatically have an email account through Bearcat Online, and they can apply for their own webpage space. These services and support are designed for the use of local students, and those students in the distance program at times have to go through a little more to get the services. The lack of 800 numbers at the university, is at times inconvenient for the distance student. CompassKnowledge provides an 800 number and preliminary support for everything from technical problems, financial aid, to registration. The partnership with CompassKnowledge and the University of Cincinnati is a true partnership that focuses on the client/student.

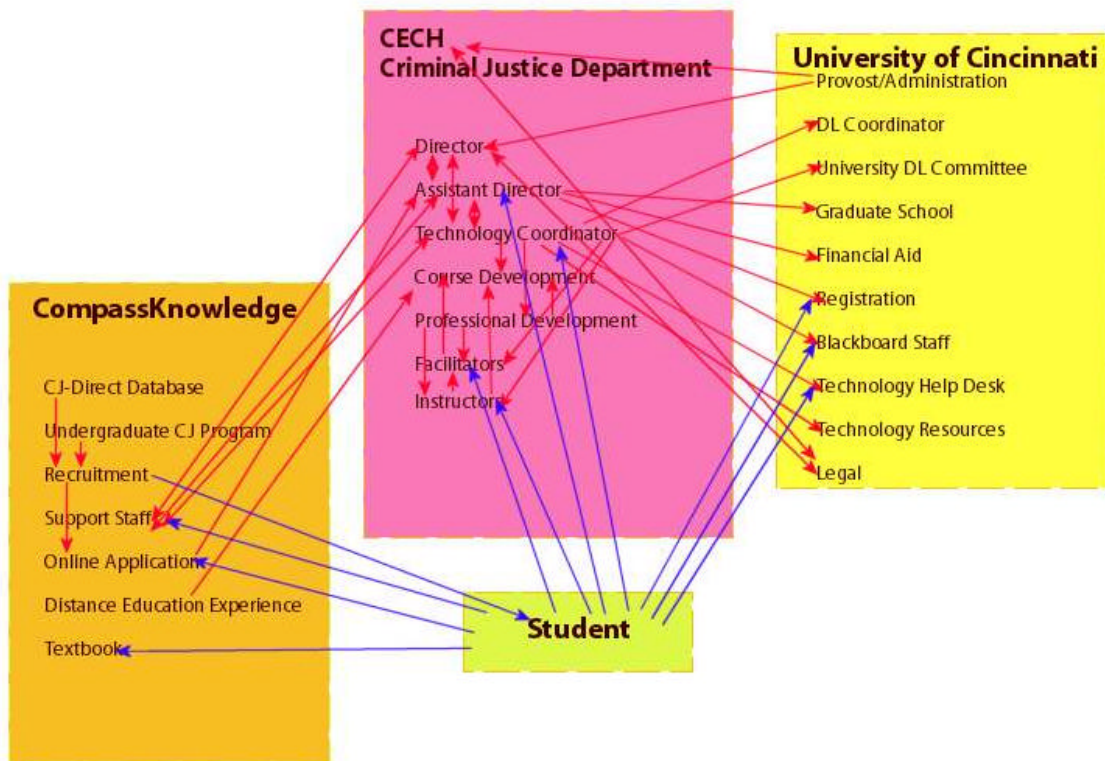


FIGURE 3

Figure 3 demonstrates the complexity of the structure that is in place. This structure was difficult to develop. Several areas of that have changed since the beginning. Originally, CompassKnowledgeGroup would take care of the billing and financial connections for each student, but the legal department would not let this happen; thus, all financial considerations are handled by the university. Originally, CECH/Criminal Justice would make arrangements for textbooks. Now that responsibility (for securing and mailing textbooks to students), is completed by an outside company through CompassKnowledge. The structure is stable at this time, but it can change as the university becomes more and more sensitive to the growing student population that is served by distance learning programs.

In the structure in figure 3, one of CompassKnowledgeGroup's responsibilities is recruiting new students. This is a key value to securing this particular company. CompassKnowledge is a for-profit company that knows how to sell its products. Currently CompassKnowledge uses four people as "enrollment advisors". Students are recruited from different sources, direct mail, Internet initiatives, and undergraduates from another Criminal Justice program partnered with CompassKnowledge. The CompassKnowledge staff knows how to do this. This of course frees up CECH/Criminal Justice staff, professors, and facilitators to develop content and delivery of that content.

Communication between all three factions is important. CompassKnowledge is located in Orlando, Florida and the University of Cincinnati is not. Weekly conference calls are made between the Assistant Director, Tech Coordinator, and the Program Manager. Face to face meetings are held every three to six months with the Program Chair, Assistant Dean, the Program Director, the Distance Learning Director, Director (UC), and the Chief Academic Officer. These meetings are scheduled on campus.

## **Instructional Design**

The partnership has also provided insight that comes from the experience of partnering with other previous programs, and professional educational/academic support. Instructional design, the course structures, and program structure have been developed with this guidance.

Much of the Instructional Design is based on advise from the experienced staff from CompassKnowledge. For example, successful courses will usually make use of chat rooms (virtual lecture hall in Blackboard). As a result of this suggestion, most of our courses will have a chat room portion. Consistency in design and structure also helps to familiarize the student with navigation, and procedures. This allows for more content to be delivered. The structure of the program itself leads to better learning, as well as better management. Each class is held for five weeks and followed by an exam, and only one class is presented at a time. Therefore, two classes are held per (regular university) quarter. Again, not only does this help in the management of the program, it also allows the student to stay focused on one class (even though it is concentrated). Each week of the class is a module. Each module (depending on the instructor) consists of a delivery of content (lecture) and readings, followed by activities and an assessment piece. Along with the scheduling of classes, all classes are delivered through Blackboard. Even though an individual website could have been used, by using Blackboard the instructional design is already in place. Also, by using Blackboard at U.C., there is a full staff available for students, instructors, and tech people, in case of problems that may be encountered.

