

In: Handbook of Distance Education (Moore, M.), 2001, in press.

DISTANCE EDUCATION LEADERSHIP:
AN APPRAISAL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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A new role for the professoriate in the new millennium has been recognized and encouraged, especially as technology-assisted instruction has proliferated and changed the way teachers and students interact, as well as the manner in which educational entities must now do business to meet the demands of a digitized society. The literature describing the rapid evolution of distance education delivery systems over the past twenty years has frequently categorized it into three stages, from correspondence education, to technology-assisted education and, more recently, networked education. Although all three remain, and there are variants on each of these models, the theme is consistent that we are now witnessing dramatic changes in how instruction is designed and delivered over time and space. As this dynamic becomes more frequent and more pervasive, faculty have been admonished to be more receptive and adaptive to opportunities for playing exciting new roles in the distance education arena.

But it seems we have not yet paid adequate attention to new roles required of leaders within those institutions. Schools and colleges in the new millennium need leaders who have reflected on their experiences and internalized understandings about their own capacity to lead. This should apply no less to those in leadership roles in distance education settings within those institutions. The intended purpose here is to better understand the role and impact of leadership in distance education settings, examine recent research and writing in this area, and identify research lacunae needing further investigation; offer insights and suggestions for “Best Practices” to those involved in, or aspiring to leadership roles; and generate increased interest in the study of distance education leadership.

For purposes of this appraisal, leadership in distance education, as distinct from managerial functions in a variety of settings, is defined as a set of attitudes and behaviors that create conditions for innovative change, that enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas. It is possible to play a leadership role without necessarily being an expert in the field; a university president or elected public official who endorses, articulates and facilitates distance education goals crafted by others can have widespread impact. It is also important to note here that effective leadership practice is not confined to those in administrative roles; indeed, there are leaders without portfolio who, as influential thinkers, have significantly impacted their organizations and the field.

However persuasive the arguments might be that fundamental changes are occurring in the digital age that will profoundly impact the academic workplace, many still believe that there are too many alarmists who insist that the teaching/learning environment must be dramatically restructured, and they point out that the academy has been educating the citizenry in essentially the same fashion throughout other significant periods of change. But the issues to be addressed in order to remain competitive today are not quite so simple anymore. Institutional decision makers need to be informed and enlightened enough to ask fundamental questions that could well influence their institution’s future viability. How many faculty will we be needed in ten years?

Will the notion of classrooms survive? Is the present structure of the institution viable? Will teachers and students need to meet on campus anymore? Can the organization's decision makers respond to new competitors? The changing context of education and the aggressive encroachment into their domain by the powerful forces of digital commerce makes it impossible to ignore these questions. The confluence of competition, cost, technology and new consumer demands has insinuated new rules of engagement into an historically placid environment that has derived its strength from tradition rather than change. This set of circumstances is going to force all academic enterprises to rethink their place and purpose, not just in philosophical terms, but in very pragmatic ways as well. Indecision and immobility during these tumultuous times could prove fatal to a number of institutions, and it is the presence of effective distance education leadership in such an uncertain milieu that could well make the difference between success or failure.

Whether or not it embraces the trend, the academy is shifting from a campus-centric to a distributed education model, and while the administrative and instructional infrastructures that presently characterize most of our institutions won't necessarily disappear, they will be utilized in different ways. Those who dismiss this as a passing phase, perhaps do not recognize how pervasive these changes already are even within their own institutions, however mainstream they may still appear to be. In increasing numbers, students now simply want access to learning resources and an accepted credential to verify their learning, both commodities that have typically been aggregated and self-contained on a campus. But because distance education technologies now make it possible for students to get what they need while geographically separated from a fixed location, and with less human mediation, educational administrators continue to carry the burden of a bureaucracy and physical plant that are becoming increasingly vestigial and costly.

Thus, as the boundaries and distinctions between traditional and so-called non-traditional education are blurring, there is need for leaders able to function effectively in both contexts, and because many distance educators are among the few who have already moved within these overlapping circles, they are well positioned to play key roles. Many, having succeeded to some extent in "institutionalizing" open and distance education, are now able to move from the margins to the mainstream of their organizations, and assume new roles. However, for those now willing to enter, or who are thrust, into this milieu, is it readily apparent what attitudes are best suited to manage these distance education endeavors, what techniques are effective in directing this burgeoning phenomenon, and what type of leadership might be most appropriate to move the field to its next phase? It seems that we have yet to offer much guidance to educational administrators about how they can best contribute to this inexorable trend in their midst.

