

---

# Current Trends in Distance Education: An Administrative Model

---

*Dr. Daniel P. Compora*  
*Assistant Professor: Department of English*  
*The University of Toledo*  
*2801 West Bancroft Street*  
*Toledo, Ohio 43606*  
[dcompor@utnet.utoledo.edu](mailto:dcompor@utnet.utoledo.edu)

## **Abstract**

Current practices and procedures of distance education programs at selected institutions in higher education in Ohio were studied. Relevant data was found in the areas of: (1) content of the distance education program's mission statement; (2) needs assessment procedures; (3) student demographics; (4) course acquisition, development, and evaluation criteria and procedures; (5) hierarchical approval of courses; (6) delivery systems; (7) selection of distance education course instructors; (8) distance education course teaching/management procedures; (9) matriculation of distance learners; (10) budgeting; (11) marketing procedures; and (12) formative and summative evaluation of the individual courses and the entire distance education program. This research has led to the development of an Distance Learning Administrative Operational Model.

## **Current Trends in Distance Education: An Administrative Model**

During the 1999-2000 academic year, data was gathered from six selected colleges and universities in Ohio that revealed current operational practices regarding the establishment, practices, procedures, administration and management of distance education programs. The state of Ohio was chosen because it had, at the time of the study, 29 higher education institutions actively involved in distance education. Representative institutions from various classifications (i.e. state and private community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities) were found in Ohio. This qualitative research study was completed using a case study research design and provides detailed data necessary to determine administrative and management practices of Distance education programs at colleges and universities in Ohio. Through the execution of this study and the ongoing analysis of the data, current information concerning the administration of distance education programs was obtained. This study provides existing and future programs with a model illustrating an effective way to administrate and manage a distance education program.

Relevant data was found in the areas of: (1) content of the distance education program's mission statement; (2) needs assessment procedures; (3) student demographics; (4) course acquisition, development, and evaluation criteria and procedures; (5) hierarchical approval of courses; (6) delivery systems; (7) selection of distance education course instructors; (8) distance education course teaching/management procedures; (9) matriculation of distance learners; (10) budgeting; (11) marketing procedures; and (12) formative and summative evaluation of the individual courses and the entire distance education program. The study

focused on twelve research questions.

1. What is the distance education program's mission statement?

Only one of the six institutions (Institution A) included in this study has its own mission statement. Three institutions indicated that they follow the institution's mission. One institution said that they are still in the trial and error period. One institution did not respond, nor could the researcher obtain a copy of the institution's overall mission.

2. Have internal and external needs assessments been conducted to determine:

- a) If the institution has the necessary resources for the program (e.g. teaching faculty, approved academic courses, financial resources).
- b) The type of student who may be interested in a distance education program.
- c) The types of courses that would be taken by the students.
- d) If students are interested in matriculating into a course of study leading to a degree.

None of the institutions surveyed indicated that a formal internal needs assessment was completed. Only one institution (Institution D) indicated that surveys had been taken over the years to see how the program could be improved. This response seems to apply more to program evaluation than needs assessment. None of the institutions surveyed indicated that a formal external needs assessment was ever completed.

3. What are the demographics of the students who are presently enrolled in the distance education program?

The demographics vary from institution to institution. Most programs (four of the six) targeted the non-traditional adult student. All are state institutions--three two year colleges and one four year. One program (Institution C) targeted high school students--this was a combined state two-year/private four-year college. Institution F did not provide any data with regard to their distance education program. The specific demographic information from each institution is listed below.

Institution A: The profile provided is generally a female, who is employed and in her mid-twenties. This institution has directed much of its distance education efforts in the nursing program.

Institution B: The general profile given were "adults working full-time to secure job upgrade." Specific age ranges and gender were not provided.

Institution C: This program is aimed at high school students.

Institution D: The profile provided is a "diverse population from diverse economic backgrounds." The age ranges provided are adults who live in the local area and are between the ages 25-40. Many of them do not possess computers. They were described as part-time students/full-time workers.

