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# The Context of Distance Learning Programs in Higher Education: Five Enabling Assumptions

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## Abstract

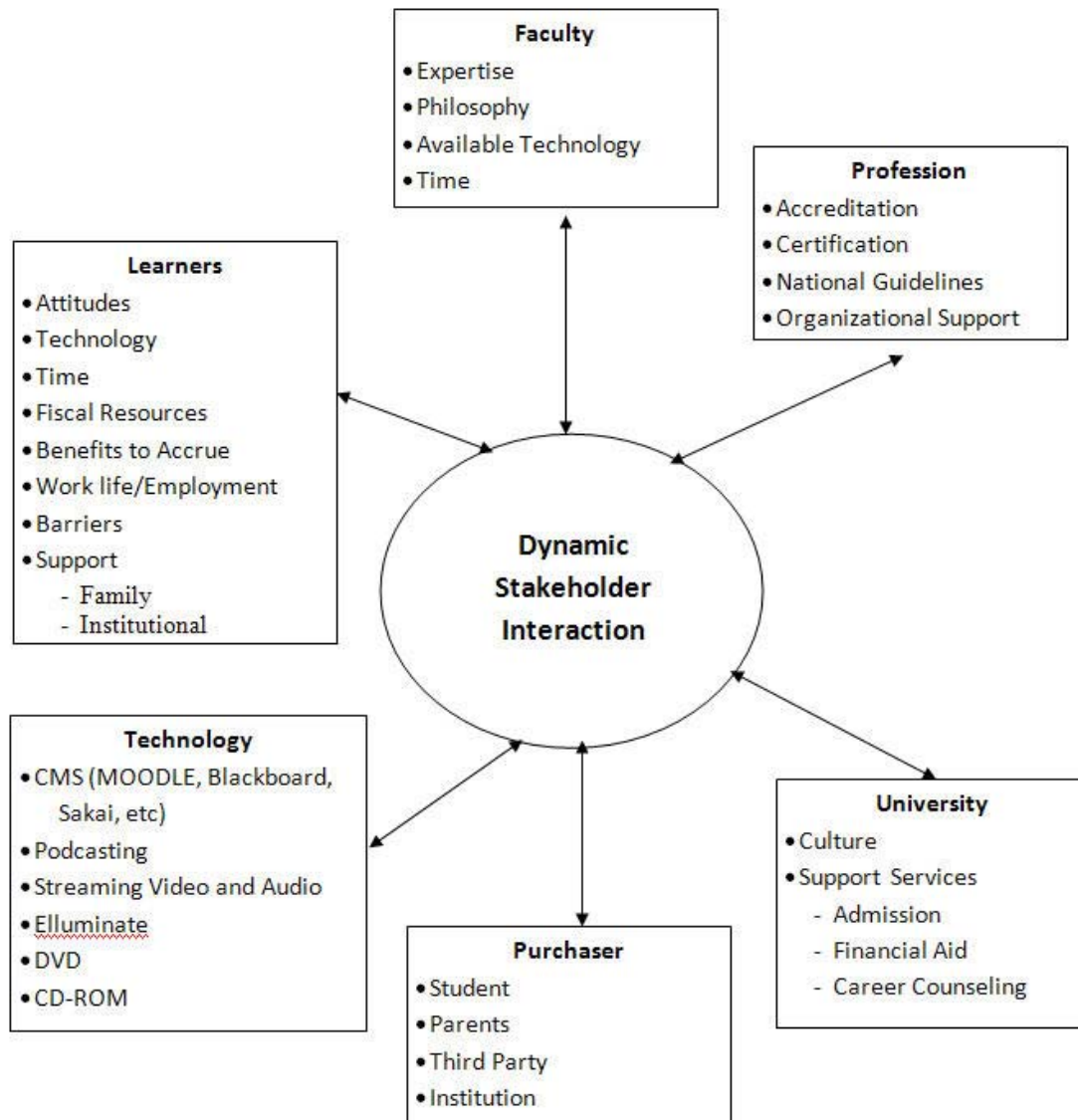
Over the past ten years, a significant increase in courses and programs taught through distance education technologies has occurred both in non-for-profit and for-profit colleges and universities. During this time, there have been many successes and failures. The researchers hypothesize that the marginal success and/or failure occurs due to program planner(s) not viewing the design, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of distance learning courses and programs in the context within which the distance learning will occur. The purpose of this manuscript is to provide five basic interrelated assumptions for distance learning program planners to consider when designing distance learning courses and programs in college and university settings. These assumptions are offered based on the observation, successes and failures of the authors in their collective 57 years of designing such programs for six different universities across the US, as well as evidence from related literature.

