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Special Report

Tips for Creating a Distance Learning Program

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DISTANCE education Report

A MAGNA PUBLICATION

Tips for Creating a Distance Learning Program

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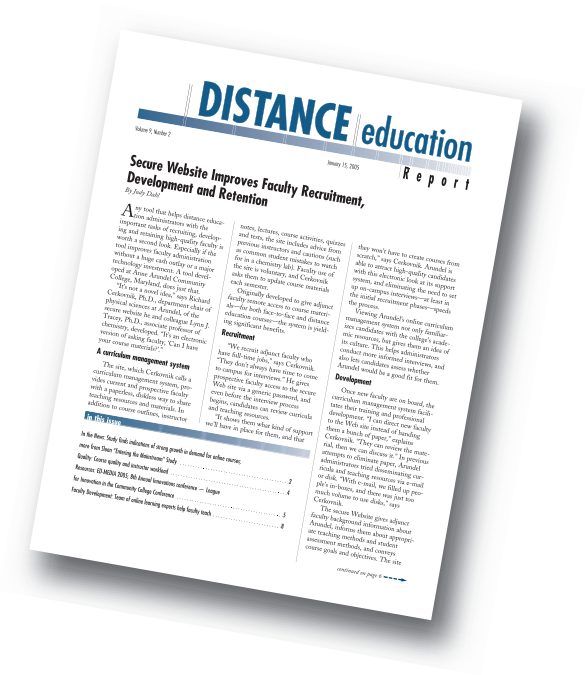
DISTANCE education Report

Secure Website Improves Faculty Recruitment, Development and Retention

By Jody Dade

A tool that helps distance education administrators with the important tasks of recruiting, developing and retaining high-quality faculty is worth a second look. Especially if the tool improves faculty administration without a huge cash outlay or a major technology investment. A tool developed at Anne Arundel Community College, Maryland, does just that.

"It's not a novel idea," says Richard Cerkowski, Ph.D., department chair of physical sciences at Arundel, of the Trinity, Ph.D., associate professor of chemistry, developed. "It's an electronic version of asking faculty, 'Can I have your course materials?'"

A curriculum management system

The site, which Cerkowski calls a curriculum management system, provides current and prospective faculty with a paperless, dropbox way to share teaching resources and materials. In addition to course outlines, instructor notes, lectures, course activities, quizzes and tests, the site includes advice from previous instructors and cautions (such as common student mistakes to watch for in a chemistry lab). Faculty use of the site is voluntary, and Cerkowski asks them to update course materials each semester.

Originally developed to give adjunct faculty remote access to course materials—for both face-to-face and distance education courses—the system is yielding significant benefits.

Recruitment

"We recruit adjunct faculty who have full-time jobs," says Cerkowski. "They don't always have time to come to campus for interviews." He gives prospective faculty access to the secure Web site via a generic password, and begins candidates can review curricula and teaching resources.

"It shows them what kind of support we'll have in place for them, and that they won't have to create courses from scratch," says Cerkowski. Arundel is able to attract high-quality candidates with this electronic look at its support system, and eliminating the need to set up on-campus interviews—at least in the initial recruitment phase—speeds the process.

Viewing Arundel's online curriculum management system not only familiarizes candidates with the college's academic resources, but gives them an idea of its culture. This helps administrators conduct more informed interviews, and also lets candidates assess whether Arundel would be a good fit for them.

Development

Once new faculty are on board, the curriculum management system facilitates their training and professional development. "I can direct new faculty to the Web site instead of handing them a bunch of paper," explains Cerkowski. "They can review the material, then we can discuss it." In previous attempts to eliminate paper, Arundel administrators tried disseminating curricula and teaching resources via e-mail or disk. "With e-mail, we filled up people's in-boxes, and there was just too much volume to use disks," says Cerkowski.

The secure Website gives adjunct faculty background information about Arundel, informs them about appropriate teaching methods and student assessment methods, and conveys course goals and objectives. "The site

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In this Issue

Tips for Creating a Distance Education Program

Distance education is only now overcoming its status as an academic upstart, or the poor relation of classroom education. Like any new movement, it has its growing pains. But in experiencing these challenges, it's important for distance educators to know that they're not alone. Many of these difficulties are actually common experiences, and your colleagues across the country have been working on ways to meet them and turn them to their advantage.

This *Distance Education Report* special report is a collection of reports from the front lines, detailing how distance educators have met challenges and developed creative responses, responses like:

- overcoming obstacles to faculty participation in distance education
- lessons for building and running a successful program
- keys to improving support for online students
- faculty perspectives vs. administrator perspectives:
- legal issues for distance education administrators
- effects of a first year experience course for non-traditional students
- a 12-step program for gaining college-wide support for online programs

We have compiled this special report to provide you with ideas that have been tested by people who have built and sustained successful distance education programs. We hope that you will take away some good ideas to apply to your own.

Christopher Hill
Editor
Distance Education Report

Quick Reference

Best Practices compiled from the ***Distance Education Report***

Case Studies

Involve Faculty Early [8]

Claudine Keenan, at the University of Massachusetts, conducted a Faculty vs. Administrator study and reports that faculty members really appreciate the opportunity to be present at the outset of planning a distance education program. In one case faculty members brought the proposal forward themselves.

At other institutions, faculty concerns about class size were expressed early enough that class size guidelines were written into policy before it became a contentious issue.

Steps to Demonstrate Support from the Administration

- Conduct an assessment of faculty and student needs. [1]
- Participate in online instructor training and/or teach an online course. [1]
- Look at the literature to determine what appropriate enrollment for online courses is. [1]
- Provide release time for instructors for course preparation. [1]
- Develop instruments to evaluate online instruction. [1]
- Be adequately staffed to provide faculty online training programs and one-on-one training from instructional designers and multi-media specialists. [3]

Instructional Design Support [2]

A faculty member was getting killed on his evaluations because he would spend days trying to show

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Distance education students, when compared to traditional on-campus students, are typically older, work many hours a week, and are often supporting families. This profile closely overlaps the description of non-traditional learners and places distance educations students among those "at-risk" — at risk of dropping out and at risk of unsatisfactory grades. [6]

An estimated 50 percent of non-traditional students will leave college without earning a degree, compared to 12 percent of traditional age students. Additionally, 27 percent of non-traditional students will drop out in their first year, nearly twice the rate of traditional students. [6]

What challenges need to be addressed to foster learner success and retention in an online environment?

- **Administrative Support**

Jody Oomen-Early and Lynda Murphy, at Texas Woman's University, conducted a qualitative study of faculty members to learn what they viewed as barriers to effective online instruction. They found that there was an overwhelming sense that the administration was out of touch with what faculty were actually experiencing. [1]

For example, workload. Despite the fact that e-learning has been in effect for some time, administrators seem to think that online classes are easier to teach [than face-to-face classes]. Administrators don't understand the time it takes to create the online classroom or the prep work it takes prior to the first day of class. [1]

An additional element of the workload issue is the perception by faculty that their institutions "dump" students into online courses as a way to boost enrollment without considering the effect this has on instructor workload. [1]

Another area of tension is technical support. Faculty and administrators both agree that 24/7 technical support is appropriate but expensive. The faculty perspective is that 24/7 technical support "is worth every penny" and "helps us get our job done," whereas the administrators' perspective is that it is cost prohibitive. [8]

Anne Johnson, assistant dean at Inver Hills Community College has developed a series of 12 steps for getting college-wide buy-in for instituting online programs. Some of the steps pertinent to aligning faculty and administration views include: line up support from the top, involve faculty at the beginning of planning, let faculty know that traditional courses are not going away, gradually introduce online tools to reluctant faculty, and reinforce that the college is not moving away from personal attention and hands on approaches to working with students. [7]

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his students how cycles in the body worked just by talking. He ultimately asked for help and was put in touch with an instructional designer who talked with him about what the students should learn.

What came out of that was a series of animations that in fact did help the students, and his teaching evaluations turned around.

Online Teaching Symposiums[1]

The Texas Woman's University has an online teaching symposium during faculty development week to give faculty members an opportunity to talk informally about teaching strategies, not just the nuts and bolts of the technology, with colleagues who also teach online.

Judy Oomen-Early, assistant professor at TWU, says, "Having that support is helpful, and not just social support but support in terms of the learning technology and trying to keep up with it."

Student Readiness [6]

Academic advisors at the University of Pittsburgh identified 55 students considered "at-risk," and asked them to take a first year experience course.

After completing three semesters, 88 percent of the experimental group of students who took the course were still enrolled, versus only 26 percent of the control group who did not take the course.

Equally impressive are the QPA scores for the two groups. After three semesters, the mean term QPA for the experimental group was 2.69, a full point above the 1.96 mean for the control group.

• Faculty Training

Teaching online can be daunting for many faculty members. Learning new technology, meeting the needs of online learners, understanding online pedagogy, and managing workload and time commitments are some of the challenges they must deal with. [1]

One of the first things to do is create online course shell(s) with a consistent course design. This permits incorporation of ADA and Accreditation requirements. [5]. It also opens the door for group orientation and support activities for students. [9]

The next things to do is get faculty in an online training program that covers the technology and the pedagogy of teaching online. One approach is a completely online program that puts faculty in the seat of a student. [3]

Another approach is to establish a mentoring program to work with new online faculty to help them through the development stages for their first online class. [7]

A distance learning design group (IDEAL) formed an intrainstitutional collaboration with an established academic program (EMOD) at Bowling Green State University to create a hybrid online program. Instructional designers and multimedia specialists were assigned to work with faculty members on their courses. They helped them pick their way through the forest of technologies available. They sat down with the professors and told them the pros and cons of using various technologies and in less than a year had remade the EMOD program. [3]

• Student Readiness

Just because students elect to study online, it does not mean that they do not visit the campus. Many online students at Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, S.C. can visit the campus, so the college designed a 90 minute "live orientation course" to help even students with little or no computer skills learn to navigate and complete an online course. [9]

Another strategy is to create an "Introduction to Online Learning" type of course designed to address the unique needs and challenges of non-traditional students. Macro-level topics might include development of goals; recognition of student responsibilities for their own education; recognition of diversity among other students; and how to access university resources. [6]

Student learning skills may be developed by allowing students to experience quiz types, assignment types, or library work that they may encounter in an online course. The course could even cover basic computer topics like how to use a word processing program. [9]

Students may also be exposed to habits in the online world that are analogous to those in the traditional classroom like participating in online discussions and practicing good attendance by logging into an online course frequently. [9]

How Serious Are We About Open Education?

By Kenneth Mentor

Is distance education at public institutions failing in its promise and its mission? Is it sealing off rather than distributing learning? Because of concerns about privacy, intellectual property, faculty skills, and corporate publishing, courses have been almost uniformly locked away in a secure password-protected environment, closed to anyone who has not officially enrolled.

But in doing this, institutions may be surrendering some of the most important advantages of distance education. The promise of distance education was its practically unlimited outreach capacity. It's time to take that promise seriously, Kenneth Mentor, an associate professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at the University of North Carolina Pembroke, says. Stop deliberately putting obstacles in the way of that potential. It is a radical challenge to program administrators today.

