Improving Distance Education: Perceptions of Program Administrators

Dann E. Husmann
Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
P. O. Box 830709
Lincoln, NE 68583-0709
dhusmann2@unl.edu

Michael T. Miller
Associate Dean
College of Education
San Jose State University
One Washington Square
San Jose, CA 95192-0071
mmiller5@email.sjsu.edu

Abstract

Distance education programming has become a common component of higher education institutions. These programs often are developed singularly by faculty or through divisions of continuing education, and the results can be non-focused, disjointed program offerings. A major problem associated with distance education is the lack of "program" focus, with the majority of attention going to individual course offerings. Accepting the notion that a holistic view must be assumed for distance education programs to be considered "effective," the current study is one in a series associated with the factors necessary for a holistic view of distance education. Using a three-round Delphi survey instrument, distance education administrators were questioned about their perceptions of variables and factors necessary for effective distance education programs. Administrators agreed most strongly that programs should encourage quality and a customer orientation, but mostly, should provide the tools necessary for faculty members to modify course materials.

Distance education has changed from an anomaly to a standard component of most higher education institutions. Through the delivery of courses on-line, via the internet, or through satellite or television broadcasts, colleges and universities have found it profitable to provide learning services and opportunities through alternative delivery methods. The incentive for offering courses via "the distance" has been largely pronounced as two-fold: to better serve constituents who would not otherwise have access to programs, and to generate additional revenue streams outside of traditional course offerings. Although the first alternative, albeit altruistic, has real potential for developing positive relations with legislative and governing bodies, the second concept, that of generating revenue, has been a dominant concern for many administrators. For private institutions, this has taken the form of providing the same "product," that of educational opportunity, at often reduced or alternative rates to a broader group of people in a more cost-effective manner (Cushman, 1996). Regardless of individual institutional considerations, the notion of distance education has become, and considering all trends will continue, to be a major focus for institutional livelihood (Moore, 1995).

A prominent concern for institutions has been the structuring of how to offer courses via distance education programming. Once the domain of individual faculty volunteering to teach on television or through radio-broadcasts, the business of mass education has become a multi-million dollar industry, and the structure and offering of courses has become the responsibility for highly trained and skilled administrators. Typically, these individuals have a background in marketing and training, and understand that programs are successful only when adequate numbers of learners choose to enroll in any one given course or offering. These individuals, however, are rarely the subjects of study, as faculty dimensions to teaching and learning generally dominant questions about program effectiveness.

The question of curricular delivery has been hotly debated on many campuses as faculty and administrators engage with outside constituents about learning effectiveness and the quality of programs. This dialogue, although meaningful, generally provides an advantage to the faculty member. In a sense, the academic content of a course is the domain of a faculty member, and administrators looking to promote programs become secondary both on

campus and in the media. The role of these individuals, however, can not be ignored, as they provide the institutionalized impetus to offer more and better programs.

Realizing that learners as consumers only purchase what they perceive to be legitimate products (learning), administrators of distance education programs often become caught in the middle between faculty and students, between faculty and outside constituents, and between the institution and faculty. Similar to the department chair, and similar to the role described for college presidents (Kerr, 1994), these distance education administrators find themselves serving a wide variety of masters with often conflicting expectations. The result is a need to better establish and to document initial baseline data about what distance education administrators perceive to be essential ingredients in the improvement of courses offered through distance education technologies. Such is the purpose for conducting this study, with special attention to the academic courses rather than the broader programs.

Framework of the Study

The current study is based on the conceptual framework of a holistic approach to distance education programs. Distance learning programs do no exist in a vacuum, and are reliant on a number of different factors in accomplishing diverse goals (Moore, 1993). The delivery of learning product (e.g., instruction) is but one of several factors to be considered in advancing the notion of learning. The instructional delivery is based on variables such as: instructor ability, climate of learning, learner attitudes about the experience, etc. These types of variables have been laid out in a variety of scenarios of teaching and learning, and for the purposes of this discussion, are considered "holistic factors" of distance education delivery. The holistic design encompassed in the current study is comprised of the following elements: delivery appropriateness, learner responsibility, instructor responsibility, administrative responsiveness, and is superseded by a subtext or cultural dimension that values and encourages degrees of learning (for a comprehensive discussion of the framework, see Miller & Husmann, 1996).

Within the framework, learner responsibility and dedication are paramount to the success of any distance education program offering. Ultimately, the enrolled students are the ones who find value and application in the content of a program. Therefore, learner responsibility must be a foundational pillar of an overall perspective of program success or effectiveness. Similarly, instructors must recognize pedagogical differences and modify delivery schemes to best meet the needs of students enrolled in courses while maintaining high levels of academic integrity. Both of these components have been recognized widely in literature on adult learning theory, with parallelism in the necessity for learners to take responsibility coupled with modified instructional design (for example, see Filipczak, 1995).

