
Policy Frameworks for Distance Education: Implications for Decision Makers

James W. King, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska

Gwen C. Nugent, Director of Education, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, University of Nebraska

Earl B. Russell, Professor, University of Nebraska

Jenni Eich, graduate student, University of Nebraska

Dara D. Lacy, graduate student, University of Nebraska

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How can decision makers deal with the growing number of policy issues in the distance education arena? How can instructional managers comprehensively plan for the present and the future in a time of frequent flux and constant change? How can institutions structure a robust and proactive decision making environment around distance education? Are there policy making models to provide a foundation and to offer guidance to the decision maker in distance education? How can managers identify a policy making "zone?"

We believe there are such models and we will briefly describe one of them, a Policy Analysis Framework. We will also outline a shorter version, which may be worthwhile to some practitioners at the beginning of the distance education policy path. Not included here are models of communication and computing assessment (Rocheleau, 1996), project management (task, time, and resources, Strauss 1997), instructional development models (Gustafson and Branch 1997), or delivery models (McLendon and Cronk, 1999). The focus is on distance education and management.

A Policy Analysis Framework

Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) proposed a powerful model to help decision makers look at the policy arena of distance education. They suggested seven elements for attention: 1) Academic, 2) Fiscal, 3) Geographic, 4) Governance, 5) Labor-Management, 6) Legal, and 7) Student Support Services. Based on this seven-item model, Berge (1998) added two more areas: 8) Technical, and 9) Cultural.

In a study of distance education policy in post-secondary institutions, King, Nugent, Russell, and Lacy (1999) adapted the Gellman-Danley and Fetzner and the Berge models. From these authors they generated a Policy Analysis Framework (Table 1) and determined that seven elements (Academic, Governance/Administration/Fiscal, Faculty, Legal, Student Support Services, Technical, and Cultural) label and categorize most distance education policies or policy related issues.

Derived from the previous models, the Policy Analysis Framework (PAF) combines arenas and shifts issues into stronger groupings. The PAF model identifies for decision makers essential, large policy areas (e.g., technical) as well as particular activities in each area (e.g., setup concerns). While there may be more detailed and specific elements and components in a particular educational situation, we have found that this general PAF description is effective and functional when analyzing distance education policy (King, et al., 1999). We are also finding that

the PAF is a constructive means for thinking about and managing distance education programs and courses. That is, the policy areas identified in the model are the predominant decision making areas in actuality. Thus, these seven areas are strategic management decision zones.

Table 1. Policy Analysis Framework for Distance Education

Policy Area	Key Issues
Academic	Calendar, Course integrity, Transferability, Transcripts, Student/Course evaluation, Admission standards, Curriculum/Course approval, Accreditation, Class cancellations , Course/Program/Degree availability, Recruiting/Marketing
Governance/Administration/ Fiscal	Tuition rate, Technology fee, FTE's, Administration cost, State fiscal regulations, Tuition disbursement, Space, Single versus multiple board oversight, Staffing
Faculty	Compensation and workload, Development incentives, Faculty training, Congruence with existing union contracts, Class monitoring, Faculty support, Faculty evaluation
Legal	Intellectual property, Faculty, Student and institutional liability
Student Support Services	Advisement, Counseling, Library access, Materials delivery, Student training, Test proctoring, Videotaping, Computer accounts, Registration, Financial aid, Labs
Technical	Systems reliability, Connectivity/access, Hardware/software, Setup concerns, Infrastructure, Technical support (staffing), Scheduling, Costs
Cultural	Adoption of innovations, Acceptance of on-line/distance teaching, Understanding of distance education (what works at a distance), Organizational values

(Adapted from Gellman-Danley and Fetzner, 1998; Berge, 1998)

These seven policy areas are fundamental to developing and managing distance education efforts. They seem to be consistent across many sectors (four year colleges, community colleges, etc.) and at many levels (department, college, system). The seven key policy areas in the PAF suggest places in administrators can intervene in the distance education system to make and manage change.

A Three-Tiered PAF

While the PAF can be a powerful organizing tool, it can be simplified to be more useful for individuals and institutions considering or just starting distance education programs or courses. A three tiered policy analysis and development system, shown in Table 2, evolved by compressing the seven policy areas of the PAF. With this simplified model, distance education policy can be

studied by looking at large, sweeping areas such as: Students, Faculty, and Management and Organization.

While this second model is down-to-earth in that there are only three areas, it still offers the decision maker an expeditious way to think about the major issues of faculty, student support, and management of the educational process and the wide array of technological issues. The shorter PAF is a good tool for departments or units engaging in distance education. It can also be molded to fit within the full range PAF that the larger institution might use to plan and manage distance education

Table 2. Three Tiered Policy Analysis Framework for Distance Education

Policy Area	Description
Faculty (including Continuing Education and Cooperative Extension)	Rewards (e.g., stipends, promotion and tenure, merit increases, etc.); Support (e.g., student help, technical assistance, training, etc.); Opportunities to learn about technology and new applications (e.g., release time, training, etc.); Intellectual property (e.g. ownership of materials, copyright, etc.)
Students/Participants	Support (e.g., access to technology, library resources, registration, advising, financial aid, etc.); Requirements and records (e.g., residency requirements, acceptance of courses from other places, transfer of credit, continuing education, etc.)
Management and Organization	Tuition and fee structure; Funding formula; Collaboration (e.g., with other Departments, units, institutions, consortia, intra-and inter-institutional, service areas, etc.); Resources (e.g., financial resources to support distance education, equipment, new technologies, etc.); Curricula/individual courses (e.g., delivery modes, course/program selection, plans to develop, individual sequences, course development, entire program delivery, interactivity requirements, test requirements, contact hour definitions, etc.)

Summary

These two models or tools, the seven step "Policy Analysis Framework for Distance Education" and the "Three Tiered Policy Analysis Framework for Distance Education" surface as practical decision making tools for planners and managers of distance education. While supporting tools for managing the distance education efforts can be found in Bates (2000), Davenport (1997), Freeman, (1997) Nardi and O'Day (1999), and Iasditi and MacCormack (1997), the Policy

Analysis Framework described here is a way to conceptualize and manage the distance education system by incentives, openness, and structure.

Specifically, either or both models may be used to identify and inventory areas of strengths and weaknesses in existing distance education policies. We posit that developing policies in areas where weaknesses are found is the surest way to help assure that transition from near-randomly offered courses to full-fledged distance education programs that provide certification, licensure and degrees. Sound policies should lead to and support sound programs.

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Authors:

James W. King is Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583.

Gwen Nugent is Director of Education, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, Lincoln, NE, 68501 Email: gnugent1@unl.edu

Earl Russell is Professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583.

Jenni Eich is a graduate student at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583.

**Dara D. Lacy is a graduate student at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583
Email: dlacy1@hotmail.com**

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