Online education has become closed in part because of privacy issues. "We have to be concerned about FERPA," Mentor says, "and administrators are terrified by the thought of huge losses of information. We're making a lot of changes on campuses in order not to use Social Security numbers or things like that, to protect privacy. That's a very real issue."

"I'm suggesting that we have erred too far on the side of caution," he adds. "What we really need are course delivery environments that protect what needs to be protected while giving the opportunity to do other things on a more public basis." What are those other things? One is to make learning opportunities available to the general public, Mentor says.

If we're using online discussions to develop critical thinking skills, how might it enhance the learning experience to have a broader, less homogenous group to discuss with? "We don't do our education in public spaces," says Mentor, "so it's hard to test how this would be."

In a way, he's talking about the wiki principle. Mentor believes it's been demonstrated that public ways of sharing information work better. If you look at open source software, for example, you have lots of different participants, and lots of community among the people who are working on a particular code. They share ideas, they reject ideas, and they work together as a team. "The product in the end is much better and it happens fast. I think the same is true of learning and broader forms of scholarship," Mentor says.

He believes that the biggest advantage of "open learning" from the university's point of view is that it allows peer review of teaching. It's recognized that there are online classrooms that are not very vibrant learning environments. If they were more open to potential auditors, instructors might have more incentive to work harder on their courses. It might also open the door to more scholarship of teaching and learning, for observing and collecting data.

"This should be a lot easier in an online environment than it is in the regular classroom," Mentor says. "But unfortunately we've locked everybody out, including our colleagues. One of the things that makes scholarship scholarship is peer review. An open classroom enables peer review."

But his main point is idealistic, an appeal to higher education's core mission. "An educator in the widest sense would say, 'I don't really care if you're paying tuition, if you want to learn about this material, here it is. I hope people learn something from this.' And we want to share this. The Internet makes that possible. But if it's all locked up behind passwords, it's no longer possible. We're public employees. Why are we locking this away?"

He appeals to the original belief in the democratizing potential of the Internet. Instead of realizing online education's huge potential for outreach, institutions have reverted to the same application and tuition system that universities have employed for hundreds of years. "We've replicated a model where only those who have the tuition money are the ones who get our stuff."

Privacy is only one of several obstacles to open access. Mentor mentions several others:

- **Corporate publishing and property rights.** Universities are threatened with legal action if they don't protect a copyright owner's property. So they protect everything in fear of a copyright issue. Mentor says they have been "deputized to protect corporate profits."

- **The university's own intellectual property.** To protect intellectual property, administrators fashion policies that seal their material to make sure that it's not widely disseminated. Mentor suggests that a lot of this material—course outlines, etc.—may not really have all that much value.

- **Faculty skills.** A lot of faculty are just getting started with online education and don't really consider using a model other than what's available—which often means a course management system like Blackboard, in which content pro-

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tection is engineered in. "We don't have very many faculty saying, 'You know, maybe it would make more sense to try it a different way,'" Mentor says.

- **State laws or proposed state laws.** Some form of social networking structure is the obvious way to do the kind of open teaching and learning that Mentor is talking about. But state legislators are nervous about sexual predators on social networking sites. States are beginning to pass laws that would punish educators for using Facebook or Second Life as a class environment. Instructors would have to make sure that students were over 18 or had parental permission to be online. "Security is a concern with the online classroom," Mentor admits. An environment like MySpace will inevitably be seen as too public. "[Let's say] a 17-year-old freshman is in my class; if we are doing discussions in a public area, there's the chance that a predator will come into my classroom and befriend that person, and it will be in an even more trusted environment—they're in class. Lawmakers may end up restricting this sort of thing—throwing the baby out with the bathwater."

- **Resources.** University technical support people are usually very busy. A tool such as Blackboard makes their work easier than if they had to satisfy faculty all over campus who wanted to use different models. From the university administrator's point of view, anything that makes it easier for reluctant faculty to go online is good. Mentor says, "We end up with a lowest common denominator in the selection of courseware."

Changing the system

Mentor is pessimistic about persuading administrators to do anything like his open course idea—at least not on a one-by-one basis. His hope lies in the possibility that there are the roots of a movement here. "Faculty do sometimes get involved in these decisions," he says with some irony. Greater faculty involvement in things like choosing a course management system would be a prerequisite for such a movement. A higher level of faculty interest in such issues might tip the decision-making process from being based on cost alone to being based on pedagogical needs.

"It's important that universities not discourage people who are trying to do creative things. If you're in an environment where the university says, 'We're paying a lot of money to use Blackboard,' then it's a disincentive to a faculty member who might be interested in trying different things."

Handling unlimited enrollment

How would a course with unlimited enrollment be handled? "This is not really an issue, that you're suddenly going to have hundreds of people when the university says you should have 30," Mentor says. It's more likely that two or three might drop in. If the course is capped at 20, "that's not giving me a whole lot more work." He might even decide to give them some feedback, "[The university] ought to encourage me to do that," he says, though he stops short at grading papers for drop-ins. "If the class were suddenly to get so unwieldy that it couldn't be managed, that would be another issue to face. But I've never seen anything come even close to that."

What about prerequisites? Wouldn't insufficiently experienced students be a drag on the rest of the class? Mentor asserts that that's another false premise because, again, he doesn't anticipate enough people showing up to seriously interfere with the pace of the class. "I have seen evidence that people are coming in and using materials that I have posted on the Internet for my classes. But they're not really participating at a level where their lack of knowledge would be a negative."

Idealism

"This is idealistic and I'm thinking people are just going to say all right, fine, another liberal who doesn't really understand what we're putting up with," says Mentor. "But what we're putting up with, that's a way to prevent change."

Mentor understands that moving to an open environment will take a new skill set for the technical support staff trained to run Blackboard or other proprietary CMSs. So in some ways universities are caught in a technology trap—they're stuck doing the same thing over and over because that's what they know how to do.

"I realize it's philosophical and administrators would tend to dismiss this as naïve," says Mentor. "And perhaps it is. But we haven't really taken the time to stand back and look at this. We've only been teaching online for 10 or 12 years. This is very new. Blink-of-an-eye new as far as education overall. Maybe we should stop once in a while and look at it and ask what sorts of environments are we creating. What's our responsibility to the public, and are we satisfying that responsibility with the things we're doing?"

Overcoming Obstacles to Faculty Participation in Distance Education

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

Teaching online can be daunting for many faculty members. Learning new technology, meeting the needs of online learners, understanding online pedagogy, and managing workload and time are some of the challenges they must deal with. And it is up to academic leaders to provide the support and resources that will encourage faculty to teach online and continue teaching online.

Two researchers at Texas Woman's University conducted a qualitative study of faculty members who had been teaching for at least two semesters to learn what they viewed as barriers to effective online instruction and to explore what administrators could do to reduce or remove these impediments.

Distance Education Report spoke to these two researchers: Jody Oomen-Early, an assistant professor in the department of health studies at TWU, and Lynda Murphy, TWU's director of distance education, about the study and their experiences regarding barriers to effective online instruction on their campus.

The following are some themes that emerged from the study and solutions that Oomen-Early and Murphy suggest:

Administrative and institutional support

Impediment: Lack of understanding among administrators as to the time and effort involved in teaching online.

"It was truly interesting as we were reading through the data to find out that there was just this overwhelming sense that the administration was out of touch with what faculty were actually experiencing," Oomen-Early says. "For example, workload: The fact that, even though e-learning has been in effect for so long, administrators somehow perceived that online classes were easier to teach [than face-to-face classes]. Administrators didn't understand the time it took to create the online classroom or the prep work it took prior to the first day of class."

Another element of the workload issue was faculty perception that their institutions tended to "dump" students into online courses as a way to boost enrollment without considering the effect on instructor workload.

The extra work involved and the administration's lack of understanding make teaching online particularly challenging for faculty seeking tenure. According to Schifter (2002), junior faculty may be reluctant to teach online because of the amount of work involved and the potential that it will distract them from their research, which at most institutions is a top tenure requirement.

On the other hand, the perception of participants in this study was that tenured faculty often choose not to teach online, placing much of the burden on tenure-track faculty.

"I think a lot of faculty are feeling pressure," Oomen-Early says. "My roles as an assistant professor now are quite different than others from years ago, in that I'm expected to not only uphold tenure requirements for publication and teaching, which was research, teaching, and advising, but I'm given this mantle of responsibility to help with online programs. … I'm sure it's different in every university, but when you have a very young infrastructure or no infrastructure, I think the challenges and pressure for faculty are immense. I think that's why you have faculty leaving academia right now, because if you don't have an infrastructure, if you don't have course designers, if you don't have faculty training, if you don't have examples or templates or models for your virtual universities to have a good handle on, I think it can overwhelm you, and that's where I think you start getting burnout and start getting professors who hear about this and don't want to get involved with it."

With a disproportionate burden for teaching online placed on tenure-track faculty, it is essential to have an effective means of giving these faculty due credit for this work, which can be difficult given the overall lack of understanding of what online teaching entails.

This was an impediment at TWU to developing an evaluation tool for online instructors. The faculty senate, which drives teaching evaluation, was made up mostly of senior faculty members, many of whom had not taught online and didn't understand its challenges. "When I wanted to do something as simple as putting a course evaluation online to give to online students, the faculty senate was totally opposed to it," Murphy says. "They were scared that faculty would be evaluated on the technology and not their teaching skills. We've gone through a lot of talk, and now our faculty senate is very much on board with doing online evaluations. But that was a slow process. It was a lot of education that we had to do for the faculty senate, because they really didn't understand the issues."

Solutions: Based on their research and experience, Oomen-Early and Murphy recommend the following ways to overcome the impediment of

a lack of understanding on the part of academic leaders:

- Conduct a needs assessment of faculty and students.
- Participate in online instructor training and/or teach an online course.
- Look at the literature to determine appropriate enrollment for online courses.
- Provide release time for instructors for course preparation.
- Develop instruments to evaluate online instruction.

"I see the role of the chair as pivotal," Murphy says. "We've done a lot of education with our chairs because we did realize that if the chair is not behind this, it's never going to work. And it's amazing to see the change. When I would go in and talk about things like workload before the council of chairs, they would sit there and say, 'What's the difference?' Now I have chairs demanding that we have an alternate workload schedule or plan for distance education. Our chairs have worked hard. We're also working hard to educate them. We also worked hard to educate our deans. I think now we're working hard to educate our senior administrators, because many of them see distance education as a money bag. It's a way to get more enrollments, but they don't really understand all the things going on in order for that to happen. So we're really trying to make them aware of the real issues and how much effort it really does take."

Student readiness

Impediments: Lack of understanding about what online learning entails, lack of technical skills, unrealistic demands.

When students are not properly prepared to learn online, they require more support from their instructors and often expect immediate feedback on their assignments and threaded discussion participation.

"We know that, especially with students who are involved with Web 2.0 technology, they are so used to immediacy and feedback, and so I know that some instructors, including myself, feel that unless you are good at setting boundaries and can turn it off, it seems that you are constantly 'on' as an online instructor," Murphy says. "A lot of online instructors are experiencing this, especially with the change in the student population. [Students] have a more service-oriented mind-set. I find, especially with adult learners, that they feel, 'I paid money. I want my question answered, and I want it answered now. I want my feedback.' I think that can play into [faculty] burnout, especially if they are not supported as it is."

