

Planning Distance Education Programs

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Abstract: *This paper discusses some of the major steps, factors and issues that need to be considered in planning for and implementing distance education programs.*

Levy explained that The Internet and the World Wide Web , have made the process of obtaining an education without regard to time or location easier for the student. At the same time, they have provided more challenges for the colleges providing this education. In online distance learning, not only does the instruction occur via a computer system, usually over the Internet, but other educational processes occur via the computer as well. These educational processes are student services, training, and support. The transition to online distance learning, primarily driven by social change, is creating a paradigm shift in the way colleges are viewing teaching and learning (Rogers, 2000). Administrators, faculty, staff, and students realize that in order to successfully implement ODL, their colleges will need to reassess their programs (levy, retrieved, Apr, 2013).

Key words: *Distance education, program, planning ,accessibility .*

I. Introduction

There is little variance of opinion about the value of coordinated telecommunications planning. Hezel's (1987) study showed that most distance educators recognize economies of scale in the development and installation of services for multiple institutions. Even though the use is extensive there is a growing feeling that telecommunications is not being used to its full capacity. As a result, educators have strong inclinations to develop uniform systems that can equitably provide education to dispersed populations (Hezel, 1987; Ladd, 1989). Because of the high front-end costs of telecommunications, the cost of building new campus buildings, and the reduction of faculty and staff, there is a renewed interest in forming regional and state consortia. It is the community development model raised to an expanded geographic area so that educational communities can share their limited resources (from "A Technical Guide to Teleconferencing and Distance Learning," 3rd edition).

Pisel discussed planning distance education planning programs thoroughly he said Strategic planning, in general, is a critical process in the success, and often survival, of higher education institutions today. It is perhaps even more critical when looking at the implementation or expansion of distance learning programs. Allen and Seaman report that a growing number of institutions are looking at distance learning as a means to increase student access, attract students from outside traditional service areas, and to expand continuing or professional education initiatives (2007). They cite that only 18% of degree-granting institutions reported that they had no interest in pursuing distance learning programs as part of their strategic vision; and another 5% are not yet engaged in distance learning programs, but see them as part of their strategic future; which leaves 77% of these institutions with some level of engagement in distance learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

He continued, we know that distance learning expanded dramatically in the 1990s and has continued this growth in the new century. From 2002 to 2006 online enrollments increased from 9.7 to 19.8 percent of total enrollments nationwide and this growth is projected to continue its increase at least through 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Gallagher, 2002). Such continued expansion implies a progressively more competitive market, which begs the question of how higher education institutions will prepare to meet the demand and face increased competition.

Pisel argued that Strategic planning would appear to be a significant part of the solution for this challenge. The literature indicates that the vast majority of higher education institutions have a strategic plan and that distance learning programs will be more successful if there is a systematic strategic planning process (Fain, 2007; Stone et al., 2001; Kemp, 2000; Frances, Pumerantz, & Caplan, 1999). He added the same literature tells us that strategic planning, particularly in higher education, does not tend to be done well and what is often called strategic planning is actually focused at lower-level issues (Watkins, 2004; Buchanan, 2000; Kaufman, 1992). Meredith, Cope, and Lenning support this concern with a 1985 survey that found that while 87% of higher education institutions reported that they conducted strategic planning, the definition used by these institutions tended to be too broad. The result was that any planning performed was assigned somewhere within a vague definition of strategic planning. On further study they determined that only around one in three institutions actually performed bona fide strategic planning (1987).

While there are no comparative statistics, it can be argued that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) does more strategic planning than any higher education institution. However, unlike the tenured staffs of

academe, the typical military planner is only in that job for two to three years before moving on to another assignment. Dwight Eisenhower articulated the reason this approach works for DoD when he said, “plans are nothing, planning is everything” (Aaker, 1992, p. 3). It is the planning process that DOD emphasizes and educates its leaders in. This same approach can be applied to higher education through a strategic planning process model. Such a model is critical in enabling the leadership and management of higher education institutions to develop and implement strategic plans to successfully face an uncertain future (Pisel, Retrieved, jan,2013). The following discussion is taken from access elearning module they presented the ideas as follows :

Considering the breadth of challenges involved, planning for the accessibility of online courses is absolutely essential. Accessibility planning also prompts the instructor to access the course content from the student's point of view. Instructors have new opportunities to implement learning tools that can substantially improve the learning experience for students with and without disabilities as well as themselves.