Certainly, we have chronicled the activities and accomplishments of several early pioneers as correspondence study was incorporated into the extension units of a few institutions, and we have recognized and recorded the efforts of a few influential activists, such as Lord Perry of Waalton, and Charles Wedermeyer, who advanced the notion of this new form of educational practice. Eventually, some of those who began teaching in this mode, and who directed the first distance education units being established at a few bold institutions, reflected on those early experiences, and began to articulate ideas and ideologies around the practice of teaching and learning at a distance. Based on their observations and experiences, a new body of literature gradually took form, mostly around pedagogical issues.

As the field took shape as a separate and distinct area of academic activity and academic inquiry, and more programs began to emerge, experientially based accounts of programs activities and accomplishments proliferated. Great efforts were made during this era to legitimize distance education by offering evidence that it was comparable to classroom-based instruction. As new technologies rapidly emerged to facilitate delivery through a variety of media, increased attention was given to analyses of which delivery system was most effective in aiding teachers to teach, and learners to learn, and to the impact of certain delivery systems on the nature of the interaction between teachers, students and the medium they utilized. Some attention was also given to case studies of various approaches to planning and management of selected programs, both successful and unsuccessful ones, and to evaluation methods appropriate to measure the outcomes and efficacy of these ventures. Yet, largely absent throughout this period of research and writing in this emerging field was any focused consideration of the dimension of leadership and its impact on the obvious growth and apparent success of distance education at literally hundreds of institutions worldwide.

Although educational structures often appear to be relatively static, they do gradually accommodate selected change, usually in response to external factors that eventually force decision makers to consider new strategic initiatives. Few institutional leaders today would not acknowledge that technological innovation is perhaps the single most compelling factor that is driving them toward new organizational structures, and for many, it represents the most significant change since their institution was established. Despite its seemingly inherent resistance to change, and an historical unwillingness to keep pace with the larger society, higher education has itself entered an industrialized phase, and the resulting changes in structure and systems will demand compatible leadership styles, including approaches that have not typically characterized educational management.

Otto Peters, one of the first to make important contributions to distance education theory, believes this industrialization is nowhere more evident than in this field. He has written extensively of how distance education practitioners have necessarily incorporated entrepreneurial elements such as a division of labor, marketing, management, quality control, and other measures that are more akin to operating a business than overseeing an academic enterprise (1994). To be sure, such characteristics exist in many educational organizations, but they are far less evident there than in most distance education environments. Indeed, Peters and others have often chosen to establish entirely new and distinct distance education entities based on an industrial model, such as the British Open University, rather than attempt to transform existing institutions. Ray McTarnaghan, founding president of Florida Gulf Coast University speaks insightfully, in an interview by the American Journal of Distance Education (1998), of establishing that distance education institution in 1997, noting that such large-scale endeavors must create a distinctive culture with a clearly articulated mission that is shared by all stakeholders, especially faculty, if they are to succeed.

James Hall offers a thoughtful analysis of what new institutional structures are emerging within which leaders will be required to function. As traditional and distance education institutions converge, leaders who have been dealing with discreet programs identified with their institutions, will now have to manage networked institutions where proprietary lines between programs and students are merging, and participants shift among multiple formal and informal learning venues, with no single institution as a point of reference. As alliances develop and networking expands, to increasingly include for-profit entities, the mega- university is evolving

toward what Hall defines as the meta-university. He argues that bold and creative leadership is required to manage as well as evaluate these emerging new structures, driven in large measure by networking technology (1998).

Typically, those suggesting ways to attract and develop new leaders into distance education might encourage mentoring by senior administrators, attendance at professional meetings, seeking out relevant graduate courses, and keeping current with literature in the field. But this latter suggestion of consulting the literature as a source of guidance for aspiring leaders, presumes that there is a worthwhile body of work available. Ten years ago, Duning undertook an in-depth review of the literature on managerial leadership in distance education. At that point, she asserted that this area had attracted far less attention than other dimensions of the field. While there have been descriptions of program planning processes, little examination had occurred of leadership, however defined, within a larger distance education context. Duning also noted that, while there is a substantial body of knowledge about non-traditional settings, it is almost entirely unknown to academe (1990). As might be expected, much distance education literature that does gain attention is denigrated. For example, a 1999 report entitled "What's the Difference: A Review of Contemporary Research on Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education" (not surprisingly, sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, both long time opponents of distance education and its perceived encroachment into the domain of the professoriate), argues that the overall quality of distance education research is questionable, and does not ask the right questions.