The notion of delivery appropriateness is unique by design, yet is familiar from the vantage point of instructional delivery. As college instructors debate the use of Socratic discussion techniques, small group inquiry, lectures, etc., those offering courses via 'the distance' must also consider the appropriateness of instruction. A slide-type presentation of concepts, for example, might not be appropriate for a topic that has a high information/content density and is driven by knowledge of specific components of an element. Similar to distance education methodology, the concept of subtext or culture is dominant in identifying how well distance education programs work. A culture that recognizes rigor and self-application will foster greater feelings of responsibility among students, while conversely, courses and programs that focus on completion without competence may degrade the entire notion of academic inquiry and learning. The framework is under guided by this notion of culture, as learner and participant expectations can alter, change, bolster, and impact the effectiveness of an entire program.

The final variable identified in this framework is that of administrative assistance or responsibility, and what administrators and their units can do to foster program effectiveness and overall quality. The current investigation provides some validation and query into this domain.

Research Methods

To investigate the administrators' perceptions of distance education quality, a Delphi procedure was implemented. The population was administrators who manage distance learning programs as defined by the 1994-95 directory published by AgSat which has now changed its name to ADEC (American Distance Education Consortium). The sample consisted of 26 administrators who responded to all three rounds of the Delphi survey. The Delphi technique encourages experts to identify and communicate their thoughts and insight on a given subject or to react to specific open-ended questions (Borg & Gall, 1988; Rojewski, 1990). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data.

The specific stem administrators were asked to respond to was "what can administrators in distance education programs do to improve distance learning program quality and success?" In the second round of the study, individual items were rated on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where 1=No Agreement that the technique would

encourage success, and 5=Very High Agreement with the technique. In the third round, normative group data were presented to study participants, and they were presented an opportunity to modify their original responses.

Results

The first round of the Delphi procedure yielded responses from 26 administrators. The sample yielded a response rate of 43% from the total population of 60 administrators who manage distance education programs within their individual institutions. All of the initial 26 administrators completed the next two Delphi stages.

In response to the open-ended question that served as the base of the Delphi survey, 104 total statements were identified. Checking for duplication decreased the number of statements to 18. Administrators were asked to rate each of the statements on a Likert (1-to-5) scale with five representing very high agreement to one representing no agreement. The mean ratings of administrators final round responses ranged from a high of 4.615 to a low of 3.692. There were 16 statements that received a high degree of agreement (greater than 4.0 of a five-point scale).

Administrators rated most strongly the need to provide additional support for faculty development of course materials (mean 4.615), make programmatic quality a high priority (mean 4.577), and being customer-focused by offering programs concentrated on potential client needs (mean 4.500). There was high agreement with providing a reward system which acknowledges faculty participation in distance education (mean 4.462), promoting the involvement of quality faculty who are enthusiastic about distance education (mean 4.423), and creating a reward system which allows for faculty to be involved in distance education (mean 4.308). Administrators also supported the concept of providing special grants to faculty who may be pioneers in the use of distance education technologies (mean 4.231), providing a reward system which assures faculty recognition or compensation for innovative and creative efforts (mean 4.231), and developing new courses and workshops to respond to industry changes and trends (mean 4.154). Agreement was also found to encourage continual updating of course content (mean 4.154), committing energies and resources long enough for the program to fully develop (mean 4.154), and promoting regional cooperation and collaboration in addressing high need areas (mean 4.115). Administrators found high agreement in implementing a reward system to promote creativity in distance education teaching (mean 4.077), providing pre-service faculty development specifically for distance education teaching (mean 4.039), promoting distance educating techniques as a method of complementing the academic department's mission (mean 4.039), and assuring cost-competitiveness (mean 4.039). Administrators had less agreement in providing sufficient planning time lines (mean 3.923) and reducing the individual-related barriers to the offering of off-campus programs (mean 3.692). Provided in Table 1 are complete statements identified by administrators along with each statement's mean and standard deviation.