## Introduction

Over the past ten years, a significant increase in courses and programs taught through distance education technologies has occurred both in non-for-profit and for-profit colleges and universities. According to Sloan Consortium report, written by Allen and Seaman (2010), titled *Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009*, enrollment in online courses in higher education has been growing significantly over the past 6 years. During the fall 2008 semester, over 4.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, which was a 17% growth enrollment rate for online courses, versus the 1.2% growth rate of the overall higher education student population. Moreover, 1 out of 4 higher education students took at least one distance learning course, which was approximately a 5% increase from the previous year. More recently, the downturn of the economy has spurred even more interest in the development of distance learning courses and programs. Specifically, in 2009, approximately 66% of institutions reported an increased demand for *new* distance learning offerings, due to budget constraints, while 73% reported increased demands for *existing* online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Also during this time, numerous distance learning based courses, programs, and consortia have realized marginal success or have proven unsuccessful from both educational and cost effectiveness perspectives (Rovai & Downey, 2010). The researchers hypothesize that this marginal success and/or failure occurs due to program planner(s) not viewing the design, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of distance learning courses and programs in the context within which the distance learning will occur. Viewing distance learning from a contextual perspective forces an examination of the needs, interest, beliefs, and biases of multiple constituents in a dynamic educational environment (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholders to Consider in the Needs Assessment Process



Source: Eddy, Donahue, Chaney, 2001, and Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, et al, 2009.

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide five basic interrelated assumptions for distance learning program planners to consider when designing distance learning courses and programs in college and university settings. These assumptions are offered based on the observation, successes and failures of the authors in their collective 57 years of designing such programs for six different universities across the US, as well as evidence from related literature.

1. *Distance learning is not superior to or inferior to traditional face-to-face instruction.*

In a meta-analysis, conducted by a research team for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, results indicated that, “on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. xiv). In addition, for the 51 study effects that were analyzed for adult learners, “learning outcomes for students who engaged in online learning exceeded those for students receiving face-to-face instruction, with an average effect size of +0.24 favoring online conditions” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. xiv). Lastly, it was found that online learning was an effective educational method for undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals. However, instruction that combined elements of both online learning and face-to-face instruction (i.e. blended or hybrid courses) had larger “advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. xv). Therefore, neither is superior, but rather, best in combination for better student learning outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education study provides powerful data for distance education leaders in their quest to justify the worth of distance learning programs.

In the Diffusion of Innovation framework, proponents and detractors of an innovation are categorized as innovators, early adopters, late adopters, and laggards (National Cancer Institute, 2005; Rogers, 1995). This theoretical framework has application to the diffusion of distance learning programs in academia across the United States. Innovators are prone to extol the virtues of distance learning programs as an equal or superior form of instruction for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to:

- Meets the instructional needs of time-bound and location-bound students
- Effectively applies existing and emerging technologies to provide tailored educational environments
- Reaches out to underserved populations
- Fosters a sense of ownership of the instructional process for students
- Provides an opportunity to connect scholars in various fields to students who, otherwise, would not be exposed directly to the leaders in their fields of study
- Allows for students in various locations, even internationally, to be linked for lectures, discussions, and a heightened educational experience
- Provides the ability to personalize the educational experience, through the use of tailored, feedback technology

Late adopters and laggards may view distance learning as inferior to face-to-face classroom instruction. Face-to-face instruction may have some advantages to asynchronous distance learning such as:

