Bringing It All Together

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Faculty are moving forward, technologies are improving, and student demand is increasing…but few changes are taking place in the university structure as a whole to accommodate the special needs of the distance-learning student. More attention needs to be given to organizational structures that service the distance learner. There has never before been a period during which more forces have had an impact on higher education at one time (Morrison, 1999). This means change in the admissions process, advising, registration, technology support and other student services must be advanced to support the student who is not physically present on campus.

Distance education has come a long way in the past 10 years, but there is still a great deal of administrative confusion in the top echelons of colleges and universities regarding the proper direction for distance learning programs in higher education. Many distance education programs are being implemented with a vision that is not universally shared and goals that are not clearly understood. When discussing this same subject, this feeling is echoed by Sir John Daniel (1999, 3), Vice-Chancellor, The Open University when he says, "most use of technology in universities lacks clear institutional aims." I listen to university presidents, top leaders of institutions, and their controlling boards talk with diversity and uncertainty. It is frightening to listen to some predictors of doom saying that distance learning will bring the end to all traditional campus programs or end quality learning experiences for students. Some administrators only see distance learning as undermining current enrollments in the traditional classroom or threatening advances in gaining a significant piece in the ever-growing non-traditional student population.

For a distance-learning program to be successful, it must be clearly integrated into the vision of school administrators and the organizational structure of a school. This process starts with establishing a clear vision for the institution that "a student is a student is a student." Distance learning students are in no way "second-class students" of the school, and may, in fact, often deserve more services than the resident student. In distance education, we often talk about distance education equivalence to the resident student education. I think we need to get away from a discussion of equivalence, and admit that a good distance-learning program may have to deliver more services to the student than the traditional program particularly in the administrative/student services areas.

The new role of the learner requires new administrative support services.

Most administrative planning focus continues to be on the financial benefits that are "rumored" to be possible for an institution that is a major distance-learning provider. Many feel "we cannot 'not' have distance learning," but there are no real "learning" advantages established in the visions of distance learning in higher education. Discussions in board meetings focus on dollars and the status of developing a distance learning program with a major corporation or "how our institution might become a global provider" of education. In other words, talk centers around

dollars or status for the institution. Higher education's real purpose should be moving the focus to learning, rather than teaching (Daniel, 1999). The role for the learning institution is moving away from just preserving and storing knowledge to that of an information navigator and facilitator of information retrieval (Duderstadt, 1997). There needs to be a focus on the real benefits possible from the development of a quality distance-learning program and what new things we must do that are truly different and support learners in understanding their new roles in the learning process. Additional student support services must be provided not only in academic areas, but also in administration. Universities must explore new ground and even consider the many new self-services administrative support services that students can themselves perform (Morrison, December 1999).

Learning from others

> It seems to me as if few administrators are willing to make the long-term investment and the patience necessary with growing the programs. We have been under a lot of pressure for increased class size and using the same "metrics" to evaluate the virtual classes. The major problem is that the Virtual University though it could be self-sustaining in a narrow time, is just not the "cash cow" the administration had hoped for.

> *Attributed to a Professor with California Virtual University, (Downes, 1999, 1)*

The quotation above is typical of the thoughts of many faculty throughout the United States when they are asked to become involved with distance learning. It is inherent almost in the nature of higher education to be skeptical and question the motives of administrators. The following is my summary interpretation of some of the ideas in Stephen Downes' (1999) *News Trolls* column, "**What Happened at California Virtual University**":

> I. Online learning will be negatively impacted by unrealistic and uninformed promises made by administrators expecting quick financial returns, monopolies of certain programs, and unrealistic assessment of demand for online instruction.

> II. Corporate partnerships will nourish for-profit motives for educational programs and not necessarily the needs of students and society.

> III. Joint ventures between educational entities are necessary, but short-term gain must sometimes be sacrificed for long-term advances. The "so-called" entrepreneurial approach of allowing individual departments or colleges to develop their own support staffs is not the right way to go to develop a centralized institutional approach to distance learning.

> IV. We need to not look at online learning as a new way of doing what we have always done. We need to look at doing totally new things. New paradigms must be created that support our mission.

Developing a plan…

A key to moving forward in distance learning is to have a plan that has the commitment of *all* of the University administrators. There must be a centralized and "enforced" vision. A laissez-faire approach is likely to increase costs and create excessive differentiation that students will find burdensome (Daniel, 1999). Moving forward with a singular vision is the key challenge that I feel needs to be faced in the planning process. Creativity and innovation needs to be rewarded, but care must be given not to mortgage the future with short-term entrepreneurial gains of single entities in the present. There must be an explanation or directive committing to a singular

approach to supporting institution-wide distance learning initiatives. The resources are simply not there to have diversity across academic entities in most schools.