Institution E: The participant said that the distance education student profile is not much different from other "typical community college students." The data indicates that this institution serves a large non-traditional adult student population who are mostly part-time students (8923 part-time students--3898

full-time).

Institution F: The institution provided no information, but the following was taken from their website:

[Institution F] is a co-educational, liberal arts college affiliated with the United Methodist Church. The college is located in a city with an approximate population of 25,000. It has 2000 students, of which 51% are male and 49% female, representing 22 states and 22 countries.

4. What are the procedures and criteria used to evaluate and acquire courses to be used in the distance education program?

Only one of the institutions (Institution D) develops its own telecourses. Three institutions purchase telecourses from sources like PBS. Two institutions (Institution A and Institution C) do not have a telecourse component in their programs.

Four of the institutions offer online courses. Institution F (the private four year college) did not offer any online courses, nor did institution C (the program aimed at high school students). Only Institution D use licensed online courses. They and the other three who offer online courses primarily develop their own. Institution D, a large population community college (18,000 plus students) also indicated that it purchases some computer software courses, from a distributor who was not specified.

5. What is the hierarchical approval procedure of distance education courses?

Two institutions (Institution C and Institution E) require Dean approval. Institution C has the most detailed policy in place, requiring a proposal to be submitted, then approval by the department chair and dean. One institution, Institution B, is primarily reliant on faculty to make these decisions; however, the faculty must consult with the department chair before a final decision is made. Institution E will not offer a distance education course unless a traditional course exists. This is typical of distance education courses because of the academic approval that must be conducted. Two institutions (Institution D and Institution F) did not provide any data with regard to this issue. Institution A indicated that with the upcoming changes, a system would likely be put in place, but no current data was provided.

6. What telecommunication delivery systems are used to transmit the distance education courses?

All of the programs studied utilize multiple instructional delivery systems. While some institutions rely on one delivery method more than others, each institution transmits distance education courses in a variety of ways. Four of the six institutions (66%) use videotape, with Institution B reporting tape distribution being the primary delivery system. Five of the six (83%) reported the use of the Internet to transmit courses via the World Wide Web.

Only one institution (less than 2%) reported the use of CD-Rom courses.

Only one institution (less than 2%) reported the use of audiotape courses.

Five institutions reported use of a live interactive television and video

teleconferencing system.

#### 7. How are distance education course instructors selected?

Every institution, except Institution F, which did not provide any data, indicated that faculty members are chosen for distance education teaching based on a willingness to teach such a course. Two of the institutions (A and D) made a point to say no one is forced to teach a distance education course. None of the institutions indicated the existence of a formal training program in place for instructors, but support is indeed available to them.

There is no consistent method of payment for instructors--for this reason, each institution's response is noted below:

Institution A: Instructors are generally paid to teach these courses as an overload.

Institution B: Instructors are paid as in-load and as overload.

Institution C: Originally, people were paid extra (double) for developing and teaching a distance course. Later, they were paid as an overload. Currently, they are being taught as part of the normal load.

Institution D: Full-time faculty can choose whether a distance course is paid as in-load or overload.

Institution E: Full-time faculty members teach distance courses in-load.

Institution F: No data was provided.

Clearly, each institution has its own unique situation and handles the compensation issue differently.

#### 8. What are the distance education course management procedures, including involvement of the teacher, types of assignments made, the use a hot line or online help system, and the type of feedback given to students?

For the most part, most of these decisions are left up to the individual instructors. None of the institutions require a special orientation session for the students. Institution A has an optional orientation before classes begin.

Institution B and Institution E said that the first night serves as an orientation.

Institution C indicated that orientations, live or videotaped, had not worked out very well. One institution, Institution F, did not provide any information.

With regards to hotlines and help systems, the responses varied greatly.

Institution A indicated that an email discussion group is the way students could submit questions. Institution B said that the individual faculty members handle all problems. Institution C relies on the syllabus to convey a great deal of the information required to succeed in the courses. Institutions C, D, and E did not provide any information with regard to the resources available to help the students.