A decade ago Duning and others assessing the status of scholarly inquiry into the area of distance education management concluded that the field lacked a theoretical framework to guide our understanding of distance education practices, and that of all the areas of study in distance education, management still appeared to be the most neglected. We now undertake the task of re-examining the status of this vacuum to determine if it has been filled; to ask; if not, why; and if it has, is it a useful contribution to theory and practice in the field.

This author dutifully reviewed more recent literature in the field by conducting a content analysis of titles and abstracts of articles appearing in two American publications during the past four years; the American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE), and DEOSNEWS, an electronic journal, both published by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Pennsylvania State University. Also examined were the 1998 and 1999 issues of a European journal, Open Learning, edited by Greville Rumble, and the contents from 1997 through 1999 of Distance Education, an international journal published by the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia. Volumes 10 through 13 of the AJDE revealed that, with the conspicuous exception of one issue (Summer 1998), which was devoted entirely to distance education leadership (edited by this author), no other authors wrote specifically about activities and outcomes that seemed to have any obvious connection to leadership. Volumes 6 through 10 of DEOSNEWS contain only two titles that have any leadership connotations. It is of some interest to note that one issue contained a review of literature classified as "administration and organization," offering the possibility that leadership would be addressed, even if only tangentially. But this was not the case. Although the titles in the European and Australian journals included several articles related to staff development and the economics of distance education, no articles appeared on the topic being searched. Thus, we conclude that over a four years period, several widely read sources of research and writing in distance education theory and practice offer us very little indeed on the topic of leadership.

We can optimistically take note, however, of a new journal introduced in January, 1999, the *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, published by the Taylor-Francis Group (London), and edited by Duncan Waite. Although the first three volumes seem to favor school leadership issues, and a few titles suggest leadership in this particular venue is rather broadly defined, it nonetheless provides a promising new forum wherein distance education practitioners and researchers may now make contributions in a professional publication dedicated entirely to educational leadership.

Another useful device for gauging how popular a specific topic seems to be at a given moment is to conduct a content analysis of presentations at major national and international distance education conferences. A number of these papers eventually find their way into the published literature in the field, and can thus serve as indicators of what topics are currently in vogue. This activity was undertaken through an examination of titles and abstracts of papers presented at the European Distance Education Network, Bologna, Italy (1998); the distance education conference sponsored by the University of South Australia ; (2000); and the ICDE World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education in Duesseldorf, Germany (April, 2001).

Not unexpectedly, the interest and attention focused on the general theme of distance education management in general and leadership in particular, was conspicuously thin. The Bologna conference, entitled “Universities in a Digital Era-Transformation, Innovation and Tradition,” offered 137 papers and workshops on a wide range of topics, including several under the category of organization and policy. Although several of these referred to various approaches used to plan and implement particular projects, none directly addressed matters concerning leadership per se. The Australia conference program, entitled “Distance Education-An Open Question?”, listed 133 presentations. Again, of these, not one, based on a reading of the abstracts, appeared to address issues related to leadership. One keynote address did discuss technology driven change in education and did contain a few comments germane to distance education leaders. The world conference in Germany, entitled “The Future of Learning-Learning for the Future: Shaping the Transition”, received a total of 624 proposals for presentations. From this enormous body of work, it could be presumed that certainly a few authors would likely contribute to the leadership theme as their area of special interest. Several of these proposals were placed in the categories of Strategies and Policies, and Management and Logistics and, no doubt, a reading of full texts would reveal some content related to the leadership theme (Interestingly, the one session dealing specifically with the topic discusses an online course on the subject of leadership).

Finally, with respect to the current body of written work, there is, of course, an increasingly steady supply of new books on distance education, many offering a chapter or two on aspects of administration and organization. For example, Moore and Kearsley’s volume on a systems approach to distance education does contain a chapter on administration with brief but useful discussions on such topics as staffing and planning, but nothing specifically on leadership. An examination of new books on open and distance learning reviewed and/or received by the journals noted above, yielded no titles that deal primarily with organizing and leading distance education activities. Also, the subject index of ten prominent books on open and distance education published since 1993 were reviewed; none contained any listings under the subject of leadership, and only two listed administration or management. Thus, if the literature on the management of distance education is relatively thin, we can hardly be sanguine about the

prospect of finding much on the more specific aspects of leadership in this field. Yet, it is encouraging to observe that there are now occasional volumes appearing that focus more exclusively on topics that flirt with the leadership theme. For example, a review of the data base on Open and Distance Education publications, edited by Keith Harry of the British Open University, listed three book titles devoted to open and distance education leadership and management (Paul 1990; Duning, Keckerix and Zabrowski 1993; and Freeman 1997). And while these works are mainly intended to offer strategies for developing and directing open learning initiatives, rather than formulating more theoretical constructs, this material will nonetheless certainly help close the gap in the literature on leadership.