Existing Models…

There are four distance-learning models prevalent today that can be used to help establish localized visions for institutions. I feel one of the problems with the California Virtual University and many institutions trying to advance distance learning programs is not having agreement as to what model the "virtual university" really is to follow. In effect, California hoped the model would evolve…yet varying visions never let it happen. Care must be given to not make the same mistake. We must say there are "needs out there" that are consistent with our mission and that we really want to address. Schools then must decide on a model that will best move them forward.

Support Center

This seems to be the most prevalent model that I have been able to identify. These types of support groups that form a technology or learning "center" are often found under the umbrella of an individual department in a college despite the cries of inefficiencies from some top administrators. A small support staff works with interested or directed faculty to develop courses and also conduct faculty development sessions. The staff is usually geared to the development of a limited number of courses (perhaps 6-8 maximum) or a specific program. It may be typical in a major university to have the college of education with a support staff, the school of medicine with a support staff, and other academic entities with individual staffs supporting course design and the use of educational technologies supporting distance learning.

This model works with the parochial attitude of many academic departments, but from an administrative standpoint, this is a very inefficient way to utilize technology resources. Although I feel the support center model exists throughout many universities, it is often not identified as a stand-along unit. Many deans and department administrators feel it is important to have dedicated support for faculty advances in educational technologies, and they do not want to "share" their support with any type of centralized efforts. Their claim is that these support units are integral parts of their academic programs. I feel that the reality of the situation is that they are afraid of technology or distance learning centers that might "gain their own lives" and perpetuate themselves simply for their own distance learning or technology center/department gains and not even ask academic entities to identify their needs.

Administrative Center

This is one of the newest models and might also be referred to as a "broker" model. This model has an entity outside the typical university or college structure to administer or broker courses and degree programs. There are varying approaches to accreditation, but the essence of the model is that this entity administers courses/degree programs, but does not have large numbers of faculty of its own. A limited staff maintains the "University," but extensive dollars are spent in advertising and promotion. Some type of infrastructure will be established to exhibit courses, but it does not necessarily include extensive hardware and networking infrastructure.

The best-known example of this type of model is Western Governors University (WGU) and California Virtual University might also fall in this category. WGU is providing a limited inventory of what they call competency-based degree programs for which it is individually

accredited. Other programs are offered directly through the participating universities. It is only fair to say that although WGU is further along in its development than CVU, critics are also saying that the Governors University is not successful. The June 1 CIO Magazine (1999) says that since its launch last fall, distance learning pioneer Western Governors University (WGU) has so far failed to live up to its promise. The school, which brokers virtual classes offered by colleges and companies, expected to have enrollments of 3,000 by the end of its first school year, but so far has only about 100 students.

SREC (Southern Regional Electronic Campus) is following this same model on a limited scale with minimal promotion of courses and programs. With each model, each course provider maintains its own quality practices, but subscribes to a central core of good practices/standards maintained by the central administrative entity. The SREC is currently providing purely administrative/information through its Web site.

Academic Center

The Academic Center is an independently accredited entity that delivers its own degree programs. Most, at least in their early stages of development, do not have extensive campuses and may have multiple small support sites throughout the United States. There is a core academic group of very few full-time faculty administrators that recruit, hire, develop curriculum and schedule faculty. This model differs from the Administrative or Broker model in that the Academic Center "owns" its own programs and faculty. Distance learning methodologies provide the predominant delivery of programs with a large number of part-time faculty delivering centrally "controlled" courses.

You might describe this model as truly a "stand-alone" distance learning university delivering distance learning courses potentially throughout the world. There are strong critics of this model that say this is "second-rate" learning and contend that they are simply the maligned degree-mills of the past. There are strong arguments for the quality of such programs, but the reality is that this model provides more of a challenge to gain credibility in the "academic community."

With over 61,000 currently enrolled students, the University of Phoenix is the largest example of this model. It is America's largest private accredited university and also provides Certificate Programs to more than 447,000 working professionals. There are also schools such as Walden, Union, and Nova, and others have used a similar model. As an aside, I do think it is interesting to note that a number of these universities have become established as "distance learning universities" and are now increasing their activities with a more traditional "bricks and mortar" approach by establishing growing residential campuses. The best example is this Nova Southeastern University that is establishing a major presence in Florida. Nova started its early advances using the "classroom-without-walls" concept. Now, Nova Southeastern University is currently the largest independent institution of higher education in the Southeast and it is among the 20 largest independent institutions nationally. NSU educated more than 18,000 Florida residents in calendar 1998 with an annual budget of approximately $220 million (NSU, 1999).

Training and Education Center

This model stems from the traditional Continuing Education or Professional Development Center model. These are profit centers that have their own faculty and staffs that have the main mission of producing revenue from continuing education and professional development. In some cases, they have existed in one form or another as auxiliary enterprises located adjacent to the school location. Sometimes Small Business or

Economic Development groups are included in this type of organization. Nontraditional education in adult basic education or high school completion might also help finance these centers. Degree programs are developed and offered through the main University on a proposal/contract basis or they may do contract course development for outside entities.