#### 9. What is the matriculation rate of students who have completed distance education courses and have decided to obtain a degree?

Four of the six institutions (67%) provided no data. Institution C indicated that students who take distance education courses are already in a degree program. Institution D reported that the students are Post Secondary Options students and "about 80%" are still in college.

10. What is the budget of the distance education program, including common line item amounts and the amount committed for marketing the program?

None of the institutions surveyed were willing to provide specific dollar amounts. The way budgets are handled varied greatly. Each participant addressed different issues regarding the budget. Each institution and its budget situation is provided below:

Institution A: This program has its own budget. There is no money for faculty development, but staff and technical support are paid out of this budget. The cost effectiveness of the program has not been determined.

Institution B: Little information was provided, but the participant indicated that the real cost per student increases by \$20 when they take distance education courses. Students who take telecourses pay an extra \$10 as a non-refundable tape fee. Students in online courses pay the same as student in traditional courses.

Institution C: According to the participant, there is no budget--everything has been accomplished through grants.

Institution D: This school has a separate budget but it is part of the overall campus budget. They treat all delivery methods of distance education with regards to faculty pay. The faculty member gets five credit hours for developing the course--they can take it as an overload or as part of their regular load. This institution is looking to treat the various delivery methods differently with regard to pay. No cost effectiveness information was provided.

Institution E: Their budget is part of the instructional technology budget. This institution is starting to do some cost studies, but it appears that their telecourses lose money.

Institution F: This is the first year the program has its own line in the overall budget, and it primarily pays for time on the telephone lines and for equipment.

11. What marketing procedures are used to promote the distance education program?

Marketing of the program seems to be handled differently at every institution. Institutions C and E really do not market their programs in the community--neither program has its own budget.

Institution A markets primarily within a month of the registration period. Specific procedures and types of marketing strategies were not provided.

Institution B did not provide much information, saying only that the printed schedule and press releases served as marketing for the program. This participant noted that there is no relationship on the amount of money spent on marketing and the number of student who enroll.

Institution D markets in a variety of ways; they send out a brochure every quarter; the video department makes a promotional tape from the PBS clips. News releases and the college newspaper are also marketing tools, as is the World Wide Web.

12. How is formative and summative evaluation conducted on individual telecourses as well as the entire program?

Each institution handles the evaluation of the program and course quite

differently. Two of the institutions (Institutions B and D) indicate that the instructors are the only ones who can conduct evaluations. Two of the participants (from Institutions A and E) said that they (not the instructors) conduct written evaluations. One participant (Institution C) conducts personal interviews with the students. One institution (Institution F) did not provide any data. The responses are presented below:

Institution A: Evaluations take place on a course-by-course basis, and they are evaluated on the same criteria as a traditional course (these criteria were not provided). The course evaluations do not ask direct questions about instructors. It has not yet been determined whether the evaluations should go to the faculty member, the administration, or to both parties.

Institution B: The faculty members are responsible for the evaluations.

Institution C: No written evaluations are completed. The participant interviews each student individually about the courses and the program.

Institution D: Only the instructor can evaluate the course. This institution has implemented an assessment program, but details were not provided.

Institution E: Surveys are sent, after the course, to the students, but the return rate is not good. In addition to concerns about the course, this institution also attempts to gather some demographic data with its survey.

Institution F: No data was provided.

Although each institution handles the evaluations differently and with varying degrees of success, all five of those who responded indicated that evaluation is important.

## **Conclusions**

There appears to be a discrepancy between the literature cited and the actual practice of the institutions surveyed. Based on the discussion of the results of this study, the following generalizations can be made and serve as conclusions.

1. Inadequate preparation and development of program specific mission statements is noted. While some institutions have a separate mission statement for the distance education program, others simply follow the mission statement of the institution.
2. Distance education programs are often implemented without conducting a needs assessment. None of the institutions surveyed indicated that formal internal or external needs assessments were completed.
3. Demographic profiles vary greatly depending on the institution. One of the programs targets high school students while others focus on non-traditional, working class students. All participating institutions do have at least a general profile of their typical distance education student, and it appears that programs decisions are tailored toward fitting the needs of these types of students.
4. All institutions involved in online courses are developing their own. Only one institution indicated that it licenses online courses. Programs offering telecourses are very reliant on existing telecourses. Only one institution develops its own telecourses. Specific approval and selection procedures were not discovered in this study.

