Staffing A Distance Learning Team: Whom Do You Really Need?

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One of the basic problems in building a distance learning team or hiring new personnel is that a very limited number of people have significant experience in the field. Thus the question becomes one of what experiences and skills do distance learning personnel need.

When people think of distance learning, they often think first of technology. Indeed, the growth of distance learning today is greatly dependent upon the internet and other technologies which make it readily available to a large population. Often, when a distance learning program is initiated at a university, the first hires are people with expertise in networking, telecommunications, or programming. While these skills are important, they cannot stand alone in building a successful distance learning program.

The distance learning manager and team generally do not spend the majority of their time solving technical problems or upgrading equipment. If they do, then their program is not driven by student needs and academic planning, and is unlikely to meet institutional goals. A distance learning team's first priorities should be needs assessment and planning, faculty support, and student support. Other major issues that are dealt with on a daily basis are marketing and promotion, budgeting, scheduling, program evaluation, graphic design, and administrative management.

Clearly, the ideal situation might seem to have a multitude of persons on a distance learning staff to provide expertise in a specific area. But the reality is that the large majority of distance programs are in the midst of their growth spurts, and operate with small staffs with multiple roles. Furthermore, many of the roles overlap and often require expertise in unrelated functions.

With the above responsibilities in mind, the ideal distance learning staff member will possess experience related to most of the following areas:
a. **training**; this is an ongoing responsibility as new faculty and students join a university. Training includes not only technical training, but also instructional design, fundamentals of distance learning, and where to find resources (bookstore, registration, distance learning help, materials distribution, etc.). Training should be multi-dimensional, and include options for various learning styles, such a group, one-on-one, or online traning.

b. **consulting**; both faculty and students must know that they have a reliable and point of contact when they have a problem, question or suggestion. In this role, the staff person works closely with faculty to advise and evaluate, rather than setting the agenda. Often, the staff member will have to balance the conflicting needs of several people in an effort to find a good solution for everyone. An experienced consultant will face such challenges by looking for innovative solutions such as bringing conflicting parties with like interest and goals together. (Surry, 1996)

c. **curriculum development**; because developing a distance course requires much more than simply translating a traditional course, distance staff members should have some teaching experience, a degree in instructional technology, or should take a series courses in curriculum or related areas.

d. **research**; the ability to develop and conduct valid assessments in student and course need as well as program evaluations cannot be overrated. A distance program should never be static, and must thus rely on the results of such findings for future direction. Among the areas that should be evaulated in a distance program are dropout rate, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, impact, and attitudes. (Verduin, 1991)

e. **marketing and promotion**; this includes not only finding new and creative ways to dissiminate course information, but also about the program, its goals, and accomplishments. The intended audience is not only the general public, but faculty, staff, and students as well.

f. **administration**; beyond hiring, firing, other staffing issues, and program planning, there are extensive campus, state, and national policy and legal issues which must be continually addressed. Distance learning staff are also charged with program development, coordination, and securing grants. (Surry, 1996)

g. **basic technical/computer knowledge**; while technical knowledge should not be the only requirement for a distance learning staff person, computer competence and an aptitude for technical problem-solving are essential. Extensive knowledge of the internet is increasingly needed, as more distance courses are offered online. Usually there is another support person or persons on campus who are charged with maintaining and operating computers and networks.

In addition to these criteria, there are desired personality characteristics of a distance learning staff person as well. Because the roles and responsibilities are so diverse, the ideal candidate is a person who thrives on change and flexibility, rather than a structured environment in which the work of every day can be anticipated and preplanned. The ability to work quickly and juggle multiple tasks at one time is also essential to the many growing programs that are short-staffed. Finally, members of a distance learning staff are faced with an environment where the there is little past history, and the answers are continually changing. As a result, it is important that staff members be resourceful and willing to take risks to create new ideas or develop innovate approaches to distance learning.

References

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