In summing up this brief review of scholarly presentations and writing, it should be acknowledged that, within the body of work receiving this cursory examination, there may well be more attention given to the leadership theme than we were able to discern, and no doubt some authors would protest that their contributions do address, at least in part, some dimension of leadership. We suspect that this may be a legitimate claim, yet we can state with some degree of confidence, that at least 70 percent of the work reviewed and noted here, in both conference and publication venues, falls into the domain of case studies of specific programs; a great many, in fact, use the case study nomenclature in their titles. Yet, it must be asked, even if some content related to leadership is included, how useful this reportage is in contributing to the body of work on leadership theory and practice or, in truth, to any other important aspects of distance education.

It should be asked at this juncture if the paucity of scholarly material related to leadership in distance education is compensated for, to some extent, by the availability of material in other areas of educational theory and practice? It is within the area most closely alligned with distance education (i.e., adult and continuing education) that we can find a somewhat promising answer. As with distance education, there is a long and impressive history in continuing education, but in this particular area, we find a considerably more developed and rather impressive portfolio relating not only to the planning and management of continuing education activities, but also focused attention to the area of leadership. Simerly (1987) and others have contributed a number of accomplished studies that, in the absence of, and until there is, a more fully articulated body of work on distance education leadership, can be quite useful to distance educators. It will be interesting to observe if some contributors to the literature on continuing education will now offer similar insights in distance education where these endeavors intersect. This is quite possible since many distance education initiatives are spawned within continuing education units where there is often a spirit for entrpenurial and innovtive practices. It is also worthwhile to note that, in the area of elementary and secondary school administration, there is now a considerable amount of attention given to leadership topics in the literature frequented by these educators, and this could influence greater awareness by those in other areas.

One is tempted to conclude, from this review, that the subject of leadership in distance education is being actively avoided, in favor of the usual fare - reports and case studies of specific projects and programs that go into excrutiating detail about the life (and sometimes death) of particular initiatives at selected institions. Unfortunately, the typical treatment of these accounts seldom offer any useful insights about distance education practice that might be generalized for possible relevance and application in other similar settings, and almost never is there any thoughtful analysis about the impact of leadership, or the lack of it, in affecting the outcomes chronicled in these studies.

What might be some plausible explanations for this paucity of interest in an area of study that, until now, seems to be largely neglected while, in other organizational settings, most notably the for-profit corporate sector, there is enormous interest in topics related to organizational leadership, as seen in best selling books and high priced seminars? First, those researching and writing in the field may just now be getting beyond the phase in its history where there has been an inordinate amount of interest focused on analyses of how distance instruction compares with more conventional methods and, as new technologies were rapidly deployed, how these various learning environments worked compared to one another. A related factor may be that most who have written in the field thus far have themselves been academics who preferred to devote their writing to pedagogical issues rather than administrative matters.

Second, there has been, in fact, a reasonable amount of attention given to the planning and administration of distance education programs for quite some time. And although most of this work to date has been confined to accounts of specific case histories, this treatment has perhaps been considered adequate enough without getting involved in the more esoteric domain of leadership. Related to this is the fact that the concept of “leadership” is not widely recognized as a separate and distinct element of administrative practice or study. This is especially so outside of the U.S. In Germany, for instance, where what is referred to as the “Führer Complex” is still prevalent, leadership is not discussed, or at least, not studied in the field of education. Prominent European theorists such as Otto Peters and Beorje Holmberg have made important contributions to the organization of distance education, but they and others have not identified leadership as a discreet topic for analysis.

Third, there are those who simply dismiss the concept as one that is not especially useful for advancing the study or the practice of distance education. It is seen as an elusive idea that does not readily lend itself to reliable analysis, or to a universal set of desirable behaviors safely applicable to the idiosyncracies of each situation. Further, just as some argue that there are no characteristics attributable to distance education that are uniquely its own within the field, they likewise believe the question of leadership within distance education merits no special scrutiny or analysis as a distinct area of study.