- Enhanced capacity for group interaction in face-to-face instruction
- The ability of students and instructors to see reactions and emotions related to the discussion of course materials
- The ability to deal effectively with teachable moments
- The ability for instructors to respond, immediately, to questions/concerns by students
- The ability for instructors to intuitively gauge how students are responding to the course content, through body language and cues

The Diffusion of Innovation framework explains the behavior and attitude of some distance learning skeptics, even in the light of powerful data. These skeptics may be late adopters who need exposure to a continual stream of objective and subjective data on the value of distance learning programs before a change will occur.

The success of distance learning programs, on the individual level, is often a function of personal learning styles. The relationship between learning styles and distance learning offerings has been thoroughly investigated in the literature (Battalio, 2009). The results of that research indicate that students will accommodate their varying learning styles with different learning environments. (Battalio, 2009). However, all too often, people assume that everyone learns the same way they did or do, when in actuality, students learn in diverse and unique ways. Additionally, the first wave of the Net Generation, a label to describe the young adults of today, have entered college, and these students have unique characteristics, specifically related to learning styles (Bartlett, 2005). Net Generation students learn quite differently than their predecessors, as they have been saturated with the use of technology. In the final analysis, the success of distance learning and face-to-face instruction is related to closely to individual learning styles.

## *2. Successful distance learning programs are driven by teaching and learning rather than technology.*

The rapid growth of information technology, the Internet, and Web 2.0 technologies has greatly expanded postsecondary education opportunities for students (Chen, 2009). Because distance learning programs and courses rely heavily on technological applications for the delivery of course content and interactions among students and faculty, program developers often allow the technology to drive how to design courses and deliver these courses to students. Moreover, distance learning developers will charge the University's Information Technology Services unit to select the course management system and other technology applications that will be used in courses; when in actuality, the choice of a course management system should be a function of Academic Affairs, after a thoughtful assessment of the needs of all constituents (Refer to Table 1).

Ideally, the needs of the learners should drive the distance learning applications and the technology should be selected to meet the specific requirements of the population of interest. The needs of the learners and instructors are clearly evident when deciding to include synchronous learning strategies in the course requirements. Since many of the potential pool of learners are time-bound due to work, family and community obligations, adding synchronous learning activities (e.g. satellite video/audio, webinars, skype presentations) may preclude their participation. From the instructor's perspective, offering multiple presentations on the same topic to meet the needs of time-bound students is time consuming and draining, especially when students are in time zones all over the world.

Case study examples for learners to support this example abound. Some of the most salient examples of time-bound students observed by the authors are presented below:

- A police officer in our online program was assigned to "undercover" duty that involved varying times of work.
- Employees who work on rotating shifts while completing online study.
- Parents of school aged children who need to balance work-life issues

The technology exists to communicate with students in myriad ways. The challenge for the distance learning program planner is not to infuse the course of study with all the latest and most sophisticated technology, but rather, to select the technology that best meets the unique needs and interests of the learners and the instructors. According to Shearer (2003), technological tools and media should be chosen by "how it allows or does not allow the other elements of the course to behave in a systems environment where all the elements or variables interact" (p. 275). Therefore, "the most appropriate medium of delivering instruction to students via distance learning, does not necessarily mean the newest, most expensive technology available; there are several factors to consider, such as learner autonomy, types of interaction, access, and cost of the media" (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green & Lara-

Alecio, 2009, p. 228).

Specific course management systems (Blackboard, Sakia, MOODLE, etc.) have both similar and unique features; and therefore, may address the needs of different groups of learners in different ways. The bottom line is that the needs of learners and constituents should determine the technology selected. The program designer, after a careful needs assessment, should have the ability to pick and choose the technology that best meets the needs and capabilities of their population of interest. All too often, universities aim to select the one best way (or technology) to deliver distance learning courses and programs. Often, when we strive to meet the needs of all with one application, we meet the needs of few. Colleges and universities as learning organizations should devise strategies to effectively meet the distance learning needs of all constituents when designing and supporting distance learning courses and programs.