Many instructors are anxious about developing an online course, but with thorough planning and preparation, an instructor can typically succeed in creating a rich and satisfying learning environment for all students in the class. The extra effort that it takes to design an accessible online course has multiple dividends for the instructor and for all students.

There are three main areas in which planning is key to accessibility:

- **Planning Saves Time and Money in New Course Design.** Putting together a new online course is a difficult undertaking and requires a great deal of planning and coordination. Including accessibility from the beginning as part of the planning process can save time and energy. Constructing an accessible template for all the HTML files used in a course is much simpler than going back later and making each individual web page accessible later. Building accessible PDF files from electronic documents is much easier than creating inaccessible PDF files through a scanner and then having to retype the content later. Making small changes in the course development process can result in large savings down the road.
- **Planning Helps Set Priorities For Course Retrofitting.** When faced with making an existing course accessible for a student with a disability taking the course for the first time, faculty members should work out an action plan in cooperation with the disability services staff and with the student with a disability. Drafting an action plan helps prioritize the most important items needed to provide accessibility to an individual student, as well as providing a structure for making future corrections to achieve complete accessibility.
- **Policy Development Encourages Planning Across Courses.** Having a strong campus-wide policy for accessibility in distance education provides an institutional commitment that all courses will be accessible for all students. Faculty members that buy in to the policy will be more likely to engage in the planning and training needed for accessibility. A strong evaluation and enforcement aspect written in the policy ensures that the policy will be carried out across departments (accesslearning.net).

Pisel noted that Strategic planning is part of a multilevel continuum of planning processes defined by the scope and duration of the planning. There are three distinct levels of interrelated planning—strategic, operational, and tactical—with strategic being the highest level of the planning trilogy (Kaufman, 2005). While ultimately, all three levels will be involved in the successful implementation of a distance learning program, the focus of this paper will be limited to the strategic level of planning.

Pisel explained further that Defining where one level stops and the other begins is generally a function of time and focus. Cope writes that “strategy evolves through a series of today’s decisions as they take identifiable patterns over time” (1986, p. 7). The length of time is a defining characteristic for planning. At the high end of the continuum, strategic planning projects forward as little as 3 to 5 years (Barry, 1998) or as much as 10 to 20 years (Herman, 1990; Hunt, et al., 1997; Rumble, 1986). Operational plans encompass from 1 to 5 years. At the other end of the spectrum, tactical plans have the shortest outlook of typically less than a year (Barry, 1998; Herman, 1990; Rumble, 1986). The importance of comprehending this trifurcation of planning is that misunderstanding and misapplication are often causal factors in the perceived failure of strategic planning.

He also said that Strategic planning, with its long-range perspective, enables the institution to identify where it is going and focuses on broad policy issues (Moscow, 1981). An institution plans strategically to identify how it will commit resources over the long term in order to accomplish its mission (Hunt, et al., 1997). The strategic planning process enables it to communicate and motivate (both internally and externally), pursue opportunities, and employ systematic decision-making (Brickner, 1977) (Pisel, retrieved, jan,2013).

There is a notion available that said in developing or adapting distance instruction, the core content remains basically unchanged, although its presentation requires new strategies and additional preparation time. Suggestions for planning and organizing a distance delivered course include:

- Begin the course planning process by studying distance education research findings. There are several research summaries available (see Moore & Thompson, 1990).
- Before developing something new, check and review existing materials for content and presentation ideas.
- Analyze and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the possible delivery systems available to you (e.g., audio, video, data, and print) not only in terms of how they are delivered (e.g., satellite, microwave,

fiber optic cable, etc.), but in terms of learner needs and course requirements before selecting a mix of instructional technology.

- Hands-on training with the technology of delivery is critical for both teacher and students. Consider a pre-class session in which the class meets informally using the delivery technology and learns about the roles and responsibilities of technical support staff.
- At the start of class initiate a frank discussion to set rules, guidelines, and standards. Once procedures have been established, consistently uphold them.
- Make sure each site is properly equipped with functional and accessible equipment. Provide a toll-free "hotline" for reporting and rectifying problems.
- If course materials are sent by mail, make sure they are received well before class begins. To help students keep materials organized, consider binding the syllabus, handouts, and other readings prior to distribution.
- Start off slowly with a manageable number of sites and students. The logistical difficulties of distant teaching increase with each additional site (Willis, University of Idaho).