What, ultimately, is the usefulness of the body of work accumulated thus far on the subject of distance education leadership? Although most of the work that does exist is largely confined to an occasional book chapter, conference presentation, journal article, or “Principles of Good Practice” lists, perhaps it can be stated with some confidence that distance education practitioners currently in, or moving toward leadership roles do have a variety of growing resources available to guide their practice. Assuming that there may be some value for the field of distance education if there is increased attention to leadership issues, what can be done to generate more interest in the topic? At the very least, those planning publications and meetings related to distance education could actively solicit contributions on the subject, and dedicate entire conferences, journal issues, or books to Leadership in Distance Education.

Beyond some useful literature in continuing education, as previously noted, are there resources from other areas of study that could compensate for this void we allege still persists in distance education? We suggest that Donald Schon’s important study of reflective practice has significant implications for distance educators, no less so than for the several professions Schon uses to illustrate his theories (1983). Schon makes a provocative case for developing mature

practitioners by insisting that they actively engage in a process of on-going systematic reflection of their work during their practice, rather than at a later point when they may no longer be able to make appropriate interventions to enhance their effectiveness. This seems an especially worthwhile process for an entire generation of distance education practitioners who now have substantial personal and institutional experience, and are still highly active. By engaging in “reflection in action,” these veterans have the opportunity, as Schon aptly describes it, to define new truths, not only for their own benefit, but for the entire profession as well. This effort and its results have the potential to make important new contributions to the field and offer insights into its leadership.

Is there, in fact, any value in attempting to craft, if not a bona fide theoretical framework for leadership practice that is unique to distance education, at least a set of guiding principles that, at this moment in which distance education has evolved to a new role and status, can well serve its providers and consumers? Those responsible for mapping new directions for moving distance education practice to the next stage of its development might be somewhat heartened by the recent attempts by several groups, including professional associations and accrediting bodies, to define so-called “Principles of Good Practice.” The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, for example, has developed and promulgated a “Policy for the accreditation of academic degree and certificate programs offered through distance education”(1998). These standards for quality are certainly useful in providing suggested criteria by which we can plan new programs, measure what we are doing in such areas as matching technology with needs, providing appropriate student support, implementing evaluation measures, and the like. In the absence of a more precise theoretical framework, such principles do offer, at least, some insights about what constitutes effective leadership practice, and how it ultimately impacts the success or failure of our collective efforts. But producing checklists of helpful hints about what to do and what not to do hardly seems adequate to the tasks ahead.

While the most common mode of assessing progress in the development of a body of knowledge in an area of study is the usual review of the literature, it is possible that a brief survey of other activities related to distance education leadership may yield some useful information that could compensate for the apparent lack of any substantial corpus of written work thus far on the subject. For example, there are a number of centers for distance education housed at colleges and universities (e.g., the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at The Pennsylvania State University) which sponsor symposia, workshops, publications and programs of study which, while not necessarily activities focused entirely on leadership, do contribute to greater awareness and understanding of distance education practice. Also, professional development sessions on distance education administration are increasingly in evidence. Several institutions now offer week long summer institutes that do, in fact, specifically address distance education leadership (e.g., the Institute for the Management of Distance Education, offered by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications; see <http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/Events/>). These presumably are serving a useful purpose in providing experienced and aspiring leaders with insights and guidance. More importantly, a number of institutions, particularly in the U.S., now offer certificate and graduate level programs of study with curricula in distance education, including courses specifically designed to prepare leaders for the field. Just one example of this newly emerging field of study is a Master of Distance Education offered online by the University of Maryland University College, which also offers a related Certificate program in collaboration with Oldenburg University’s Center for

Distance Education (Germany). This degree program is attracting an international cohort of students, and has waiting lists for admission (See: <http://www.umuc.edu/mde>).

It is interesting to speculate on what impact these curricula might eventually have in creating a distinct body of work that offers a more theoretical approach regarding leadership, rather than the prevailing emphasis on practical applications of administrative techniques. Preparing candidates for careers specifically in distance education through professional education programs has potentially significant implications as, for the first time, the field will acquire a new generation of individuals in leadership roles who did not “come up through the ranks” during a period when the field was just emerging as a recognizable and viable area of professional practice. In addition to introducing new leadership styles and strategies in their chosen field, this cohort might contribute important new theoretical perspectives as well.