### *3. Principles of marketing management apply to distance learning program success.*

Marketing management is defined as “the process of planning and executing programs designed to influence the behavior of target audiences by creating and maintaining beneficial exchanges for the purpose of satisfying individual and organizational objectives” (Andreasen and Kotler, 2003, p 39). This definition helps to direct the design of successful distance learning courses and programs by focusing efforts on the bottom line goal of meeting the needs of constituents after a careful needs assessment process. The behavior of interest for distance learning is focused on students achieving their personal and professional career goals through distance learning.

It is important to note that the evolution of distance learning programs in higher education closely parallels the evolution of marketing programs (Stellefson & Eddy, 2008; Stellefson, Eddy, Chaney, and Chaney, 2008, Andreasen and Kotler, 2003). In this evolution, both the marketing of goods and services and the marketing of distance learning courses and programs have progressed through a product mindset, a sales mindset, and a customer mindset.

The product mindset purports that success will come to distance learning programs that provide students with the program and delivery methods that the institution believes are needed by the students. Faculty and departments (1) build courses and programs based on their own expertise, (2) using instructional technology that is available and convenient for faculty, and (3) schedules and delivers these courses and programs based on the needs of the faculty and department. The product mindset limits the potential market for the distance learning courses and programs because the course of study, technology and scheduling may not meet the needs of the distance learning students. Faculty are often deeply involved in their particular area of study and strongly resist modifying their efforts to ensure that the product meets the more diverse needs of students; especially those needs linked to future employment. And, faculty and department chairs fail to grasp that distance learning learners, who do not have access to the technology that the faculty have on their desk or laptop (usually because the University purchases, upgrades and supports the technology at no cost to the faculty), and cannot meet specific synchronous online obligations, are not less motivated students, but rather may be time-bound and technology limited.

The sales mindset holds that success will come to distance learning programs that persuade students to enroll in their programs. Many distance learning administrative units consider this type of activity as “marketing” of a program. The use of traditional promotional activities (e.g. newspaper/magazine ads, billboards, radio/TV spots, etc.) and emerging technology approaches (e.g. Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, etc.) are examples of the sales mindset. The sales mindset, in this context, is self-limiting because the distance learning program, no matter how much money and effort is devoted to the promotional campaign, still may not meet the unique needs of the population of interest. And, in some situations, the cost of the promotional activities offsets any potential revenue gains.

The customer mindset in distance learning holds that success will come to those distance learning programs that best determine and satisfy the needs, beliefs, goals, and technological capabilities of the population of interest. In the customer mindset, a careful assessment of the needs of multiple constituents is the cornerstone of the marketing effort. From this needs assessment, the program is designed, the technology is selected, and the promotional strategies are determined. Careful attention to the customer mindset will enhance the likelihood of success. The customer mindset does not imply the needs of the students alone drive the distance learning program. Rather, the customer mindset, as related to distance learning program, mandates input from multiple constituents and is rooted in the context and values of the academic institution. The multiple stakeholders (Table 1) to consider involve an ecological perspective to distance learning, in a contextual-relative approach to program planning. The planning approach purports that “the environment in which the program activity occurs will change across time”, “the individual participating in the activity will change across time”, “ the relationship between the student, technology, and professor will change across time” (Eddy, Donahue & Chaney, 2001, p. 377). Therefore, having a firm grasp of the dynamic interactions of these stakeholders (i.e. student, teacher, technology and institution) provides critical information on needs of the multiple constituents, as it relates to designing, implementing and evaluating successful distance learning courses and programs.

### *4. Successful online/distance learning courses and programs meet the needs of multiple constituents (students, faculty, departments, professions, administrators, etc.).*

Therefore, the quest for the “one best way” to design and deliver distance learning programs is misdirected. Disparate types of courses and programs require the flexibility to design courses and programs that meet student needs and consider all the constituents that influence and are influenced by distance learning initiatives.