5. There is little consistency as to how courses get approved for distance delivery. While some institutions employed a hierarchical approval procedure, others seemed to operate more on a "who is willing to participate" basis. Undoubtedly, a hierarchical approval procedure can help prevent budgetary and workload problems and insure that adequate thought and discussion take place before a course or program is offered via distance education.

6. Delivery methods appear to be selected based on availability of technology as opposed to a systematic design process. Distance education programs tend to employ different delivery methods, but most tend to rely on one form more heavily than others. Much of this is likely due to the availability of existing technology more than it is based on actual program design.

7. Instructors generally teach distance education courses based on their willingness rather than their expertise. The most developed and longest running distance education programs surveyed provide support for both faculty members and students. Faculty members often need help getting started when teaching a course in a different manner than which they are accustomed. Unfortunately, most of the programs surveyed provide little or no training of instructors.

8. Students do not appear to be getting the support they need. Distance education programs are often dependant upon other departments and divisions in the institution, including the campus library, bookstore, academic departments, and testing centers, just to name a few. Successful distance education programs need to provide technical support for students involved in the distance learning process. Most of the institutions lay the bulk of the responsibility on the individual instructor. Only two institutions indicated that an established help system was in place, while another relies on the syllabus to handle problems. Three of the institutions did not indicate the availability of any specific help systems.

9. Little data about matriculation is being gathered by the institutions. Evaluating the effectiveness of a program could be difficult if no data is being kept as to whether or not students matriculate into a degree program. The institutions appear to be serving an existing student population who are already in degree. As a result, this type of data may not be essential to the management of the program.

10. No specific trends were noted regarding a dedicated budget for a distance education program. Generally, distance education programs do not have specific budgets. Each institution operates under different financial constraints. Some programs have a budget while other operate on grants and startup funding. There is no consistent method of paying instructors-some are paid in-load; others overload. Their respective departments pay some faculty members; the Distance Education department pays others.

11. There is an absence of marketing strategies to promote distance education programs. Since some institutions have no budgets, they cannot do any marketing of their programs. As a result, these programs tend to be targeted at specific groups and contain little room for growth. On the other hand, the institutions that do market heavily were able to offer the more courses

employing more diverse delivery methods.

12. Most institutions do conduct evaluations; however, there is little consistency from institution to institution as to how the evaluations are conducted used. In some cases, faculty members are responsible for conducting evaluations. In other cases, the distance education program director conducts them. In some cases evaluations are optional; in other cases, they are required.

The findings of this study indicate that established guidelines and procedures are not being followed with regard to the development, administration, and management of distance education programs. While each institution has unique characteristics, it is important to follow some established procedures to insure that the program is meeting the needs of all parties involved.

For this reason, the following nine-step component model has been developed to address the major administrative needs of most distance education programs.

These are not sequential steps; rather this model is based on the administrative and management needs of most programs. This model is general enough to cover most any type of distance education program, yet specific enough to cover many crucial administrative and managerial concerns of a distance education program.

### **Distance Education Administrative Operative Model**

**Assessment**  
**Budget**  
**Coordination**

**Delivery methods**  
**Evaluation**  
**Faculty Involvement and Training**

**Generate a Mission Statement**  
**Hierarchical Approval System**  
**Implementation of Support Systems**

*Assessment:* Formal or informal needs assessment needs to be conducted to insure that the needs of the students are being met. The literature reviewed supports the needs assessment phase of the instructional design process.

"Before beginning to solve a problem or making an improvement, it is worth being sure that the right problem is being solved, that the effort is directed toward real needs" (Willis, 1994).