Solutions: Prepare students to learn online, assess their readiness.

Instructor readiness

Impediments: Lack of faculty understanding of student-centered learning, keeping up with technology changes.

Teaching online is still very new for many online instructors, and some find it difficult to adjust to the learner-centered pedagogy that effective online instruction demands. "They still rely on that lecture," Murphy says.

"They're a little nervous to let some of the control go to students. You will see beginning online instructors post so much and constantly answer every comment on the discussion board to the point that they're exhausted by the end of the semester and never want to [teach online] again."

The faculty in this survey indicated that they need help keeping up with distance learning technologies and understanding effective ways to apply them to their courses.

Solutions: Online teaching symposium, peer support.

TWU has an online teaching symposium during faculty development week that gives faculty members an opportunity to talk informally about teaching strategies, not just the nuts and bolts of the technology, with colleagues who also teach online, Oomen-Early says. "Having that support is helpful, and not just social support but support in terms of the learning technology and trying to keep up with it." TWU also has some seed money available for faculty to conduct research on instructional technology and share ideas with their peers.

Reference

Schifter, C.C. (2002). Perception differences about participating in distance education. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol. V, No. 1. Accessed Jan. 14, 2008, at www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring51/schifter51.html.

Collaborating Within Your Institution for Program Success

By Christopher Hill

How does collaboration between an established academic program and a distance learning design group work, when it really works? Terence Armentano, assistant director of distance education at Bowling Green State University, oversaw a successful collaboration between his group, IDEAL (Interactive Distance Education for All Learners), and the executive masters of organizational development (EMOD) program at Bowling Green.

The EMOD program wanted to go online, but not all the way online. Its members still cherished the face-to-face interaction of the traditional classroom and so were looking for a blended solution. They opened discussions with Armentano's group and in less than a year had remade their program. Here's how they did it.

1. Know what you want. EMOD's members decided from their evaluation of the market that they wanted to go blended, partially online and partially face-to-face. Originally they had their students—busy corporate executives—come in four weekends a semester. They wanted to cut that time down so they could make the program more accessible to these working professionals. "EMOD was doing an assessment of where they were at, looking at trends, looking at where they wanted to be. Realizing that my department was the distance learning experts on campus, they connected with us, and that's where our collaborations started together," says Armentano.

2. Envision the results. The assistant director of graduate studies in the college of business, Angela Stoller, contacted Armentano and they started discussing the process of bringing the program into a blended format—what it would look like and what would need to happen. "The training, the technology, all those sorts of things just started coming together," Armentano says. "They contacted us and we would get together and have initial meetings about what needed to happen to develop a successful blended program." Armentano's group tried to bring out what kind of instructional design strategy they wanted to use, aiming at a consistent look and feel across the program.

3. Maintain good communication. One of the key things that makes this kind of venture successful is good and open communication. "They knew that we were invested in what they were doing, that we wanted to help them out and help them to realize that we were here on campus as a service to them to help them fulfill the goals that they had in mind," says Armentano.

4. Train your faculty. One of the first things IDEAL had EMOD do was to get the faculty in an online training program that IDEAL had previously developed at the university. It was a three-week, completely online training program that put faculty in the seat of a student. The training program covered the technology and the pedagogy of teaching online. It was a mixed group—some of the faculty had done some online teaching and some had no experience at all.

IDEAL, with four designers plus Armentano, was able to do one-on-one training. They helped the instructors pick their way through the forest of technologies available. They sat down with the professors and told them the pros and cons of various technologies. They assigned instructional designers and multimedia specialists to work with the faculty on the course.

5. Know the market and know the subject. EMOD was targeting business professionals—people already established in their careers—who wanted to learn about solving problems dealing with organizational change. Some courses would involve change management, organizational development, organizational behavior, organizational systems, statistics, etc.

"We knew that the students they were marketing for would be highly engaged, active professionals who would need that flexibility and accessibility to have access to the course material," Armentano says. IDEAL wanted to focus on asynchronous tools for delivery, but also included synchronous tools. However, some students lived in different states and there were various time zones, "so we had to think about how we could develop programs where students can cooperate and have group work in a way that gives them some independent time to do it."

6. Offer side benefits. One side benefit in creating the program is that students are actually using some of the technologies that businesses are using to communicate and collaborate within their companies. So as students learn about these ideas, they're also using new tools, and learning how to collaborate online using Web applications that enable such collaboration as wikis and blogs.

7. Show benefits, alleviate fears. When you introduce new technologies there's often resistance. "One of my goals in working as an instructional designer for this program," says Armentano, "was to alleviate that fear and [help them] see that they can actually enhance what they're currently doing." Some of the changes that took place were in using technology to enhance the educational experience. Professors began to like the idea of

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extending their classes beyond the borders of Bowling Green, Ohio. "Introducing these online tools in a way that isn't overbearing, in a way that shows them that it's helpful, was really a big thing."

One of the things IDEAL did to promote the program with the faculty was to develop a blog for the EMOD community. It was a way for the program to give back to the business community at large and to create a presence in the blogosphere. To date it's had hits from every continent but Antarctica.

8. Make incremental change. Why not take the whole program totally online? That decision was made by the college itself. The faculty wanted to maintain their face-to-face contact hours. "Like I said, when you're introducing that new technology, you have a lot of fears and misconceptions about the way those tools work," Armentano says. But he believes that as soon as faculty get their feet wet, they have such realizations as, "Oh I can have just as effective a discussion using these discussion boards as actually having the students coming here to class."

9. Be adequately staffed. IDEAL has four instructional designers, a director, and an associate dean. They are reviewing this staffing now because as more programs go online adequate support and staff are demanded. "The way we did this project is that I was pretty much the lead instructional designer and I would pretty much be the main liaison between us and them," Armentano says. "I would meet with each individual faculty member who was going to teach it, look at their syllabus, talk about their goals, and help them put together the design of the course."

IDEAL's three-week online training program for faculty has turned out to benefit the entire university. It's been so successful that IDEAL is offering a similar version through the continuing education department to all teachers.

Any school can take that program to train its own faculty.

IDEAL's faculty training program is offered for free use by any institution. It can be accessed at *http://pace.bgsu.edu/container.php?x=onlineteaching*.

Different Perspectives on Distance Education: Faculty vs. Administrator

By Christopher Hill

There's no question that faculty members and administrators have different perspectives on distance education, but there has been little research on the ways in which these differences play out. To better understand the interactions between these groups, Claudine Keenan, a doctoral student in the University of Massachusetts higher education leadership program and executive assistant to the provost at Richard Stockton State College in New Jersey, compared the language used by faculty and administrators at three institutions that had recently launched or planned to launch complete (degree or certificate) online programs.

Keenan, who has taught online since 1996, used interviews and document analysis (including print and online documents) to monitor the dialogue about distance education at a community college, a doctoral institution, and a small, private liberal arts college.

"I was looking specifically for programs that had launched within the last two years or that were in the planning stages. I wanted to catch the conversations while they were still new," Keenan says.

Keenan interviewed adjunct and full-time faculty who were involved in these programs as well as those who were not, IT staff members, CIOs, and the top academic officer in each case.

A common concern for students

Although people in each category had different ways of expressing their opinions about distance education, there were many similarities across the board.

"Everybody is concerned about students and expresses that in their own language. Administrators spoke about students in terms of enrollment growth and retention, student satisfaction as a customer-service function. They used aggregate numbers, whereas faculty spoke about student interaction and access. They talked about how they're reaching more students and how they're having deeper conversations with students. The faculty members' language was much more personal and anecdotal, and the administrators' language was more data-driven. When a faculty member talks about having access to more students than ever, he or she is saying the same thing as an administrator—that our enrollment is growing."

Similarly, faculty and administrators both spoke of student (customer) satisfaction. However, this idea played out differently depending on the person's position. For example, one faculty

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member said, "It's like I can see what they're thinking. They're writing what they're thinking on these listservs, chat boards, and other technologies." Observing the same phenomenon, an administrator looks to this kind of interaction as a selling point or a factor that improves student retention.

Institutional differences

Although her sample size was not large enough to make any generalizations, Keenan did observe some differences among the different institution types. For one, she had difficulty finding a complete online program at a small liberal arts college that met her criteria. "I found that many of the online programs that have been announced in the last three to five years seem to be professional programs such as business and health care. We're not finding online literature programs, for instance," Keenan says. (Because the liberal arts program was difficult to find, Keenan is still analyzing the data, so much of this article focuses on the associate college and the doctoral institution.)

Keenan expected to find faculty resistance to distance education in the doctoral institution but didn't find any, because only one full-time faculty member was involved in the program, and none of the full-time faculty members were required to participate. As for the quality of the program, the program director immediately allayed concerns by clearly articulating the reasons and benefits of staffing the program with adjuncts. The program does not use adjunct faculty to reduce costs but rather to bring in national experts who hold full-time positions in their respective fields.

Friction in the two-year school

At the associate college, on the other hand, there was some friction. To accommodate student demand, many faculty members were asked to teach distance courses. Another contributing factor to faculty members' participation in the program was the greater flexibility in the range of teaching roles found at associate colleges.

From previous experience, Keenan expected to observe substantial resistance to distance education among faculty members, but she found little of that in her study. As a faculty member and consultant, she attended many faculty senate meetings at which some faculty members were openly opposed to distance education, believing that it was inferior to face-to-face instruction.

One possible explanation for why Keenan did not observe this resistance was the study's methodology. Perhaps a nonparticipant who was opposed to distance education just didn't feel compelled to talk to a researcher. Or perhaps research showing no significant difference between the learning outcomes of distance education and face-to-face education had dispelled those misgivings.

Areas of tension

Although not unique to distance education, faculty and administrators in this study disagreed about class size. "The administrators felt that class size could be bigger but wanted success, so they went with what faculty members recommended," Keenan says.

The other main area of tension was technical support. Faculty and administrators both agreed that 24/7 technical support was appropriate, but budgetary realities often make support beyond regular business hours unattainable. "Faculty recognized the reality of it. One faculty member said, 'If it comes down to the difference between hiring evening [technical staff] and another faculty member, I'd hire another faculty member,'" Keenan says.

Although faculty members generally understood the compromise on technical support and there was no major friction on this issue, they still viewed it differently than administrators. From the faculty perspective, 24/7 technical support "is worth every penny" and "helps us get our job done," whereas from the administrators' perspective it is "very costly."

One of Keenan's goals of this study was to try to bridge the differences between faculty members and administrators. With these differences in mind, Keenan offers the following advice for those developing a distance education program:

- Have faculty involved from the beginning. "Faculty members [in this study] really appreciated the opportunity to be present at the outset of the plan. In one case, [the associate college] faculty members brought the proposal forward themselves. They knew students weren't able to complete their degrees in four or five years because they couldn't make it to class. The faculty members enjoyed being in the driver's seat for that one. The faculty members at the other institutions enjoyed being at the table, being present for the discussions where administrators were planning these types of programs," Keenan says.
- Communicate regularly. "Talk to each other early and often. The concerns that faculty members expressed about class size were expressed early enough that it was largely written into policy before it became a contentious issue, and I've seen it in institutions outside this study where the train has left the station and they are over enrolling with 60 students per section."