The contextual relative approach to designing distance-learning programs, introduced by Eddy, Donahue and Chaney in 2001, supports the need to address multiple constituents. These authors indicate that effective programming (including the design of technology based programs) requires planners to embrace a contextual relative approach. The specific of this approach are clearly outlined in this publication. To summarize, program design should be contextual “in that influencing factors in the milieu where the

activity will occur must be carefully examined and the interaction of these factors explored” Such factors include but are not limited to students needs, interest and perceptions, faculty interest and skills, technology available, and the culture of the sponsoring university. In addition, the design process in relative in that “the changes in influencing factors in the milieu will require modification in program design and implantation across time.” In essence, students, faculty technology and institutional culture will change across time and the distance-learning program needs to be sensitive to these changes. (p. 377)

Key to meeting the needs of multiple constituents is fidelity to the needs assessment process. Table 1 provides an example of all the constituents who should be considered in the needs assessment process (Refer to Table 1). Each of the stakeholders within Table 1 is essential in the success of distance learning programs. Before the planning process begins, developers should take substantial time to assess the needs/wants of all the stakeholders, in terms of the distance learning program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Representatives from each of these groups should be at the table, when planning the distance learning courses/programs.

##### 5. *A culture of support at all levels of the institution enables success.*

The “culture” of an institution is influenced by formal and informal policies and procedures or “norms” that have been developed over time. And because many academic institutions have an extensive history of providing face-to-face instructional programs to a traditional on campus cohort of students, the culture and norms clearly support traditional instruction. Even though the university administration, from the president to the dean, vociferously support distance learning courses and programs, the success or failure of these programs can be influenced by how the norms and culture changes, and how quickly it changes to support distance learning courses and programs.

Often, the mid-level manager in an institution is the person who interprets policy, which can impact distance learning. These administrators are usually dedicated employees with a desire to do the right thing for the university and students. Yet, at times their decisions, however well intentioned, hinder the growth of distance learning courses and programs and negatively impact student success. Listed below are some examples of activities that support distance learning and create a supportive culture.

- The Office of Admissions has online application procedures, including procedures to accept online payment of application fees.
- Academics are tailored using available technology to meet the needs of location-bound students.
- Financial Aid is provided to DL students to cover all allowable expenses, including cost of living expenses, if applicable.
- Student fees for non-accessible services (e.g. Student Recreation Center, transportation, Student Health Center, etc.) are waived for DL students.
- Transferring of credit from other institutions can be conducted online.
- Technology support services are available in a virtual format.
- The Office of Disability Services offers the services offered to on-campus students to DL students.
- Departmental and faculty support mechanisms are tailored to meet the needs of DL students.
- When possible, a virtual campus is created for DL students.

In addition to approaching distance learning course offerings with an ecological approach and consumer-mindset, program developers should have a solid grasp of the quality indicators for distance learning courses and programs and create a culture of support for distance learning in the organization. Measureable quality indicators provide a roadmap for careful development of a sound program. When quality indicators are woven into the fabric of the organization as culture of support were enabled.

A systematic literature review on quality indicators of distance learning programs (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, et al, 2009) yielded the following as the main indicators of quality distance learning programs:

- Student-teacher interaction – there are several types of interaction in distance learning environments (i.e. student-teacher, student-student, and student-content); however, the interactions that proves to play a major role in quality assurance in distance learning programs are student-teacher interactions. Distance learning courses should be developed to promote and facilitate healthy interactions between the learner and the instructor.
- Prompt feedback – it is quite important for instructors of distance learning courses to appear “present” among their students, during the entire course. This involves providing meaningful, helpful, and prompt feedback to questions, assignments, and/or student concerns. According to Sherry (2003), “communications from faculty that directly engages students and offers timely feedback may contribute to interchanges and the students’ subsequent success in the course” (p. 454). Instructors should define feedback time in the course syllabus/outline.
- Student support services – support services, such as library services, admission services, financial aid, and advising services should be provided to students enrolled in distance learning, similarly to traditional, on-campus students. Meeting these needs are vital to the success of the distance learning program.
- Program evaluation and assessment – it is crucial for measureable objectives and standards to be set, and evaluated, when developing and offering distance learning programs. Evaluation of instructional techniques, delivery, and educational processes should be rigorously assessed for improvement.
- Clear analysis of audience – The needs of the audience, along with characteristics, geographic location, available technologies, and learner goals, should be identified. As well, the “goals and missions of the learning organization, the costs that must be recovered, the costs of delivery, the political environment at the time for the learning organization, the faculty compensation, and the market competition” (Shearer, 2003, p. 275).
- Documented technology plan to ensure quality – The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) indicates that “a documented technology plan that includes electronic security measures (i.e. password protection, encryption, back-up systems [should be] in place and operational to ensure both quality standards and the integrity and validity of information” (p. 2).