According to the data collected, this is not being done. As technology changes, often so do the needs of students. The needs of the student population the program serves should be evaluated regularly, including the institution's resources, technology, faculty, and budget. Willis (1994) stresses the importance of needs assessment by stating, "Until the need has been adequately defined, an appropriate solution is unlikely to be found. Once the need has been specified, an amazing number of potential solutions become possible." Programs need to be flexible, and institutions must be prepared for changes in the demographics of the student population.

Initially, distance programs were established and most successful in the rural areas. Today institutions in densely populated, urban areas are offering distance courses. This is due in large part to the changing student body and, more importantly, to the changing work environment. There is, now more than ever, the need to address a large population of adults who are seeking retraining, and re-certification, thus causing the opportunity for continuous learning. Since individual lifestyles have changed, the traditional modes of learning are not conducive to this population. Time, financial resources and geographic issues all factor into the demand for distance learning (Aspen Institute 1996, Cited in Stenerson, 1998)).

Therefore, it is essential for institutions to continue to conduct needs assessments and demographic surveys periodically in order to continue to meet the needs of students.

*Budget:* In order for a distance education program to be successful, a yearly budget must be established. The most developed and strongest programs involved in the study had their own budgets. The weakest programs were those that relied solely on startup money and grants. While startup monies and grants may be helpful in starting a program, a budget for the program itself is a necessity. Money needs to be allocated in order to maintain and upgrade technology, provide training and support, and, in some cases, to pay faculty. While a distance education program may seem cost prohibitive initially, Willis (1994) illustrates the complexities of distance education cost analysis:

Because distance education impacts on the spending decisions within host organizations, Cowen and Nemiec (1983) believe that it is essential to involve the chief financial officer in any cost study, to be certain that the data collected are viewed as pertinent and credible by an organization's decision-makers. Their study of a two-way interactive video network in central Maine showed substantial travel and productivity savings over time and led to the continued funding of what appeared at first to be an overly expensive program.

As this implies, a program's cost effectiveness needs to be considered so that sufficient budgetary planning can take place.

While institutions may differ in the manner in which faculty are paid, support services, technological upgrades, and maintenance are just three components of any distance education program that require yearly funding. Regardless, it is important to have a system in place that is clearly articulated to the faculty so that confusion over compensation does not become a barrier to teaching a distance course. In addition, in order for programs to grow, marketing is essential and needs to be part of the program's annual budget.

*Coordination:* Distance education programs require a coordination of efforts with many other entities, some of which include academic departments, faculty, learning and testing centers, bookstores, extensions centers, sister schools, and, in some cases, local high schools. It is important to provide the students with the resources and assistance they need to succeed, as Buchanan (2000) indicates:

In addition to such support as advising services, job placement services, and tutorial assistance, of particular importance to distance learners is the provision of and access to library materials and services.... Students are often left alone to locate and acquire materials, spend great amounts of time downloading

electronic reserve materials, access supplementary resources, and decipher electronic indexes and databases. In some extremes, the electronic indexes and databases available to on-site students are restricted by licensing and are therefore off-limits to distance students, putting them at a serious disadvantage in their coursework.

It is of vital importance to clarify who is responsible for coordinating specific elements of the program to insure that the distance education student receives the best possible access to instruction and resources.

*Delivery Methods:* Determine which delivery methods are best for the institution and its students. The delivery method should be chosen based on a needs assessment. Some questions to consider are:

- Which methods (i.e. web based, telecourse, etc.) generate the most enrollment?
- Which methods are most cost effective?
- Which methods do students and faculty seem to prefer?
- Which methods allow the content of the courses to be assimilated better?

Some students may respond better to certain delivery methods-it is important to determine which methods work best for the given situation. Dick and Carey (1990) stress that, "The intended delivery mode for instruction is a very important consideration in the development of materials based on the planned instructional strategy.... Your decision about the intended development and delivery mode...will affect developmental activities as well as the required budget and staff." Some courses require more extensive dialogue while others can be treated like independent study work. The delivery method should be based on the needs of the course material.