Sloan Survey Finds Growth, Obstacles for Distance Education

By Christopher Hill

Reporting on its largest study to date, the Sloan Consortium says that online learning is continuing to grow, without any sign of a plateau. There were 3.2 million students who took at least one course online in 2005 (the last year for which complete data is available), up from 2.3 million the previous year. Forty-four hundred schools on the Federal Inventory of Higher Education were contacted for the survey, and with more than 55 percent responding, a picture of the growth and acceptance of distance education in the United States emerged.

Yet despite the strong growth rate, pockets of resistance remain. An immovable core remains unconvinced of the value of online education, something that may only slowly begin to shift.

Distance Education Report talked to Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, co-authors of the report, titled *Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, 2006*. They laid out for us in detail what the new research means for distance education and what the future is likely to hold.

DER: You've been doing this survey for three years, haven't you?

Seaman: Yes. Every year we go out and ask a few questions about the numbers. One is, How many? and another is, What do you expect to happen next year with your enrollments? Do you expect them to stay the same, to grow, to decrease? And if they're going to grow, by how much? We always ask about the preceding fall, so in 2003 we asked about 2002, and the answer to the first question was that 1.6 million people thought it was going to keep growing close to 20 percent. Then, when we went back the following year, we were astonished to find it had grown by about 20 percent—more than 20 percent, actually. This past year, which was looking at fall 2005, it grew at a rate faster than we had seen in the previous years; it grew 35 percent, so both the percentage growth and the actual numeric growth far exceeded anything we'd seen in the previous years.

Allen: So we don't think it's plateauing any time soon.

Seaman: And further evidence of that is when we ask schools if they still expect growth, they're still expecting growth in excess of 20 percent per year.

DER: What are they basing their projections on?

Seaman: It's all over the map. It's an individual thing for each school. It might be a self-fulfilling prophecy: "The numbers are growing like mad, I'm going to get my share, and I'm going to grow as much as anybody else." But what we see is that for many schools they notice the demand out there, they're launching new programs, or they have plans to expand programs or to convert a small program into a large program, and so they're basing it on very specific actions they're taking.

DER: What did you find out about the acceptance of distance education?

Allen: While the number of people that agree [that online education is being accepted by their institution] increases, there's the same number that disagree pretty much every year.

There seem to be schools where the faculty is entrenched—there is overall a group of faculty that don't believe in the value of online education. Eighteen percent absolutely don't agree that their faculty are accepting the value and legitimacy of online education, and that doesn't change.

Seaman: It's been the same over all the surveys, and if anything the opinion is getting slightly more negative. We've asked this question over three years and the results, by type of school, size of school, Carnegie classification, are remarkably consistent every year, with no major changes at all.

The types of schools, the proportion of them that thought their faculty were on board, the percentage of people who say, "I get cooperation, they're supportive of online education," are not changing at all over any of those survey years. And the proportion saying they have a big problem, [the faculty] are openly hostile to it, hasn't changed at all either. We see no movement one way or the other in faculty attitudes.

We did ask one other question about the acceptance of online education, and that was if they saw a lack of acceptance of online degrees from potential employers, and there are very few who see that as a problem. It's only about one in four at the schools that are not engaged in online. The number gets down to below one in 10 among the people who are actively engaged in online programs who see any issue in the acceptance of online degrees among potential employers.

DER: Do you see the possibility of a shift in attitudes, where that hard core of opposition might shrink or break up?

Allen: The trend would not appear to be in favor of that happening, but we are going to be doing this survey for at least four more years. So that will be very interesting for us to watch.

Seaman: We have nothing here that

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says we should be looking for a fundamental difference in that. But we've got this tension rising among the schools. An increasing number of them say that online is critical to their long-term strategy and they're seeing phenomenal growth in their online programs. They see that their programs are going to continue to grow at a fast rate, and at the same time they say they have issues of acceptance with their faculty.

So at some point the two sides are going to bang heads. It's an issue that's going to have to be resolved one way or another. What may be happening now is that people are accepting that the faculty as a whole don't accept it, but they can find enough individual faculty members who can teach the courses to keep them going, because it's still less than one-quarter of their total enrollments. Yet if it keeps growing, it might reach the critical point where they've got to convince more faculty to get involved, because that's going to be a damper on growth if it keeps growing at its current rate. We don't know what the answer is going to be, but it does look like in the next few years something's got to shake out on that.

It also may be that what will happen over time is that, because there are more online students every year, there will be more faculty every year with experience online. So it may be that we're going to convert the faculty from within, because there will be more and more of them who have had some online experience. But it's all speculation.

DER: Is there more resistance at certain types of institutions?

Seaman: Yes, but the differences are not huge. The institutions that are most heavily engaged in online education tend to be the large public institutions, which have the highest enrollments, which are most likely to say it's part of their long-term strategy. They're the most positive on almost all the dimensions of online. Yet, there's still a number of them who say the faculty are not on board.

Now, if you go to the ones that are least engaged, a small private baccalaureate institution, they are more likely to say that their faculty don't support it. But the differences aren't that big. The faculty acceptance at the small baccalaureate and the faculty acceptance at the large public, those are not huge differences.

Allen: Even at small liberal arts schools there's some degree of engagement with online. Absolutely. There is not a classification of school for which there is no activity. No matter how you slice and dice it, there's some subset of those schools that have some online. It's just that the levels can be so much lower. But yes, even at the small liberal arts schools, where as a class they're the most negative, there are people who are involved, who are talking about online.

They're growing. They're at a much lower level, but they're growing as well. Possibly growing at the same rate, but I hesitate to give you a figure, because the sample is so small at that level it's hard to give a statistically accurate estimate. We don't have anything to say they're not growing. One thing is that they all believe they're serving new students. So even for a small baccalaureate, they don't see it as a way of keeping their enrollees, they see it as a way of expanding their enrollees by finding a new student base.

DER: Where do you see the strongest growth?

Allen: The largest growth is at community colleges. That's where we see the biggest stakeholders in online. If you're a large university, you will have more students online, but our growth potential that we've seen over the last three years seems to be in community colleges.

The typical students who are online, the mix of what they're studying, what they're looking to study, the level they're at, is exactly the mix that the community college typically serves.

Community colleges serve a huge proportion of the higher education base, not just online. It's just that their proportion of online far exceeds that at most other types of schools. And what we're seeing is that they're growing faster as well. It may be because they have a particular outreach mission. Community colleges serve the working population. We know from research we've done that the online student is much more likely to have work responsibilities.

DER: What about faculty perceptions of the quality of distance education compared to face-to-face?

Seaman: We've asked that question for three years. Our question is phrased in terms of comparing learning outcomes, and we specifically ask them to compare online versus face-to-face so that they're making comparisons within their own world of what their offerings are. The bulk of these people, no matter who they are, say they're equivalent. They say that the two come out the same. There's a smaller group saying online is actually better that's been increasing over time. But there's about a third of them that say no, online's not as good, face-to-face is still superior.

Does that change depending on how engaged you are with online? The answer is yes, the more engaged you are with online, the less likely you are to see it as inferior. So public institutions that do more online, larger institutions that do more online, the specialized community colleges that do more online, are more likely to have a higher opinion of the quality of the offering.

Allen: But one thing that you have to remember is that these chief academic officers have a bit of a conflict, because if they're offering both, they're much more likely to say they're the same

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than one is better than the other, because they're offering both. So in some ways I think it's a loaded question.

Seaman: Which means that those people who are saying it's not the same—it's either worse or better—must hold their beliefs pretty strongly. There are more saying it's worse than that it's better, but the trend is exactly in the opposite direction. The people who are saying it's worse, their numbers are going down every year, and the people who are saying it's better, their numbers are going up every year.

DER: You talk about obstacles to the growth of online education. What are they?

Seaman: The things that are cited as obstacles I don't think are going to interfere with that rate of growth.

One is that students have to have more discipline to succeed in an online course. That's the number one reason cited, and I don't think that's going to impede growth with these students.

The second one is that it takes more faculty effort to teach online, and my guess is that this group may change and it won't be such a problem once they become established in the online world.

For schools that have just jumped in, it takes a big amount of overhead to get the technology in place, to get the faculty ready to teach it, to take a course and transition it to online. From an institutional point of view, there's the cost. You pay someone to develop a new online course and you don't have to pay to roll out another face-to-face course. To take a course that you've delivered for years and update it for next year, that's just a normal workload. Taking that same course and converting it to online, you've got to budget additional expenses and time to get those things out there. But those tend to be one-time conversion issues more than ongoing long-term issues.

DER: What is the trend for blended or hybrid courses?

Allen: Actually, when we started this survey, one thought we had was that there was some kind of life cycle of moving into online, that colleges would move into blended learning and then online, but we're not seeing that at all. Colleges going directly into online and blended courses are not increasing. One thing that surprised us is that the percentage of colleges involved in blended learning is not increasing—the growth is all in online courses.

Seaman: It is clear that blended learning was a kind of a psychological crutch for some people who were afraid to get dumped all the way into online until they'd had some experience. But it's also clear that there was this relatively small group for whom the blended experience was a particularly good match, and they're going to continue. And there are very strong advocates of blended programs to meet these particular niches, and they're not going to go away.

Allen: I think that business schools with their executive MBAs and weekend MBAs are probably here for the long term. They have a fast-track online and they have a blended where you come in once every two months for a long weekend. And then we have our two-year face-to-face or our one-year face-to-face evening program. If you have the whole menu and you're getting revenue, and you're reaching different students, you're unlikely to give it up.

DER: Let's talk about the methodology of the survey. First of all, who are you talking to at the individual schools?

Seaman: We're talking to what would be the chief academic officer at each institution, so typically that person would have the title of provost or academic vice president—the person who has the responsibility for planning and running the academic programs.

Allen: At the University of California, for example, we would have the chief academic officer at each of the sub-universities and colleges. It goes to each campus, not a system office.

DER: How do you select the schools that you survey?

Seaman: The survey goes out to every school in the country. Every higher ed institution, whether they're accredited or not, that grants a degree. If they're included in the Federal Government Inventory of Higher Education, they're included in our sample. About 4,400 is the total size of the universe. We do include for-profits, if they're granting degrees and open to the public.

DER: What was your response rate?

Seaman: The past year our overall response rate was a bit over 55 percent.

DER: Do you weight the results in any way?

Allen: We weight the survey based on the size of the school, the Carnegie class, the region that the school is in, whether it's public or private, so that when we do things like enrollment estimates we want to make sure that if there's a response bias it is filtered out. Schools that do online are much more likely to answer the survey, and we control for that, so we're not allowing a larger response from larger public institutions to give us a bias. We want to make sure that when we give you a number from the survey, it does represent a true national number.

"Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, 2006" can be downloaded at http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/making_the_grade.pdf ●

A 12-Step Program for Gaining College-Wide Support for Online Programs

By Christopher Hill

If you want an uphill struggle, try instituting an online program at your school without getting college-wide buy-in. Many have tried it, to their chagrin. It's a lengthy, grueling process, with the possibility of failure always present. On the other hand, if you start the buy-in process from the very beginning and go about it thoughtfully step by step, it's surprising and gratifying what you can accomplish.

Anne Johnson, assistant dean at Inver Hills Community College near St. Paul, was charged with developing an online capacity for her institution, and she has a series of 12 steps that, if followed deliberately, can guarantee a much more pleasant experience, to the ultimate benefit of instructors and students.

1. Start at the beginning

From the beginning, it's important to get faculty involved with the strategic planning stages arranged so that faculty have a voice in the change that will be occurring in the institution. "From the very beginning, we included faculty in strategic planning initiatives to help with this and get on board with it," Johnson says.

It's necessary to acknowledge faculty by giving them rewards—whether it's direct compensation or release time for taking the extra time and energy to develop and teach courses online.

2. Realize how faculty feel

Inver Hills faculty felt that online classes would take away from traditional classes. That makes it important to have a specific plan in place that not only outlines the strategic goals for the college to improve online programming but also lets faculty know that traditional classes are not going away.

3. Take baby steps

Johnson's team tried to introduce faculty to online in various low-key ways. The online group at Inver Hills put together professional development days for online faculty. The approach was to offer sessions to those who were interested in gradually moving into online teaching—sometimes with a task as simple as putting a grade book online or trying out an online discussion. "We have tried not to be intrusive with it. It's just showing them tools so they can make better teaching a little bit easier."

4. Don't force your faculty

"We aren't intrusive with faculty who are not currently online," Johnson says. "We mention that we're offering online courses, and if the faculty member is not interested in doing that, then we don't talk them into it. We don't require them to do it."

"I go out and ask faculty if they're interested in teaching online and explain the process to them. So, no, they don't come knocking on my door, per se, but sometime I do ask them if they're interested in teaching online," she says. "Many times, when they're asked and the process is explained and they're told that there's a process for stipend money, they're willing to do that. I haven't had many problems so far staffing online classes."

5. Mollify the faculty's concerns

"I think there was concern that the college would be moving away from what we've been known for—personal attention and a hands-on approach to working with students," Johnson says. Faculty are often fearful that their school will become an online institution that's no longer focused on the needs of the students. You have to make it clear that you are an institution where the traditional classes aren't going away, that distance classes are simply an additional service for students.

Driven by the office of the chancellor, the goal at Inver Hills, as at most colleges, is to increase access for students. One way to do that is to provide alternative forms of programming in classes.

6. Make plenty of space for faculty who want to stick with face-to-face learning

"There are some faculty who are not comfortable teaching online, who like to teach face-to-face, and that's fine," Johnson says. "And there are faculty who prefer the online environment, and that's fine as well. We've learned to work with faculty who are comfortable in the areas that they prefer."

7. Have faculty incentives

Inver Hills faculty are offered incentives for three or four years; they receive stipend money for developing courses entirely online. "We thought it was important to reward them in monetary terms for their efforts and for their extra time in developing online courses," Johnson says. "We also have faculty who are awarded State of Minnesota Award of Excellence monies, and faculty have been awarded monies to get an online peer review process going. They've been developing a rubric and a process to put it in place, so that our online courses are more consistent because they've gone through this extensive rubric."

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8. Provide faculty training

Johnson's committee has also been developing an online mentoring program to work with new online faculty and help them through the development stages for their first online class. The team also initiated what they call "Snap, Clack, and Click" sessions. These are sessions where online faculty get together every six weeks for an hour. They lead discussions on topics ranging from how to manage discussion boards and chats to various kinds of successful teaching techniques. It's a chance for online faculty to get together to support one another and discuss what goes on in their online environment.

9. Get everyone involved

At the beginning, Inver Hills had a strategic planning session that dealt with online programming, meeting with faculty, administration, and student services representatives. Faculty still remain involved in planning. The initial planning session became three ongoing subcommittees: a student services subcommittee, a staff subcommittee, and the academic committee.

10. Have a business plan for upper-level administration

To gain college-wide support, the Inver Hills distance ed team felt it was important to put together a business plan specifically related to online programming so that they could get support from the president, the vice president, the deans and directors, and others in administrative positions.

They put together a plan that considered the academic side and the student services side of the college. One important part of the plan was looking at revenues and expenditures as they related to online programming.

The administration supported the plan because it specifically outlined what the staff wanted to do—and the plan was very specific in outlining what needed to be done with student services. It outlined the resources needed to make quality classes to aid in increased enrollment. The plan made the point that online education is becoming much more competitive.

11. Line up support at the top

Support from top administration is key. The greatest support, in terms of initiative at Inver Hills, came from the provost, the vice president of academic affairs. And a large part of what the Inver Hills team is doing is driven by the strategic goals that come from the office of the chancellor of the Minnesota State Colleges and University system. Part of the chancellor's direction was that the various institutions needed to increase access and opportunity for students. Since one way to do that is with online programs, Inver Hills' president has also become a great supporter.

12. Remember, faculty are your best advocates

"You're always going to have people who resist change, but I think we've done very well implementing our change on campus," says Johnson. "When you get faculty who are really interested and enthusiastic about online learning, it spreads to other faculty, and faculty are the best advocates for getting other faculty involved."

Distance Learning Quick Reference Sources:

Twelve Lessons for Building and Running a Successful Program

By Christopher Hill

It doesn't fall to many people to have to create distance graduate programs at two major research universities, but it did to Bill Riffee. At the University of Texas at Austin he chaired the curriculum committee of the College of Pharmacy, which implemented a dramatically new professional pharmacy curriculum in the fall of 1996.

Also in 1996, Riffee was named dean of the College of Pharmacy at the University of Florida, with the special task of creating online graduate pharmacy programs. Recently, Riffee reflected on some lessons learned from years in the trenches.

Lesson One: **Ultimately, how you deliver learning and how you pay for it are inextricably linked.**

"The ultimate question is how do you get this started, how do you sustain it, how does it pay for itself, how do you compensate the faculty fairly, and so forth. Wherever I go, people are always saying, 'This is the best way I know to approach education at a distance,' and it always comes down to yes, but how do you afford it?"

Lesson Two: **Leave the faculty alone.** "What I say to my faculty is, 'We're going to do this thing and I promise you I will not ask you to change your teaching style.' So we have adapted our technology to their teaching style. As an administrator, you pretty much leave the pedagogy to the faculty, but you also have a fairly significant development staff that can help the faculty themselves develop different things."

Lesson Three: **Faculty will come around.** "What we find is that [faculty] teaching styles, their pedagogy, begin to change or adapt to different kinds of technology that they find interesting. And then we work with the faculty to see how we can improve the student learning as well as the delivery of content."

Lesson Four: **Leave faculty alone, but make sure they have support when they need it.** "We had a faculty member who had difficulty explaining various parts of his course to students. It was a biochemistry course, and in that course there was a considerable amount of learning about cycles in the body. He was just getting killed on his teacher evaluations, because he would spend days on the blackboard trying to show these students how it worked just by talking. So when he came in to ask for my help, I said, 'Why don't you get together with an instructional designer, talk about what you would like the students to learn, and see if that designer can help you?' What came out of that was a series of animations that in fact did help the students, and his teaching evaluations turned around. So it's an iterative process with our faculty, but we try to make things available to them to help them with their pedagogy."

Lesson Five: **Practice limited intervention.** "I'm probably more involved than most deans would be. As a dean I have a lot of things to do, but I also have samples of courses that are being taught that are being sent to me weekly. I can look at each of those and stay involved in what kind of pedagogy's going on and how well I think the content's being delivered. And if I see something that needs help, I'll usually contact the faculty member and offer some help. I'm not sure I'd call it a model—it's just the way I do business with my faculty. I feel if you don't have top-down interest, from the president of the university on down, your chances of success aren't very high."

Lesson Six: **Decide what model of distance ed you want to pursue.** "On a grand scale there are three models that people in distance education talk about. And those are whether you interact with your students synchronously or asynchronously. Or a mixture, blended or hybrid."

Lesson Seven: **There are better ways than videoconferencing.** "You will see much of the distance education done using videoconferencing—a synchronous method. A terrible way to teach. I actually set up one of those systems in Texas, but it's not a very good system to use in my opinion."

Lesson Eight: **Blended is good.** "I believe very strongly in an asynchronous approach. With a face-to-face component—a blended approach. And so that's my model of the three: a blended approach to distance education. For example, in one of our programs 66 percent of our content is delivered digitally. But the rest is face-to-face, with active learning exercises, laboratories, and so forth. And I think that is probably the best model of teaching or pedagogy in distance ed. I don't think the pure delivery of content asynchronously without any contact with the instructor other than an occasional e-mail or a test grade is sufficient."

Lesson Nine: **Synchronous can be part of your mix.** "We use a lot of synchronous tools in addition to actually meeting face-to-face—products like

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Elluminate, where the students and the faculty may be in different places but they are at a virtual interface. And they can ask questions and interact that way. I consider that face-to-face in the sense of the student's ability to interact in real time with the instructor. In the '90s a paper was written showing that the attitude of students toward distance education was positively correlated with the perception of interaction. This can even be done asynchronously if you have a good discussion board. But [students] do like to have some ability to talk with the instructor."

Lesson Ten: **Asynchronous is the most dependable and least expensive.** "The synchronous mode, when videoconferencing is used, is very expensive and it's technologically fragile. In some cases you'll find if there's a weather inversion or rain, or if somebody talks wrong, the system goes down. So in order to have high quality and in order to have a robust system, it's very, very expensive on an annual basis. Also, if you have a face-to-face element where you actually send faculty out to where students are gathering, that's expensive as well, because you have to mobilize your faculty or increase the number of faculty.

But in the asynchronous mode, we're able to capture everything that a faculty member normally does in a classroom, we're able to store it on a video streaming server and provide very high quality to the students. And then I can blend that with face-to-face and come up with a much more efficient model of higher education that either of the other two."

Lesson Eleven: **Using technology to leverage faculty lowers costs.** "I collect data for about 15 of what I consider our peers around the country in colleges of pharmacy. I divide that by the number of doctor of pharmacy students they have, and I come up with a cost of instruction in their colleges. Across the 15 or so, the average is about $14,000 per student, per year. Mine is $9,500. I have approximately the same budget as many of my peers, but I have twice as many students. So I'm able to create an economic factor that makes our program much more efficient with the same or better quality as my peers. The key to that is a blended approach, utilizing faculty that are already on board, using technology to leverage those faculty across distances rather than hiring another 60 faculty members."

Lesson Twelve: **There is no direct correlation between money and quality of education.** "The best business model does not make for the best pedagogy. The act of learning, whether you do it at a distance or whether you do it on campus, is the key.