- Institutional support and institutional resources – the institutional culture, related to distance learning, will either drive or hinder the delivery of distance learning courses/programs. The developer should make themselves aware of core values of the institution, and incorporate these values into the development of distance learning courses/programs. In addition, “allocation of financial resources for distance learning activities and materials – such as fiscal resources for technology support, training and support services, faculty incentives, and compensation, instructional resources, and evaluation research and tools – is critical for high quality and successful distance education programs” (Chaney et al., 2009, p. 229).
- Course structure guidelines – students should be informed of the self-motivation and commitment needed to be successful in the program. Course structure guidelines should also include information on course format, minimal technology needed, and course assignments, etc.
- Active learning techniques – these are strategies that result in increasing enthusiasm of students to interact and learn the course content.
- Respect diverse ways of learning – it is not only important to respect the diverse learning styles of students today, but to provide various educational delivery methods for students to engage in the learning process. This also involves assisting students to become more flexible in their approach to learning, as to incorporate a variety of learning settings (Dillon & Greene, 2003).
- Faculty support services – faculty members should be provided with the appropriate support and tools to develop distance learning courseware, implement the course, and rigorously evaluate the course. Trainings for each aspect of course development and delivery should be offered to faculty.
- Strong rationale for distance learning that correlates to the mission of the institution – in order to have a successful distance learning program, educators need “top-down” support, including a strong rationale for these programs that correlates to the mission of the learner institution.
- Appropriate tools and media – as mentioned previously, the selection and use of appropriate tools, technology and media is crucial to the success of distance learning programs (see the discussion on use of appropriate technology).
- Reliability of technology – a technology plan should be in place to ensure that the technology platform used is reliable for the delivery of the course/program. Provide students with contact information for whom to contact, should technological issues arise.
- Implementation of guidelines for course development and review of instructional materials – According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000), it is crucial that “guidelines regarding minimum standards [be] used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes – not the availability of existing technology – determine the technology used to deliver course content” (p. 2). Rigorous assessment of instructional materials improves the overall quality of instruction.

These quality indicators highlight the need for services that meet the needs of students in the context within which the program will occur. Faculty expertise, especially in terms of student-faculty feedback and program design features, are key quality indicators.

Lastly, developers and institutions should not view distance learning, simply as an easy way to make money, but rather, as a systematic, educational, delivery mechanism to reach time-bound and location-bound students. Successful programs are supported by the institutional culture, and do not “underestimate the amount of time, effort, and expense required to attract and retain students” (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 146.) “It is imperative that institutional stakeholders support the adopted [distance learning] strategy so that the organization as a whole can benefit from the initiative as the organizational change is embedded into the culture of the institution” (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 146).

## Conclusion

According to Rovai and Downey (2010), “increasing globalization, advancing technology, growing competition for students, and rising student expectations affect all aspects of higher education and provide both opportunities and threats” (p. 146). These opportunities include the ability of colleges and universities to facilitate global, distance learning. However, successful distance learning requires a significant amount of organizational support, needs assessment of stakeholders, strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. Therefore, the authors suggest that readers and potential developers of distance learning programs use the aforementioned assumptions as “lessons learned” and build on these to overcome barriers to achieving successful distance learning programs/courses.

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