I have to admit I'm prejudiced…

I have to admit I'm prejudiced by my own current experience at my existing institution, Troy State University. But my opinion is that probably the best model for many traditional institutions at this time is the *Training and Education Center* model. This model provides the flexibility to develop its own programs and faculty, yet at the same time can partner with other academic units to provide distance-learning programs. It also is a model that is most congruent with traditional academia and therefore can provide the most widely accepted foundation for innovation.

How does it work?

This model can only work within set parameters including a sufficient expense and manpower budget to develop new programs and support partners. The center should fall under the administrative control of a flexible academic unit that can develop the policies and procedures needed to provide a matrix management system over program delivery. This system enables colleges throughout the university to partner with the Center to develop and deliver distance-learning programs. The center must have profit center flexibility to share revenues with other units and outside parties. Here are some scenarios, as they exist at my institution. We have a Center for Continuing Education and Distance Learning:

> Case I
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> In cases where a college dean simply wishes the development support and student services provided by the Center, tuition revenues will be split with a college within the university. All faculty expenses will be paid directly by the college and support materials will be maintained directly by the college. The Center in this situation would only receive a small portion of the revenues largely to support administrative support to students.

Distance learning students require different or additional support services over the traditional resident student. A college or department may feel that its faculty can develop distance learning courses and deliver them to students, but may not have the additional administrative staff to support distance learning students' unique needs. Here is where the "Training and Education Center" model can step in and support the academic entity delivering the program. The processing of distance learning applications or registrations, unique billing, or other support services will be provided by the Center, and it would receive a simple overhead percentage of the tuition dollars collected.

> Case II
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> In cases where the College Dean or other academic entity wishes to jointly develop a program with the Center, the Center will pay faculty development cost, provide student/faculty support: with possibly 80% going to the provider of faculty and 20% to the respective other entity.

Some colleges or departments may wish to develop distance learning programs, but do not have the technical resources or expertise in instructional design to develop courses without outside help. In this case, the Center would step in and partner with the department faculty to develop

courses and provide administrative support to the student. Faculty are key in this process, and the majority of the revenue should go to the entity providing the faculty.

> Case III
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> In cases where the Center independently develops a program, the Center will incur all development, teaching and maintenance costs and receives 100% of the revenue. Other entities wanting to promote and market the Center programs could be paid a small percentage for their support.

This concept is somewhat unique to the university and college setting, but is necessary if varying units within the institution are to support a centralized distance learning effort. Departments might say why should we help you recruit students for distance learning courses when we need students in the classroom? This case provides some incentive. An overhead percentage is established for varying degree programs through the school. At year-end this percentage is distributed back to departments based on enrollments from that department. For example, the College of Arts and Sciences provides 200 enrollments in distance learning courses solely delivered by the Center during the year. That college would receive a proportionate percentage of that tuition revenue at year-end. The numbers and incentives here will vary greatly, so I have not included any detail in this regard. In fact, at Troy State University, one incentive is a laptop computer that is given to faculty for their use as a result of working with distance learning. The key is that distance learning advances should be a joint effort in the institution and there should be some incentives for everyone in the institution to support the effort.

> Case IV
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> In cases where individuals or other entities wish to partner with the Center to develop and deliver continuing education/professional development programs, the Center will share tuition revenues. Individual negotiations would be conducted for special programs and situations.

When we discuss program possibilities, I like to say that we should talk about "anything" that makes sense. We must get away from just doing the things that we have done before. We must not just do old things in different ways. We must do some different things in higher education, and the Center should have the ability to negotiate doing "new things" with perhaps even "new entities" outside the university or college setting.

What are the needs "out there"?

I feel the model chosen is not as important as *a decision that commits us to a specific direction.* After you decide on your direction, you can then move forward to establish challenging goals and targets to be met. For a distance-learning program to be successful, it must address needs that are real. The revenues for education in the United States is second only to health care and services in gross national revenues. There is no reason to duplicate or compete with services already being provided. There is 'plenty of room' for those who identify their niches in the market to meet the needs of students.

Each institution has to answer this question for itself. What is the existing mission of the institution? What real needs can be fill that are unique to "us" and our existing programs? Distance learning cannot be everything to everyone. There are some programs that do not lend themselves to distance learning methodologies. The most important question is when we look at the level of resources our institution is willing to commit, what type of distance learning program

can we delivery and still maintain quality curriculum and instruction? As you gain a reputation of providing quality programs, you will gain students.

Tomorrow is yesterday's today . . .

I have yet to find complete and uniform support for the implementation of distance learning in an institution. Perhaps it's out there, but I think it is rare. I think that the administration of distance learning program continues to be for strong-hearted individuals who want the challenge of bringing together institutional populations with diverse academic visions. We must not just do the 'same things differently.' The view from the top must be to look out and see *new and different things* being provided to support learners.

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