Too often in higher education we deliver content just standing at a podium and talking for 50 minutes. We assume we're going to transcribe our brain into somebody else's and all we're doing is being human transcribers. What we're seeing now is people still providing that content, but they're asking the students to consume that content outside the classroom—and understand it, synthesize it to their own database, their own knowledge, then come back with active learning exercises to actually begin applying that knowledge in a clinical setting. That's where learning takes place." ●

Legal Issues for Distance Education Administrators: Part I and Part II

By Christopher Hill

Copyright, accessibility, technology contracts, accreditation—legal considerations go hand-in-hand with distance education in many places. Deborah Brown, associate vice president for legal affairs and human resources, and Ellen Podgor, associate dean of faculty development and distance education, at the Stetson University College of Law, sat down with *Distance Education Report* to sort out the basic areas where the law touches on distance education. In addition, is the follow up on a few of the most important implications in each of these major areas.

PART I
Accessibility

Distance Education Report: What are the basics that an administrator of distance education programs needs to know about accessibility?

Deborah Brown: When you talk about disability accommodation from the standpoint of an administrator of programs, in order to meet your legal obligations, there are certain things that you want to consider institutionally to make sure that you have the right processes in place. One is some kind of notice to your enrollees, your students, and your applicants by which you make it known that you are aware of your obligation to reasonably accommodate, and the process whereby people can seek those accommodations. You want people to know that your institution internally has a defined structure for handling requests for accommodations, so that you have a consistent institutional response and a coordinator who ensures consistency across the array of online courses while effectuating an appropriate individualized review of each set of circumstances.

In the process of course development and effectuation, you also want to make sure that faculty who are creating the courses and IT individuals who are supporting the courses have been trained in Web site accessibility and the different options that are available to make courses accessible. This is particularly important if they're going to be reused, because it can be more expensive to go back and retrofit a course for closed captioning or some other feature which could have been designed in an accessible format [from the start].

Ellen Podgor: This is not just a situation where you can say, OK, this is it. There may be some state regulations that apply, there may be some administrative regulations, and it's also something that may be in flux. Anytime you're dealing with law, there's always the possibility that things can change, so it's important to keep in mind that this is a fluid situation.

DB: Having said that, the important federal laws that administrators will want to make sure they understand are the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Remember, too, that many states have accessibility laws, but these would be the main federal laws.

DER: What is the difference between the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act?

DB: The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was really somewhat of a precursor to the Americans with Disabilities Act. It applies to certain federal contractors and federal grantees who receive federal funds, and it basically imposes obligations very similar to the Americans with Disabilities Act. The ADA came along in 1990 with a much broader application and basically extended coverage on a national basis, including not only public universities under Title II but private and independent colleges under Title III. The obligations vary somewhat depending on which section you're subject to. Again, that is in addition to whatever state law might exist in a given state.

But in general the obligations are consistent, and it's an obligation to provide reasonable accommodations to otherwise qualified individuals to allow them to effectively participate in education.

People really need to check their state to see if they have any additional requirements. Where you have multiple laws applying, the general rule is that whatever provides the greater protection for the individual student is controlling.

DER: You differentiate between traditional requests for accommodation and technological requests. Help us understand that distinction.

DB: A traditional request, as opposed to a technology request, is often something like additional time on an assignment, which in the context of an online asynchronous course doesn't often seem to make a lot of sense. We also have requests for things like notetakers, or readers. But having a notetaker when someone is 400 miles away and there is no one with a proximate physical presence, and in an asynchronous environment where the student potentially can view the lecture over

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and over again, may not make much sense. You're more likely in an online environment to have the technology requests—like large-font texts, presentations that appear on the computer, text-reading capacity for visually impaired students who may not be able to read the text on the screen, who may need something to read the text for them. These types of things and the range of assistive technologies that are out there are fairly comprehensive.

Also, you have potential accommodation issues if you require individuals to report to a central testing location in order to do proctored examinations, to make sure you select test sites that are accessible to individuals with disabilities. You should consider whether the proctors have been suitably notified and trained so as to not end up with a failure to accommodate.

DER: It sounds like there is training and education needed for a number of different people and functions.

EP: It's important to educate the people involved in the delivery of the program about the obligation to provide accommodation and the types of things they might expect. We think it's important to have a central coordinator for the purpose of complying with the ADA to assure appropriate responses to requests for accommodations, the proper training on accessibility of Web design, and other features. To inventory capacity for existing and new technology, to determine what the features are and how they can be used so that, once again, you're not just sort of scrambling after the fact.

You can find yourself in the situation of, "OK, I've got this great course and I'm ready to launch it. And now all of a sudden I get all the accommodation requests after all the recording has been done." Whereas if you had all the technology available and you could have recorded it using technology that was easily adaptable for different kinds of disabilities, then you wouldn't be in the circumstance of trying to redo the course at potentially great expense.

We want it very clear at the beginning that often there's not one easy answer for all the questions. The answers are often dependent on the venue that you are in, because states may have different answers to questions, you've got the federal system, different regulatory agencies, some of which may be within just one state. So it's not one-size-fits-all dealing with these kinds of issues. It's more important to know what the questions are and to ask legal counsel.

DER: Is there a proactive, centralized model for dealing with legal questions, rather than just reacting on a piecemeal basis?

DB: The model that we typically advocate is a faculty champion with the vision of what the institution wants to accomplish with distance education. That faculty person really needs to lead a collaborative team that includes the various staff who are the key stakeholders to support that effort. That would be not only a group like IT, which you would expect, but also legal counsel for the state regulatory issues. It would include an associate dean or whoever handles accreditation issues for the institution. It would include human resources for any faculty contracts or appointment letters, ownership of online materials, the library for purposes of resources, and student affairs and career development for the student services aspect.

As people who are schooled in the law, we always know that dealing with problems before they arise and trying to anticipate the problem always works to the benefit of everyone.

PART II
Technology

DER: Another issue you discuss is technology contracts. What are the possible pitfalls?

Deborah Brown: There are different perspectives between the academic and the legal side when it comes to technology contracts. What we try to highlight is that faculty members often think of technology in terms of functionality—I want the chat room, I want to be able to X or Y, I want particular features with respect to a technology program because this is how I want my class to look and feel.

But when you think about it from the legal perspective, with technology contracts you're really looking at a document that's a set of rights and responsibilities. What do I get with this technology, what do I have to do to be able to exercise my rights? There's a range of issues that you're considering from an institutional standpoint. You want to support faculty functionality, but it's important that you don't allow your long-term success to be compromised by short-term decision-making. You really have to look at the vendor to be sure that you're going with their stability, their capacity to deliver year after year, long-term pricing commitments, how well that technology fits within your infrastructure. If I go down this path with this company today, if I don't like it or if it doesn't work out, how painful will it be to the institution to switch to another platform or to another issue of technology?

DER: What else is there to keep in mind about technology contracts?

DB: I'd also be worried about business continuity. For example, technology contracts often provide that you will get a designated server to house your distance education. Well, if I live in Florida and my school could be destroyed by a hurricane, you know what? I need to change my server site. I need to have the ability to do that without packing up and heading to Georgia, and my only hope for business continuity is to broadcast my classes through Georgia. I need to be able to do that under the technology contract.

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You also want to be clear about your affiliation relationship with the technology; that is, the use of marks and logos, either them wanting to use their mark on your courses (your students sign on to your course and they see the name of a vendor in the lower left-hand corner), or them wanting to use your mark or your logo in promotion and publicity of their product at other schools.

DER: Technology support is part of a contract too, isn't it?

Ellen Podgor: The technology contract is sort of like any contract—you have a lot of different things that you look at, but at the end of the day the three biggies are: what am I getting, how much does it cost, and how painful is it going to be to get out if it all goes bad? And to a user the availability of support is very important, and how easy is it going to be to get hold of these people who have supplies for the product, and how easy is it going to be to use the product itself? Key points to watch out for as you consider it: who's going to support it, how quickly are they going to get there when you need support? How easy is it going to be to get hold of them? Is it going to be something that has a function that I truly need for the particular project that I'm doing? Is it going to provide me with proper training? These are some of the things that I would look at.

Accreditation

DER: What should you keep an eye out for in the accreditation process, from a legal standpoint?

EP: It's going to depend on who the accrediting body is and what the rules are. For example, we're in the legal academic community and we have very, very strict rules on distance education. We can only do a certain number of hours. Students who are in their first year of law school may not do distance ed courses. They can only take so many distance education courses in their entire law school career. And there has to be a certain type of interaction in these courses. If we're going to do a lot of distance learning, we have to have a distance learning plan.

The American Bar Association has very, very explicit rules, and it's going to depend on the particular accreditation body that you're dealing with as to what those rules might be. The significance of it, obviously, is that when you're at an institution you have the things that keep you up at night—if something bad happens here, I'm in major trouble in terms of my institution continuing. One of those is loss of accreditation. So I think that administrators will tell you that they don't like to do things that may jeopardize their accreditation. But a number of the accrediting bodies have published specific guidelines for distance education. Accrediting bodies in theory are focused on program quality, and many of the accreditation standards and guidelines that have been published are attempting to ensure that there is a comparable level of quality for online education and classroom delivery.

When we did our presentation we asked how many people had actually read the best practices document published by the eight regional accrediting bodies. Only about half raised their hands. It did not seem like many were familiar with the study published by the Department of Education in March of 2006, which was the document they published on interviews with accreditors about what would be red flags suggesting from an accreditation standpoint that you may have issues in your distance education program. Because it's far broader than simply looking at the intellectual content. It's an entire package of everything that accreditors look at.

The institutional contact and commitment of the distance education program, the curriculum and instruction, the student support. Evaluation and assessment are a great example. Do you have a process of "firm student identification"? How are you going to know that the students who are taking your courses are really those students? That's a component of the best practices document. I'm not so sure that people are so focused on the copyright issues. It really doesn't seem like a lot of attention has been focused on the student support areas and the other areas that go into distance education. There are a number of documents published on that. The ADA has fairly stringent standards, but I'd venture a guess that accreditors require at a minimum some form of notice, if not approval, if you're going to implement a distance education curriculum. Make sure that whoever does your accreditation work is following those standards and providing proper notices, so that when you have your accreditation review you are in compliance.

Both of these are available online: *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, a composite document published by the eight regional accrediting bodies, and the other one was published by the Department of Education in March 2006, called *Evidence of Quality in Distance Education Programs*, drawn from interviews with the accreditation community.

State regulation

DER: What's the basis for most state regulation?

DB: Historically, states have always had the ability to establish laws and rules concerning education within their own borders, and that makes sense because they want to protect their citizens from unscrupulous educators or educational programs that lack quality.

What's really evolved over time is that that entire model was based on a physical classroom and on the notion of people who were operating within the state. As online education has grown, that premise isn't necessarily sound anymore, so what ends up happening is that the vast majority of

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states have crafted some variation of the physical presence test in order to determine if someone is engaging in enough educational activity to be subject to the state regulatory scheme, and a variety of different factors might trigger a sufficient presence in a state.

But the important thing that people should get out of it is that if you're operating or thinking of operating within a particular state, you understand what that state's regulatory scheme is and whether or not you're going so far as to be subject to, say, the Colorado Higher Education Commission. Some of the factors they look at are obvious: Do you have any employees in the state? Do you have a building? Do you have a post office box? Do you have an in-state phone number? Are you doing local targeted advertising as opposed to national advertising? If you have a large number of students in the state, are you facilitating in-state study groups or in-state instruction? It's just an issue that's out there that I'm not sure a lot of people are really aware of. ●

Trial by Fire: Online Teaching Tips That Work

By Lori Norin, Ph.D., and Tim Wall

A few years ago, our university started accelerating its distance learning program. Along with courses that televised lectures to area high schools, we began a fledgling online course program that used WebCT classroom teaching software. Some professors designed courses that worked well, while others found that 100 percent Web delivery didn't work well for them. Early in the program, our speech department experimented with a departmental online course, but it didn't work as well as we had hoped.