*Evaluation:* One discrepancy between the literature and the findings of this study involve the use of evaluations. This study's findings indicate a reliance on end of term course surveys as the sole means of evaluation, with some programs not even conducting these. At the very least, evaluations of the individual distance education courses should be conducted at the end of each term. However, these should not be the same types of evaluations used for conventional courses. Preferably, the program should utilize both formative and summative evaluation. Feedback from students and faculty should be conducted and evaluated regularly. "Evaluation should provide feedback to improve the implementation process (formative evaluation) and should give a final assessment of the instruction's effectiveness (summative evaluation). Based upon these findings, instruction should be revised" (Willis, 1994).

*Faculty Involvement and Training:* A distance education program, in order to meet the needs of student, must utilize faculty at every stage of the process and make sure they are properly trained. Some of the issues faculty members need to determine are:

- What content will be covered?
- What are the course (and program) objectives?
- What is the most appropriate way to transmit course material?
- What types of assignments will be required?
- How will tests be administered?
- What textbooks and materials will be required?
- What grading system will be employed?

Even if specific faculty members do not teach distance education courses, their content expertise and knowledge of the institution's programs make them a key component in establishing learning outcomes and objectives. The need of a training/support program needs to be determined, a notion supported by Clay (1999):

There is arguably no area more important to distance learning administrators than that of training and support for distance educators. Many educators have reached a level of understanding and experience in which they are highly confident in their ability to deliver quality instruction. When they are faced with adopting techniques that seem to curtail their abilities to immediately interact with students and require the utilization of new technologies, they are understandably fearful that their instruction and subsequent evaluations will suffer.

Clearly, faculty involvement and training are required elements of any successful distance education program, as Clay (1999) explains:

Training programs must be designed to meet the needs of persons with a variety of learning styles.... Ideally, a training program will include opportunities for at least four types of the following training:

- group sessions;
- one-on-one lab sessions;
- web-based tutorials;
- printed materials;
- listservs;
- mentorships;
- monthly discussion sessions among peers;
- observation of other distance courses.

Of all these, one-on-one training is probably the most effective for most instructors in that it enables them to progress at their own pace while giving them a feeling of dedicated support. While group workshops don't focus on individual needs, they do hold down costs and provide a chance for a sharing of ideas. Group workshops can be enhanced by providing participants into smaller groups based on their level of knowledge and interest.

As Clay indicates, it is important for institutions to consider the type of training that best suits the needs of those being trained.

*Generate a Mission Statement:* Distance education programs must have their own mission statements. Those programs without specific mission statements claimed to follow their parent institution's overall mission statement. While technology is constantly changing, the program should always maintain its objectives with regard to course objectives and content. Personnel and technological changes can cause people to lose sight of the program's mission; therefore, a specific distance learning mission statement should be generated to insure that, in the long term, the program will continue to meet the needs of students while being open to new technologies.

The necessity for a specific distance education mission statement, and the fact that many institutions inadequately develop one, is echoed by Willis (1994):

A clearly defined and articulate mission statement is essential to the development of a successful distance learning strategic plan. It is also an often overlooked or inadequately prepared part of the academic distance learning project. Everyone assumes that his or her vision of the program is the same as that of all other participants.... This mission statement is not just the generation of a carefully worded statement of purpose; it must also have accompanying supportive goals and objectives (Marrus, 1989, Cited in Willis, 1994).

This study found that mission statements have not been adequately prepared. As a result, the goals and objectives remain unclear. Specific goals and objectives need to be clearly articulated in order to insure that the needs of the students and the institution are being met. Only one of the participating institutions had a program specific mission statement.

Bryson (1990) believes the mission of the distance education network is a reflection of the vision of the organization and must determine future direction by clearly identifying the reason for the existence of the institution, its service to clients and its contribution to society. A clearly stated mission reduces the risk of conflict and is the base from which strategies and action plans are developed. (cited in Hache, 1998)

Hierarchical Approval System: In order to insure that course content and objectives meet the needs of student, and to insure that budgetary and workload issues don't become problems, a hierarchical approval procedure should be implemented. Without established criteria in place, problems could arise. Courses unfit for certain types of delivery could be offered. Courses could be offered even though nobody is available to teach it. Currently, teacher selection appears to be based on a person's willingness to teach distance courses, not on their expertise. The appropriate department chair and dean should approve faculty assignments and course selections before being considered by the distance education program directors. Not all course or faculty members are suitable for distance delivery. A structured approval system would minimize the chances of poor decision with regard to course and teacher selection.