Though the above make a lot of sense, structural items like the above would not have been tried, had the outside influence of our partner not been present and vocal. Again, on the advise of our partner, and our own acquired expertise', all delivery through Blackboard is available in at least two formats (.pdf or .rtf files). Sometimes embedded PowerPoint

presentations, and/or audio files are used. Most multimedia is not used because of download speeds and limited student machines and connections. Currently, updating our minimum and recommended hardware standards for DL students has become more of an issue.

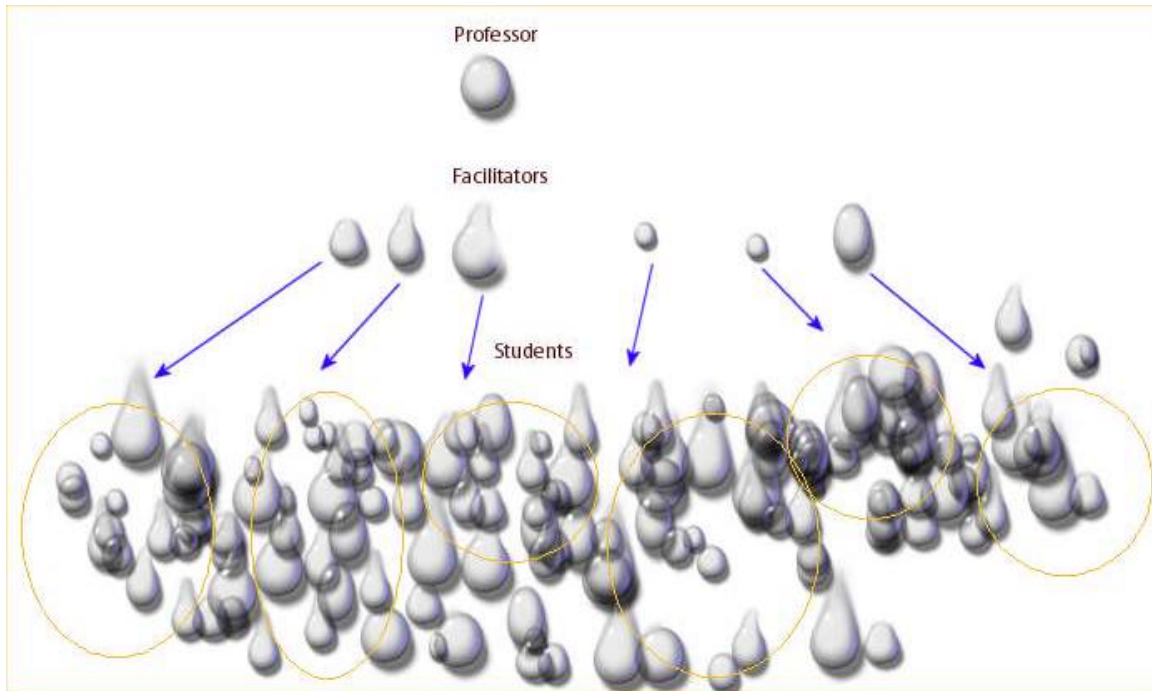
All classes are transformation of existing F2F classes. As a result, the content is revisited by the instructors, modified, and then organized to meet the Blackboard structure. This has also had an effect on the on-campus classes. Many professors, after creating their transformed DL class, will use that material as a portion of their on-campus class, creating a hybrid version.

Another reason for the success of this program is commitment. This, again influenced by the connection with CompassKnowledge, comes in several forms. The CompassKnowledge Academic Director and staff helped the Criminal Justice Department present its proposal to the Provost. CompassKnowledge also provided input for the legal teams that developed a contract. One of the first academic partnerships with a for-profit group.

Separate from the university level support, the program, through the leadership of the Department Head, Dr. Ed Latessa, all Criminal Justice Professors teaching at UC are asked to participate in at least one DL class in the two year program. This obviously eliminates problems. Everyone does their share. They also have an understanding of the mechanics.

### **Facilitator Model**

The “Facilitator” model works. In the early stages of the program, it became obvious that one professor could not handle the projected number of students. As a result (again with consultation with our partner) the program uses facilitators. All of our facilitators are PhD students in Criminal Justice. They have 36-38 students to work with, by grading their papers, communicating, problem solving, and relaying technology and content information. This program would not work without this vital structure. (see figure 4)



FIGUR

E 4

### Conclusions

Why does this partnership bring success to this DL program? Probably the most important reason is that it is a partnership in a fundamental way. The desire for success is reflected in the desire to make a profit. This being a revenue-driven program, lack of success results loss of profits. This also works in reverse, loss of profits reflects failure as well. Criminal Justice at U.C. wishes to provide a quality program, and CompassKnowledge is run by business savvy education experts. With an Academic Director and DL Specialist (both with doctoral degrees) leading the business, the concern for a quality product, as well as satisfied clients, make this a strong partnership. This partnership works because of common expectations, excellent communications, expert recruiting and sales staff, and a quality product, presented by a nationally recognized Criminal Justice faculty.