Initially, when the speech department was asked by the dean to put our basic course online, we resisted. In fact, our course was the last required general education course to go online. We finally agreed to a Web-enhanced course.

It was a disaster: The professor was trying to master WebCT; the students were trying to learn it. One student even commented, "I signed up for speech class, not WebCT." More time was spent learning the software than learning the content. The number of times students had to come to campus was modified over and over. Student feedback was mostly negative. Students complained about the irregular number of times they had to come to campus and the organizational methods used (they wanted nothing more than a list of assignments), and they could never seem to master the locations of necessary functions, such as mail and discussion boards. Students were frustrated. Faculty were frustrated. At the same time, administration wanted more Web courses. At one point the department recommended dropping the Web-delivered speech course entirely.

As a last resort, we attempted to restructure the course by creating a hybrid—half online and half on campus. Students were now required to meet on campus with the professor once a week. The results were amazing. Student feedback was much more positive. One student even commented, "I was really upset at first that I had to come to class once a week, but now I really see the benefit. I think it helped me to get to have that contact with the classmates and the confidence to know I had that face-to-face opportunity with the professor if I needed it."

In addition to more positive student feedback, student retention improved 8 percent the first semester we switched to the hybrid course, while posttest scores jumped an average of 20.5 percent. There was also a clear decrease in student and professor frustration. As one student said, "This was an excellent learning experience. When I needed any help or information, it was always readily available, and there were many sources for learning."

Having found a delivery method that seemed to work well, we began to look seriously at strategies, tips, and techniques for using WebCT that would simplify and enhance the teaching experience. We frequently discovered we were "overworking" the course management system. Just because we could place a message, document, or link in three or four places didn't necessarily mean we should. There were so many tools at our disposal that we were tempted to use them all. Frankly,

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that just confused everyone—professors and students.

Our next step, then, was to look for ways to make the presentation less busy, falling back on a lesson that all teachers learn early on: sometimes less is more. At the same time, however, we didn't want to simplify so much that we would exclude useful techniques. Eventually, by trial and error, we learned the balance between too much and not enough.

We also discovered that working in the electronic venue required that we be constantly several steps ahead of our students, who are often extremely computer savvy and quite likely to discover ways to plagiarize. Without engaging in cynicism, we adapted the Reagan philosophy of "trust but verify" by using readily available software such as student tracking and TurnItIn.

In the process we also learned how to use feedback mechanisms to enhance teaching. For instance, we discovered that a threaded electronic discussion on a subject like plagiarism puts students on record as knowing what it is. After that, the standard excuses for plagiarism pretty much went away. Similarly, a quick personal e-mail is a handy way to find out what a student knows or needs to know about a subject. The professor can ask the student to summarize a concept in a return e-mail. Then the professor can see, at a glance, the gaps in knowledge and advise the student accordingly. These are only a couple of effective ways judicious use of software enhances teaching without getting in the way. The trick, we found, was to use the software without becoming slaves to it.

Along the line, we've discovered some techniques that work. If you're new to the online course experience, especially if you're considering a hybrid course, here are some tips you might find helpful.

Acceptance forms

Professors commonly pass out course outlines and discuss class policies, and then ask students to sign a contract or agreement saying that they will honor those policies. Here's an opportunity to use the hybrid situation both to save paper and to simplify record keeping. Instead of handing out a syllabus on the first day, tell your class that it's online and where they can find it. In addition, ask each student to submit an electronic acceptance form, which can be placed in his or her electronic mailbox. Since the acceptance form is the first correspondence of the semester, the form will automatically go to the top of each student's e-mail list for easy retrieval. Neither paper nor filing is involved.

Hidden elements

A Web site can be confusing if it publishes too much information in a single screen or if it presents too much information in a short period. We've found that if we put too many items on a screen, students tend to surf through them instead of working on the lesson at hand. Sometimes we want students to read ahead, but sometimes we want them to concentrate on a single lesson. That's where hidden elements come in.

If you've designed all the lessons for a semester and then put them on a Web page, hide the ones that aren't active. That way the students can't "smorgasbord" through the course. Hiding menu elements (on the left of the screen) also can be valuable. For instance, we've found that if students can see the "Discussion" tool in the menu, they tend to open it to see what's there. Since each discussion targets a particular concept, try placing a discussion link in that learning module, with perhaps a backup link in the calendar. Now you can hide the discussion tool in the menu; students don't need it. Otherwise, students might open the menu tool and start surfing, resulting in questions about upcoming discussions. A reverse of that situation is the practice of hiding something that's been there for several days. If an active assignment was due a couple of days ago, hide it and wait for the questions about where it went: this is nagging by hiding.

Organizational methods

There are a variety of content organizational methods that can be used; however, the week-by-week method allows you to use your calendar and learning modules together. You can limit each learning module to a single week's work and install links in your calendar. We found that students in the basic speech course responded especially well to this organizational method, most likely due to the built-in time-management components. Students were able to approach their public speaking preparation using a clearly delineated, step-by-step method. Also, this practice tends to keep students where you want them to be in the course.

Tracking tools

In a classroom, how many times have you heard this: "I simply don't get it"? As a teacher, you wonder why, and you ask the student to clarify. In a hybrid course, you can use the tracking tool. We post our lecture notes on the course site and we track student reading. You can tell at a glance what a student has read and how much time was spent. Let's say you discover that a student has spent very little time going over your materials (lectures, handouts, etc.). As a teacher who's been around a while, you suspect a similar lack of effort in reading the text. Instead of sending a tedious e-mail that paraphrases what you've already published, you can send a short e-mail that asks the student to clarify.

Here's an example:

"Please tell me which points are baffling to you."

If at that point the student isn't specific, here's a typical follow-up:

"Please review the lecture notes and

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text and then send me an e-mail that outlines your understanding of the major concepts that this assignment covers."

By that time, the student usually gets the drift.

Discussion tool

Although you've already engaged the class in a discussion, you can reinforce it on the bulletin board. After the class discussion, you can require the students to post their thoughts on the bulletin board. Then you can jump into the forum and ask them to respond to other postings. This practice engages students who aren't very active in class but may have valuable input. As a bonus, sometimes the quiet students start participating more in class discussions.

Humor and frequent communication

While we don't want to be in the stand-up comedy business, we can make it clear to students that we're not a robotic part of the machine with a square screen. Often a friendly or encouraging e-mail that uses non-threatening language can make a student feel more a part of the class. An appropriate humorous comment allows students to view a professor's lighter side, allowing for the interpersonal component that is difficult to transcend over the Web. Also, consider that people check their computers sporadically 24 hours a day—don't miss the opportunity that this around-the-clock access allows. If you have a thought on the way home after a lecture, send it to the class. If you want to remind them to read a chapter, send an e-mail or publish a text block they can't miss.

Text blocks

WebCT features the ability to publish headers and footers. You can certainly use this feature to design a page with a standard banner such as the name of the course. In addition, you can use the text block feature to publish urgent messages. If you have one message one day and replace it with a new message another day, be sure to change the color of the text block. Otherwise, students might assume it's the same message and skim by it.

Tips for the online learner

A direct link on the home page that provides tips for new online learners can eliminate initial confusion and provide students with a clear understanding of what the online learning environment is all about. This type of link could include such topics as Web etiquette, where to go for help, thinking ideas through before responding, online learning is not for everyone, creating a private and positive working environment for studying, other helpful weblinks, etc.

What now?

This is a mere handful of tips, and it is by no means a complete list. As classroom professors, we try new tricks regularly. Some we keep; some we lose. Don't be shy about using the same approach when you're teaching your hybrid Web class. If you're relatively new to the Web-teaching environment, take our list as typical techniques you can try. If they don't work for your students, discard them or modify them to fit your situation. WebCT has a lot of tools: use them your way, and don't feel you must use all of them. Do what you do in class: put yourself in the students' place and see whether your presentation works; stay loose and listen to the feedback. ●

Seeking Out and Speaking For New Learner Populations: The Key to Distance Ed Leadership

By Christopher Hill

"The better administrators really do understand what's going on in the future learning populations," says Janet Poley, president and CEO of the American Distance Education Consortium, a nonprofit consortium composed of 65 state universities and land-grant colleges. She's talking about an empathetic ability to identify with the various populations in need of distance education, to see where they are now and where new ones will come from. This is key to her ideas about what distance education leaders need to do in order for programs to succeed.

In a recent conversation, Poley talked about the qualities, especially empathy and identification, that she sees as vital to distance education success. They are:

1. Identifying learner populations

This means having the ability to project what learner needs are going to be, where the problems are going to be, and what changes can be expected in learner populations. "Distance education has always been about creating access," Poley says. As learners change, institutions and programs must change to continue to afford access.

As an example of the kind of changes and new learners she's talking about, she mentions veterans of the war in Iraq. "We have a tremendous number of people who've been hurt, who've been displaced from jobs, who are coming back having to change

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careers, and we're just at the beginning of that."

She mentions that distance learning has a track record—with initiatives like eArmyU—of helping military personnel receive an education while they're deployed. But Poley foresees a large influx of veterans who are going to need distance education when they get out of the service. "That's one example of a learner need that hasn't yet come completely to the surface but that's going to impact distance education, in my view, for the foreseeable future," she says.

Other examples can be found in America's new immigrant populations. "Were we ready for them?" Poley asks her fellow distance educators. The Mexico-based professional school Monterrey Tech was ready, she says, and has established some 60 learning centers for new immigrants around the country.

Identifying and seeking to serve emerging learning populations like these are the most effective ways to get new programs developed and funded.

In Poley's view, the main task is to learn how to see these learners, not let them remain "invisible" to the educational world. "Help them articulate their needs for learning," she says. It's about access for people who need learning, and being able to understand and then work with those populations.

It's not always about the poor and disenfranchised, either. She mentions the aging population of America, baby boomers in retirement who want to pursue lifelong learning.

Poley warns against over-reliance on technology in meeting these various sets of needs. "Bandwidth is great and we love it, but that might not be the answer to all these kinds of issues by any means."

So, in Poley's view, the first question to ask is, What populations are you trying to serve? Are you, as an administrator, just going to concentrate on running a profitable program, or are you going to create new modes of access that can make a difference on a bigger stage?

2. A learner orientation

When it comes to prioritizing and organizing a program, always place the learner in the center, Poley says. As long as things are structured to give maximum access to learners, you're on sound footing. Then all the other questions about how you finance it, and how you manage it, will find their answers. "Put the learner at the center of the model and then you work all the systems around that."

3. Sustainability

A vision for sustainability is almost as important as a learner orientation. The goal is to organize, manage, and finance a program that can sustain itself. To do this, you need to look past just getting one grant and running a program for a few years. (She mentions that grants that go away after a few years are among the biggest problems for sustainability.) You've got to be able to resource whatever you're doing. You need regular streams of funding that support your work.