There is also a need to establish specific criteria by which courses are selected and materials developed for distance delivery. Willis (1994) states:

"...when instruction is systematically developed, the course has organization, logical consistency, and wholeness that can engage students and supply the conditions for efficient learning. ...The first step of defining the constraints of budgets, time until delivery, and technical specifications of the delivery system must be taken into account...a formal design process for the instruction should be undertaken: writing objective, developing criterion test items, structuring content into hierarchies, and selecting appropriate media forms" (see Dick and Reiser, 1989).

Depending on the content, some courses, such as seminar courses, do not lend themselves as well to distance education delivery methods. With course content that is more abstract, the more group discussion is needed. A seminar course being taught via the Internet would not likely be the best option. Therefore, directors of these programs must develop criteria based on a needs assessment. It needs to be determined which courses are best taught traditionally, on television, or on the World Wide Web.

*Implementation of Support Systems:* A successful distance education program should have

support systems for faculty and students. Distance education, while not a new idea, is new to many faculty members and students. Certain faculty members and students may be intimidated by technology that is new to them. Therefore, support for faculty to help them design and develop distance courses, as well as technical support to empower them to run the necessary technologies, is needed to help them develop and deliver course material.

Many institutions do not anticipate the commitment to planning and resources that are needed to make this endeavor a true success. Institutions can not abandon the distant student! There must be resources not only to provide the software and at times the hardware but also the training. Assumptions cannot be made that the distant student possesses the necessary skills required to survive in a virtual classroom. An institution never assumes that the traditional students do not require the basic presentation, communications and intellectual skills. Likewise, the distance education system should never make assumptions on the technical skills of their students. Support must be provided and the most successful avenues have been: call-in help desks, structured and evaluated workbooks, and informed technical tutor support (Rowley 1997, Cited in Stenerson, 1998)

For students, scheduled orientations, dedicated help lines, and technical support may help them achieve success in distance education courses and programs. Aoki and Pograszewski (1998) elaborate on this point:

Student services provide distant learners with a means to engage in social interaction with their fellow students. This gives the distant students similar opportunities to meet new people that on-campus students enjoy. This type of online interaction can be accomplished by creating online communities through the use of online bulletin boards, web enabled applications, and groupware. ... A faculty member can use open-ended discussion questions to stimulate dialogue or collaboration among students.

This model is only a guide-each institution will have its own needs and special circumstances. However, this model does address most of the crucial needs that were discovered in this research project.

There is a discrepancy between what is recommended in the literature and what apparently is taking place in practice. The programs surveyed do not all appear to be following key steps of many system design models. This problem is evidenced by, among other points, the lack of needs assessments, lack of established dedicated budgets specifically for distance programs, and the inconsistent application of evaluation. The importance of developing a system analysis and design is argued by Stenerson (1998):

The asynchronous environment raises a number of concerns for institutions, the most essential aspect being the support of the distant student. This support raises new challenges in meeting the fundamental requirement of any higher education institution - providing skills to students so that they can process information, address its relevance and acquire knowledge. It is essential for institutions to develop a system analysis and design so that distance education can be incorporated into its overall educational system.

Given the results of this study concerning the administration and management of distance education programs in the state of Ohio, several implications can be offered that are equally applicable at both the state and national levels.

While it may sound overly obvious, programs with their own separate budgets can accomplish a great deal more than institutions that rely heavily on grant and startup funding. It is important for programs to establish an annual budget early in the implementation phase of the program. Without a consistent monetary commitment, the program cannot be properly marketed, technology cannot be maintained, and the program is unlikely to grow.