Table 1. Administrator's Perceptions: How to Improve Success in Courses Offered through Distributed Education Techniques

What can administrators in distance education programs do to improve distance learning program quality and success?		
(Scale: from 5 = "very high agreement with technique" to 1 = "no agreement with technique")		
Technique	**Mean**	**SD**
Provide additional support for faculty development of course materials (i.e., visuals, written materials, etc.)	4.615	.5711
Make programmatic quality a high priority	4.577	.5038
Be customer-focused by offering programs concentrated on potential client needs	4.500	.6481
Provide a reward system, including tenure and promotion criteria, which acknowledges faculty participation in distance education	4.462	.7060
Create a reward system which allows faculty to be involved in distance education	4.308	.8376

Provide special grants to faculty who may be pioneers in the use of distance education technologies	4.231	.7646
Provide a reward system which assures faculty recognition or compensation for innovative and creative efforts (e.g., fees, royalties, etc.)	4.231	.7104
Develop new courses and workshops to respond to industry changes and trends	4.154	.6127
Encourage continual updating of course content	4.154	.7317
Commit energies and resources long enough for the program to fully develop	4.154	.7317
Promote regional cooperation and collaboration in addressing high-need areas	4.115	.8162
Implement a reward system to promote creativity in distance education teaching	4.077	.8449
Provide pre-service faculty development specifically for distance education teaching	4.039	.9157
Promote distance education techniques as a method of complementing the academic department's mission	4.039	.7736
Assure cost-competitiveness	4.039	.7200
Provide for sufficient planning timelines	3.923	.6884
Reduce the individual-related barriers to the offering of off-campus programs (i.e., release time, merit pay, etc.)	3.692	.7000

Discussion

The notion of distance education parallels traditional college curriculum from the perspective of many administrators: the work of the administrative unit has the potential to greatly impact the overall effectiveness and quality of the learning environment. This notion, conceptually, grants a substantial value to an administrative body, and recognizes concepts such as andragogy that particularly rely on the difference of learning modes and styles among learning groups. Distance education is unique, though, in that learning quality is impacted by, conceptually, the entire environment of the learning program. The notion was reinforced by the current study findings, as administrators reported their highest agreement-favoring faculty in eight of their top ten perceptions. Only two of the top ten highest rated statements were tied directly and solely to the function and work of administrative bodies. The second statement, "make programmatic quality a high priority" and the ninth statement, "develop new courses and workshops" both largely were grounded in the work of administrative units rather than faculty or student partnerships.

The findings, as related by distance education administrators, suggests that they see their job as one of facilitating program quality rather than owning responsibility for program success. If this notion proves consistent in other research, the industry of distance education will be more closely aligned with the profession of continuing education administration, where success, effectiveness, and quality has less to do with the formal actions of the office and more to do with the linkages and bridges that one can build with various academic units. This has meaningful residual results in areas such as professional development and graduate program training, but most importantly, stresses the need for an academic preparation and understanding of the academic industry by distance education administrators. This is not consistent with much of the current professional development literature that stresses marketing and public relations, but rather, reflects the historical trend in higher education to draw and develop

leadership from faculty and faculty-exposed labor pools.

Findings also reveal that administrators perceive quality to be based almost exclusively in the performance of faculty. With such high mean ratings tied to faculty performance, the logical conclusion is that there is a need to invest heavily in programs that enhance faculty performance. The notion of faculty development is certainly a component of this conclusion, but specifically, findings indicate that administrators and "programs" in general must find ways to transition faculty to the distance learning mindset and craft a different set of skills and expectations for faculty performance. Distance learning gives new meaning to such common terms as office access and classroom interaction, and successful programs in the future will build upon these new definitions to create effective student-centered programs and learning organizations.

Whether distance education is fully embraced by the academic community or relegated to a revenue-producing ancillary function of the institution, these programs will continue to be relied upon to accomplish the fundamental expectation of mass access, on-demand higher education. Institutions, as organizations led by administrators such as those in this study, must learn to respond to various constituency needs and retain their integrity while simultaneously providing more open access to courses and programs of study. Findings reinforce the need for advanced faculty planning to teach via distance learning technologies, and touch on the foundation of instructional delivery attention as paramount to program quality. Administrators are but one piece of the distance learning effectiveness and quality puzzle, and practitioners and scholars alike must critically examine the industry to delineate the salient components of effective and successful distance learning programs. Perhaps utilizing benchmarking to identify excellent programs, perhaps autobiographical or case study research can describe the key elements of quality programs. The end result must be the same for colleges and universities, though, and that quite simply is how to communicate the unique, value-added components of "higher" education through technologies that make distance learning possible and a pragmatic option. Answers will not come quickly or easily, yet must come in the near future.

References

Cushman, R. (1996). From a distance. Lingua Franca, 6(7), 53-63.

Filipczak, B. (1995). Putting the learning into distance education. Training, 32(10), 111-118.

Miller, M. T., & Husmann, D. E. (1996). A holistic model for primary factors in the ecology of distance education course offerings. Journal of Distance Education, 11(1), 101-110.

Moore, M. (1993). Is teaching like flying? A total systems view of distance education. American Journal of Distance Education, 7(1), 1-10.

Moore, M. (1996). The death of a distance. American Journal of Distance Education, 9(3), 1-4.