In the same way that a learner-centric model ordered your priorities, a long-term resources strategy will tell you about what things you can bring in from other sources, who your natural partners are, what grants you can go after, and so on.

You need to know what your resources are in relation to what you need, be it money, people, or technology.

Working on a long-term resourcing plan is one of the most difficult tasks distance education administrators face. A successful administrator-leader needs to be good at working with the people who can supply the resources. The leader's credibility has to be high.

4. Communications

"Your grant writing needs to match your vision," Poley says. Often it requires a lot of integration and synthesis to develop the right grant proposal.

"A lot of people have good grant writers, and good writers can write whatever good conceptualizers tell them. But if you don't have good conceptualization, all the grant writers in the world aren't going to get you good grants. Everybody thinks their answers are in the magic marketer, the magic developer, the magic grant writer. And those people won't magically bring you the money—it just doesn't work that way."

Poley believes that communication skills in general are necessary for a successful program. "I think in the distance education area, it's almost a given that you have to be able to communicate well, you have to be able to give a good speech," The ability to communicate your vision of the learner population is important.

"I think that's using the bully pulpit, being able to use your position to create a vision for a positive future, being able to speak for audiences that are invisible—to me that's about leading."

Reducing the Risk: Effects of a First-Year Experience Course for Nontraditional Students

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

It comes as no surprise to those who work with distance learning populations to hear that these students typically deal with different challenges than their traditional-aged, on-campus peers. According to the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement, distance education students typically are older, work many hours a week, and often support families. However, this very profile can place these students at risk for not continuing their studies or not being successful.

The typical first-line remedy to aid student success has been a first-year experience program. This type of program, which often includes some sort of "University 101" course tailored to assisting students in their pursuit of success, have a well-established track record of boosting the persistence and academic standing of the students who enroll. Since the creation of the first such program in 1972 at the University of South Carolina, continual evaluation has shown the worth of these programs in increasing retention and improving academic performance. Their original target, traditional-aged on-campus students, has clearly been well served. However, comparable studies have not been done to examine the utility of these programs for nontraditional students, a population that often closely overlaps the distance education student population.

Seeing a gap in the literature, Sherry Miller Brown, director of the McCarl Nontraditional Student Success Center at the University of Pittsburgh, set out to learn if a first-year experience class would help her university's nontraditional students overcome some of the barriers to success. Her research points to the utility of a first-year experience program tailored to the needs of this particular student population.

Reading the Literature, Constructing the Course

Brown's work began in 2002, when she raised close to $1 million for the university to open the McCarl Nontraditional Student Success Center. The center is staffed with academic advisors, career counselors, and other professionals dedicated to helping nontraditional students stay in school successfully.

Right away, she noticed a problem that academic advisors across institutional boundaries will find familiar: a lack of time to spend with students who need it most. "Advisors in our field have much higher case loads," she said, explaining that it is not unusual for an advisor to have a single hour each semester with each student, regardless of how difficult the student finds the college experience. "It is so hard to explain to people how hard it is to be a nontraditional student," she says.

Brown was also concerned by statistics that were available in the literature, such as the estimate that some 50 percent of nontraditional/adult students will leave college without earning a degree, compared to 12 percent of traditional-aged students. Additionally, 27 percent of nontraditional students will drop out in their first year, nearly twice the rate of traditional students. (Both statistics are from *The Condition of Education*, 2002).

To address this nontraditional student vulnerability, Brown wrote a first-year experience course targeted at this specific population. The course is taught primarily by the center's academic advisors, giving them an additional hour each week with their students. The primary goals of the course include development of academic and career goals; familiarity with university resources; the student's recognition of responsibility for his or her own education; recognition of diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints among other students; familiarity with the university environment; and exploration of each student's interest and abilities.

The course reflects the unique needs and challenges of nontraditional students as they interact with the university, in keeping with the flexibility of the first-year experience approach. Brown notes that among the 18 colleges at the University of Pittsburgh, "each one does first-year experience differently." In the case of the nontraditional student, the differences include teaching how to access university resources when certain offices are not physically open to students who are only available on weekends or evenings. The course also addresses more traditional learning skills for success, such as memorizing, note-taking, and critical reading.

During the first semester, academic advisors identified 55 students considered to be at-risk and asked them to take the first-year experience course. These students were selected on the basis of GED scores, lack of previous college experience, community college QPA average below 2.5, or evidence of attrition at more than two colleges. Of those invited into the course, 32 accepted and 23 declined.

Although Brown acknowledges that a bias may have come from self-selection

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into the course, she believes the dramatic difference in success between those who took the course and those who did not speaks for itself. After completing three semesters, an impressive 88 percent of the experimental group were still enrolled, versus only 26 percent of the control group who did not take the course.

Equally impressive were the QPA scores for the two groups. After three semesters, the mean term QPA for the experimental group was 2.69, a full point above the 1.96 mean for the control group. At the same time, some 76 percent of the experimental group had a QPA above 2.00 for the fall 2005 term, compared with 33 percent of the control group.

Hints for distance education

Although initial research clearly indicates that the first-year experience course for nontraditional students is a success, Brown plans to continue monitoring the program through other research activities. For example, she says, "this fall we'll look at different populations of students, [such as] students who transfer from community colleges." She already knows from the data that students who transfer to the university from community college often see a dramatic drop in their QPA average for the first couple of terms. "Usually by graduation they will be close to where they entered," she says. However, that drop before rebounding is when these students are in the biggest danger of dropping out.

Brown believes the first-year experience program could be adapted to foster success and retention in the distance education population, and she has some advice for those attempting to construct an all-distance version. "In order to have a successful program, find a way to do real outreach," she says. She emphasizes how important it is for these students to have continual, personal attention from the university, and the tools to assist with this are commonly available. "It is really important to have discussion boards so you can talk back and forth. Personalize it as much as possible," she says.

She expresses concern that distance education programs may neglect to focus adequately on student services and student development for this population, and she urges administrators to continue to find ways for these students to remain in contact with the staff when needed and receive prompt responses to requests for assistance. "You have to provide outreach to your students. Find ways to connect to them, not just a link or a Web page," she says. ●

Avoiding the Mosquito Effect: Keys to Improving Support for Your Distance Education Students

By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

Your distance learning program is thriving, you have more successful courses than ever before, and your students and faculty are enthusiastic about the opportunity to teach and study online. There is just one problem: Every semester, questions and requests for support arrive in swarms. As you spend your time answering the same question multiple times, you feel you are being slowly nibbled at until there is nothing left.

Deidre Stidom, online course manager and faculty trainer for Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, S.C., knows the feeling well. Multiple requests for support can take their toll, and "your students can become an uncontrollable help-sucking desperate swarm," she says. That is why Piedmont has devised a number of strategies to control this "mosquito effect" at her campus and beyond.

Mosquito Repellant #1: Standardize the Course Template

When Piedmont first started its online course program, it did not lack creativity. Faculty plunged into the world of online teaching, creating courses with interfaces that matched their own personalities. For example, "all the courses looked different: there were icons moving and shaking; some were in color and some black and white," Stidom says.

While the courses were clearly creative, the variety of interfaces brought its challenge. Some were visually attractive but not ADA-compliant. Further, students would spend the first several weeks of the term getting accustomed to the interface and navigation of the course, only to have to learn another course or more from scratch the next term. Finally, with 134 online course titles, it was difficult to support multiple course structures.

So, it was time to standardize. "We created a WebCT shell with a consistent course design," Stidom says. This permitted students to learn the interface and the course navigation once, then

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apply their skills to future online courses. It also opened the door to group orientation and support activities.

Mosquito Repellant #2: Consider a Live Orientation Course

Just because students elect to study online does not mean they do not visit campus. Many of Piedmont's students can visit the campus, and for them, the college designed a "live orientation course" designed to help even students with little or no computer skills learn to successfully navigate and complete an online course.

"We took one course and rolled it into a shell," says Stidom, explaining that students are then invited to come to a campus computer lab for a 90-minute orientation. Within the model course, Stidom can show the students how to navigate the course, find relevant documents, and even send an e-mail message with an attachment. When they leave, most feel confident about their ability to hit the ground running in an online course.

However, some students expressed a desire to have the material from the orientation course available for review and further tutorial. To this end, Piedmont is in the process of filming the live orientation course. The trainer pauses between each section so that the video can be divided into topic-specific segments. The college will then put this material online, where students can access it throughout the semester and watch needed topics again and again.

Mosquito Repellant #3: Never Leave Them Wanting More (Orientation, That Is)

Even with the live orientation course and the ability to access training materials later, some students still felt that they were not properly equipped to succeed in Piedmont's online courses. So, to satisfy this need, the college created a one-credit course called "Introduction to Online Learning."

One benefit of the course is that it helps round out a student's schedule; "It is helpful in summer when students need 10 credit hours for Pell Grants," says Stidom, noting that the extra credit will complete a schedule with three three-credit courses. But the real benefit is the in-depth experience with all facets of an online course.

The course is designed to allow students to experience every possible quiz type that they may encounter in an online course as well as every type of assignment that the system supports. There is also the opportunity to experience library work such as they might encounter online. The course even covers basic computer topics such as how to use a word processing program and save files in rich text format so they are readable by most other word processing programs. "After that, they can roll into a fully online course," Stidom says.

The four-week course also emphasizes the behaviors students will need in order to be successful. For example, students learn about habits in the online world that are analogous to ones in the traditional classroom. Just as it is important to contribute to discussions in class, it is equally important to post discussion comments online when they are desired as part of the class. And, while discussions tend to stay online for later review (unlike an in-person discussion, which cannot be recapped or relived), it is just as important to log in to an online course regularly as it is to have good attendance in the traditional classroom.

Mosquito Repellant #4: Use Help Desk Tickets to Track Service and Create a Knowledge Base

To provide support for students and faculty in the nearly 12 dozen online classes at Piedmont, the college has a two-person department. To help track and better deal with support requests, the department relies on the power of the Internet. This is increasingly important now, as all Piedmont courses have a WebCT component, multiplying the number of possible requests for support.

Users requiring support can log on and search a knowledge base to see if the answer to their question is available. If it is not, they can generate a help desk ticket that is then routed for attention.

The online help desk ticket goes immediately to a pool, which the office administrator directs to the appropriate person each day. Each ticket has a tracking number, so that students can refer to their question. When the ticket reaches the appropriate person, that person can e-mail the student with the answer and then use the completed question and answer to add another bit of information to the knowledge base, hopefully helping a future student find help more quickly.

For those students who are less computer savvy, a telephone help desk is available even on weekends to answer questions and talk them through the online creation of a help desk ticket. This kind of personal touch is often what is needed for some students to feel confident that their support requests have been heard.

By tracking student support questions as they make their way through the system and toward resolution, staff can easily update students about the status of their requests, alerting them, for example, if there is a delay in finding the correct information. "As long as a person knows they are at the top of your list, their anxiety is cut in half," say Stidom. It may even help turn that buzzing swarm of mosquitoes back into individuals who are a pleasure to work with. ●

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