Making Informed Decisions about Staffing and Training: Roles and Competencies for Distance Education Programs in Higher Education

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of all higher education institutions offering distance education courses increased from 33 percent to 44 percent from the fall of 1995 until the 1997-98 academic year (Lewis, Snow, Farris & Levin, 1999). New technologies are being utilized to deliver instruction and training to people who would not otherwise receive it. Many technology-related changes over the past few years have been dramatic and well documented, requiring little attention here. However, this ever-evolving landscape of distance education technology requires that the distance educator continually develop new skills. From an institutional perspective, as distance education programs are implemented, decisions must be made regarding hiring and training staff. What are the major roles that need to be covered? What skills are needed? What competencies are more important, technical, interpersonal, instructional or management? There is little research identifying the roles and competencies needed to implement distance education in the higher education environment. In response to this need, we convened an expert panel of distance educators via a computer-mediated Delphi technique in the fall of 1999 to identify and analyze the roles and competencies needed in higher education institutions to implement and manage distance education programs.

The study had three purposes. The first was to identify the competencies and roles needed in distance education in higher education. The second purpose was to rate the importance of those competencies. The third goal was to compare the results to those of a previous competency study done five years ago by Liz Thach (1994). This study followed the pattern of previous competency studies by utilizing a panel of distance education experts to determine roles and competencies. The Delphi technique, consisting of four rounds of electronic questionnaires and controlled feedback, was selected to structure the group process. All data was gathered using web-based instruments that resided on the server of the Center for Distance Learning Research at Texas A&M University. Distance education experts were carefully identified through peer nomination process to participate in the study. Fifteen distance education experts made up the final panel, completing the four rounds of questionnaires.

There are thirteen identifiable roles needed to implement and manage distance education programs in higher education: Administrative Manager, Instructor/Facilitator, Instructional Designer, Technology Expert, Site Facilitator/Proctor, Support Staff, Librarian, Technician, Evaluation Specialist, Graphic Design, Trainer, Media Publisher/Editor, and Leader/Change Agent. These roles are not equivalent to positions or titles. Many roles are typically assumed by one position, depending upon the skills of the person in that position. However, all these roles should be considered in staffing and training decisions. The importance of the roles and

competencies will vary depending on the institutional environment particularly related to the distance education model be implemented. Site Facilitator/Proctor for example, is more critical to a videoconferencing model than to an online model of instruction. Likewise, specific technology competencies will vary depending on the mode of delivery of instruction to distant students. Institutions that do not utilize web-based instruction would not require the competencies related to that mode of delivery, obviously.

A set of thirty general competencies emerged that are necessary to varying degrees across all roles. These general competencies are a foundational skill set that can be considered entry level for any of the roles. They include competencies related to communication and interpersonal skills, administration and management, technology, and instruction. The level of mastery of a general competency will vary from role to role. Some of the general competencies are primary to one role, such as change agent skills to the role of leader/change agent, for example, and secondary or tertiary in the function of other roles. This data indicates that all roles include some degree of need for change agent skills, but it does not identify the level of mastery or depth of knowledge required for the different functional areas represented by the thirteen roles. Table 1 reports the general competencies.

Table 1

General Competencies Assigned by Panel Members to All Roles

Competency Name
Collaboration/Teamwork Skills
Basic Technology Knowledge
Interpersonal Communication Skills
English Proficiency
Knowledge of DL Field
Writing Skills
Questioning Skills
Skills in Development of Collaborative, Student Focused Learning Environment
Adult Learning Theory
Knowledge of Support Services
Feedback Skills
Organizational Skills

Technology Access Knowledge
Planning Skills
Software Skills
Knowledge of Intellectual Property, Fair Usage & Copyright Regulations
Facilitation (Discussion) Skills
Public Relations Skills
Multimedia Knowledge
Presentation Skills
Consulting Skills
Evaluation Skills
Group Process Skills
Editing Skills
Project Management Skills
Change Agent Skills
Negotiation Skills
Needs Assessment Skills
Data Analysis Skills
Personal Organization Skills

In addition to the general competencies, each role requires other competencies that are role-specific. It should be noted that each role requires both the general competencies and the indicated role-specific competencies. The expert panel rated the role specific competencies, those not associated with all thirteen roles, on scales of criticality and frequency. Table 2 includes the role specific competencies on which the panel reached a level of consensus as being very important due to either frequency or criticality.

Table 2

Roles And Role Specific Competencies That Were Considered Very Important

Role	Competencies
Administrative Manager	Managerial Skills, Budgeting Skills, Marketing Skills, Strategic Planning Skills
Instructor/ Facilitator	Content Knowledge, Teaching Strategies/Models, General Education Theory, Skill with Internet Tools for Instruction, Instructional Design for Interactive Technologies, Library Research Skills, Modeling of Behavior/Skills
Instructional Designer	Instructional Design Skills, Instructional Design for Interactive Technologies; Media Attributes Knowledge; General Education Theory; Text Layout Skills; Skill with Internet Tools for Instruction; Teaching Strategies/ Models, Web Related Programming skills; Learning Style and Theory; HTML Authoring Skills
Technology Expert	Computer Hardware Skills; Technology Operation/Repair Skills; Skill with Internet Tools for Instruction
Site Facilitator/ Proctor	(Consensus not reached on any competencies as very important.)
Support Staff	Advising/Counseling Skills
Librarian	Library Research Skills
Technician	Technology Operation/Repair Skills; Computer Hardware Skills; Computer Networking Skills
Evaluation Specialist	General Education Theory
Graphic Designer	Graphic Design Skills; Text Layout Skills; Media Attributes Knowledge; Skill with Internet Tools for Instruction
Trainer	Training Skills; Modeling of Behavior/Skills; General Education Theory; Teaching Strategies/Models; Skills with Internet Tools for Instruction; Advising/Counseling Skills
Media Publisher/ Editor	Skills with Internet Tools for Instruction; Graphic Design Skills; Media Attributes Knowledge

Leader/Change Agent	Modeling of Behavior/Skills; Managerial Skills; Marketing Skills; Strategic Planning Skills; Policy-Making Skills; General Education Theory

Based on the comparison of the current results to the findings of Thach (1994), interpersonal and communication skills remain necessary across all roles and dominated the top ten general competencies in both studies. Basic technology skills became more important, while more advanced technology skills such as engineering became less important. Collaboration/teamwork skills as a competency remains necessary across all roles, being the competency most often assigned to a role.

Three competencies related to the Internet emerged in the present study as well as two competencies related to pedagogy, underscoring on the one hand the need for basic technology competencies across all roles and on the other hand the need for sound pedagogical practice in distance education initiatives. A dual trend emerged related to technology skills. First, the more advanced technical competency, engineering skills, was not as highly rated as before. Secondly, basic technology skills are indispensable across all roles, having become part of the entry-level skill set needed by any staff member.

There are various applications of this research. Institutions of higher education can use the results in the staffing of distance education programs. The thirteen identified roles can be used as a guide in the selection of staff. It should be noted that each staff position might encompass several roles and conversely, that the functions of one role might be divided among several staff positions.

Existing training programs for distance education professionals should be updated based on the competencies identified in this study. Likewise, new training programs should be implemented using the results of this study as a framework. Institution specific training programs might use the competencies identified here as a foundation and tailor the specific skills to the environment and needs of the institution.

References

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