Benefits and Barriers

Learning is a lifelong pursuit. Distance learning uses many technologies including telecommunication and computer systems for two-way interaction to promote lifelong learning without regard to geographic location or time zone.⁷ A few examples of the benefits of technology-enhanced learning are:

- For the institution, potential new students who reside outside the geographic area served are now a part of an expanded market.
- For the students, enormous resources are available at the click of a mouse. This can support a national and international student body that can share ideas and thoughts no matter where they live in the world.
- For the faculty, while up-front design and development time is usually increased, technology-enhanced courses are often easier to update and easier for learners to participate in.
- For both students and faculty, feedback and evaluation can be more immediate and accomplished more conveniently through e-mail and online conferencing.

However, a bewildering number of policies and procedures form barriers to the efforts of educators who wish to implement a program at a distance. This, along with the meager resources available on most college campuses, makes implementation of certificate or credit programs a formidable challenge. There are also issues of coordination and control for those on campus who are charged with standardizing educational efforts, reducing duplication of effort when it is cost effective to do so, and accounting to university or other governing agencies. For these administrators, the ad-hoc, grassroots efforts of faculty and departments to develop and implement technology-based learning may be viewed as maverick efforts that create planning and implementation challenges (Bergie & Schrum, 1998).

The literature lists major barriers to distance education program implementation (Pearson, 1990). Lack of successful institutional planning for the delivery of distance education programs at educational institutions represents a major barrier to implementation and success. The problem is that there was no validated process for planning for implementation of successful distance education programs. Pearson's study determined what critical factors leaders of successful distance education programs considered to be important prior to, during, and following implementation of the program at their institution.

Thirty administrators in education, distance education specialists and program providers were invited to participate in a three round Delphi to determine the 20 critical factors that should be considered in the planning process to implement a distance education program at an educational institution. The 30 key leaders were asked with each Delphi round to refine and rank those critical factors that they listed. The final round produced 20 critical factors in rank order.

Panelists also indicated that the factors were dependent upon each other for the ultimate success of the implementation of the program. The critical factors they generated contained a planning model which included the steps of purpose, philosophy, organizational structure, people, finances, equipment and facilities. The experts indicated that successful implementation depended upon the completion and thorough investigation of each of these critical factors.

The model set a high priority on human and fiscal resources that can serve as a model for the strategic planning of administrators of new programs in long distance instruction. Planning for the implementation of the program requires a major investment in time, people and funding. Serious consideration should be given to the number one critical factor: "identification of the need for the program." All the experts agree that without this identified need, an institution should not move ahead to purchase equipment, hire people, or even think about delivering a long distance program. Faculty involvement, incentives, motivation and training were ranked as serious issues for these successful institutions. According to these experts, the educator is a high priority in the delivery of long distance coursework. While the fear of teachers being replaced by the technology appears to be

an overriding concern and barrier for many institutions, the importance of the teachers remains critically high in the electronic classroom (from "A Technical Guide to Teleconferencing and Distance Learning," 3rd edition.

II. Conclusion

With advances in technology-driven delivery media, distance learning has done more than simply revolutionize the educational process. It has completely changed the strategic landscape. Institutions are no longer looking at a limited radius of a few hundred miles or the limits of state borders to gauge the competition or define the market. Competition and the market for the distance learning product are now worldwide. To succeed or survive in this environment, the distance learning institution needs to adopt a process that enables it to gird its position against threats and weakness while exploiting opportunities and strength. A strategic planning process, if properly executed, provides the answer to the challenges of today. However, Boar reminds us that the strategic planning process is more art than science and warns "the results of the process are only as good as the intellectual investment of the participants in thinking deeply about the issues. What makes the difference is insight, not rote execution of analytical steps" (1993, p. 15). The model outlined in this paper is intended to give detailed insight to the novice planner and a broad set of reminders to the more experienced, but in all cases, it will only be as good as the intellectual capital invested in the process(Pisel,retrieved ,jan,2013). Online distance learning programs and the technology and staff supporting them can undoubtedly be a costly venture for an institution. A lack in appropriate planning will only cause problems, both budgetary and otherwise, to occur as an ODL program is being implemented. The time it takes to appropriately plan for all areas of ODL will aid the institution in using its limited resources effectively, efficiently, and wisely.

The purpose of planning is to develop methods to align an institution with the environment (Rowley & Sherman, 2001). We are now in the information age where many aspects of our environment, especially in education, are moving online. Planning helps a college to grow and change in an organized, meaningful process (Rogers, 2001). Colleges that want to have an effective ODL program need to consider all aspects of providing an education, which are much more than simply putting classes online (Levy,retrieved ,Apr,2013).

Acknowledgment:

The author extends his appreciation to the college of education research center, deanship of scientific research, king Saud university for funding this research work.

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