Also, since none of the institutions surveyed had completed any formal type of needs assessment, it is likely that many institutions are likely not to conduct a proper needs assessment. Also, based on the literature previously cited, this researcher believes that ongoing needs assessment must take place in order to insure that the needs of students and the institution are being met.

Consistent formative and summative evaluation of programs and courses need to take place. Each institution in this study handled evaluation differently, making it hard to generalize which is the most effective practice. Institutions need to clearly establish who is responsible for conducting evaluations, who receives the data, and who is responsible for implementing changes.

Many programs seem to rely on a "who is willing to teach a distance education course" philosophy in order to staff distance education courses. This trend indicates that faculty may be reluctant to break away from the traditional classroom paradigm and may need additional support (technical, financial, and moral) in order to embrace the concept of distance learning.

Finally, institutions need to employ diverse delivery methods of instruction. Even the largest programs seemed to favor one particular delivery method over another. Institution D, for example, is heavily reliant on telecourse delivery. A certain degree of specialization is logical; still, this trend raises concern that programs may be tailored to the technology available as opposed to technology being acquired to fulfill a specific need. For a distance education program to be successful, it must meet the needs of students while maintaining a level of cost effectiveness for the institution. Therefore, it is important for programs to be open to multiple delivery methods in order to match content with the best delivery system.

The findings of this study need to be shared at both the state and national levels. This data could be helpful to institutions that are just beginning distance education programs and to institutions that have had long-term success with theirs.

This study revealed current data concerning practices and procedures in the administration of distance education programs was obtained. Current practices and procedures of distance education programs at selected institutions in higher education in Ohio were studied. While this study uncovered many trends and operational practices with regard to the administration and management of distance education programs, it also revealed an unmistakable trend that most programs are not being designed using system design models. This trend indicates that those in charge of the design, implementation, and administration of distance education programs are ignoring a large body of scholarly literature. Further research is needed in many areas of distance education in order to insure that the needs of students are being met while cost effectiveness for the institution is maintained.

---

## References

Aoki, K and Pogroszewski, D. (Fall ,1998). Virtual university reference model: A guide to delivering education and support services to the distance learner [on-line]. Online journal of distance learning administration, 1 (3). Available at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/aoki13.html>.

Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society. (1996). Creating a Learning Society: Initiatives for Education and Technology, rapporteurs: Amy Garmer and Charles Firestone. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.]

Bryson, J. M. (1990). Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Buchanan, E. A. (Spring, 2000). Going the extra mile: Serving distance education students. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 3 (1).

Clay, M. (Fall, 1999). Development of training and support programs for distance education instructors. Online journal of distance learning Administration, 2 (3). [on-line]. Available at: <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/clay23.html>

Cowen, R. and Nemiec, A. (1983). Evaluation considerations when documenting teleconferencing cost benefits. In L. Parker and C. Ohlgren (Eds.) Teleconferencing and electronic communications II. pp. 290-292. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Center for Interactive Programs.

Dick, W., and Carey L. (1990). The systematic design of instruction. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman.

Dick, W., and Reiser, R. (1989). Planning effective instruction. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Hache, D. (Summer, 1998). Strategic Planning of Distance Education in the Age of Teleinformatics [on-line]. Online journal of distance learning administration, 1, (2). Available at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/Hache12.html>.

Hill, M. and Clay, M. (1998). An institutional overview: Factors influencing faculty participation in distance education in postsecondary education in the United States: An institutional study [on-line]. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration 1 (4). Available at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/hill21.html>.

Marrus, S. K. (1989). Building the strategic plan: Find, analyze, and present the right information. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Rowley, J. 1997. Open Learning and IT Skills Acquisition in Higher Education. British journal of educational technology, 28 (1), 64-65.

Stenerson, J. (1998). Systems analysis and design for a successful distance education program implementation [on-line]. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 1 (2) Available at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/Stener12.html>

Willis, B. (Ed.). (1994). Distance education: strategies and tools. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications.

---

*Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume VI, NumberII, Summer 2003*  
*State University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center*  
[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)