Having now entered a new millennium in which the promise of ever advancing technologies is likely to present provocative new challenges as well as opportunities, it is tempting to ask if there is perhaps a leadership style that is most appropriate for distance education. While it may be too bold to suggest a single best approach, it might be useful to at least identify those situations where distance education leaders are most likely to find themselves in the near term, and consider those strategic perspectives that might be most compatible and productive in those settings. These include more collaborative partnerships, such as alliance building with for-profit companies more typically seen as competitors; more meta-university arrangements, where networking structures make parochial interests a handicap; more expansive markets requiring a truly global view well beyond one’s usual environs; more free-standing virtual entities utilizing asynchronous formats; and more exclusively online delivery systems rather than mixed-media approaches. These would seem to be a few of the venues in which there will be need for high performing leaders.

While we should perhaps avoid committing to any particular leadership style as the most suitable, certainly the concept of transformative leadership advocated by Bennis and Nanus (1985) remains a particularly compelling model for distance education leaders today because organizational practices long entrenched in educational entities urgently require reshaping to adapt to environmental changes, most notably the emergence of a worldwide market for students, but also an exponential increase in potential competitors for those students. Transformational leaders in education must be capable of helping its stakeholders (e.g., administrators, faculty, students, trustees), recognize that there are obvious benefits in doing business in new ways, and that they can no longer afford the luxury of adopting new ways of teaching and learning in an incremental fashion to which academics are so accustomed and comfortable in doing. To be sure, there are no facile formulae that can be matched with particular settings that will ensure infallible leadership performance; ultimately, a sense of vision, resoluteness, and the ability to operationalize concepts are requisite to succeed.

Advocates and initiators of distance education no longer need be seen, or to view themselves, as mavericks on the fringes of their institutions, but rather as contributors who can play a key role in bringing their institution to the next stage of its development. This new status among those responsible for “alternative” programs is now more common, as institutional decision makers become more aware, often with some alarm, that they may not be as relevant and responsive as their competition is to the demands of diverse new market segments seeking access to learning opportunities. Leaders can capitalize on their institution’s growing need to remain competitive

in a broader arena, by demonstrating how distance education offerings, once relegated to the margins, can now be central to an institution's strategic planning for success and, in some cases, even survival in the new global marketplace. And while some might object to the notion of appealing to an organization's self interest as a means of advancing distance education, the fact is that an innovative new idea very often succeeds, not because it is noble, but because it can serve a useful purpose, both for the larger system as well as for its proponents.

Leaders must create conditions conducive to energy, initiative and innovation in their particular milieu, and bring others along, both above and below them in the organizational hierarchy. This requires, in addition to transformational leadership, what Hershey and Blanchard call "situational leadership, with its ability to diagnose the organization at that moment and determine its stakeholders' readiness for moving in a new direction (1977). In fusing these two approaches, the leader diagnoses the unique situation in the immediate environment, and then transforms it as far along the change continuum as necessary, through a collaborative style. In this way, a climate less resistant to, and more receptive toward distance education is created, often in an incremental fashion as the situation is gradually transformed.

Since few distance educators have the opportunity to create entirely new free-standing entities exclusively designed for online or other delivery systems, but rather labor within institutions positioned somewhere along the continuum between conventional and alternative infrastructures- what might be called a hybrid model- most eventually face the conundrum of whether or not to promote the notion of a central unit to coordinate distance education activities, or at least to foster new initiatives. One argument is that, in the absence of a focal point for such endeavors, individual faculty will likely tinker indefinitely and inefficiently on their own with a variety of instructional technology options intended to augment their classroom-based courses, but this approach will not ultimately result in a system-wide adoption of distance education in any comprehensive and cost-effective manner.

And those institutions that do incorporate small-scale distance education initiatives, but contract out many specialised functions that allow them to retain their existing infrastructure, are often seen as suspect because they can conveniently tout their involvement in distance education without any real institutional shift in its direction.

Another view is that this incremental process of individual initiatives becoming increasingly prevalent within an institution is what will eventually lead to a critical mass of participation which ultimately creates the demand for more institutional commitment and support. Proponents of this latter strategy maintain that it is the pattern that typifies most institutions' progression toward distance education today, and that premature administratively driven initiatives will only generate further faculty resistance and impede any prospects for longer term change. Bernath provides interesting insights into this dilemma, using various European models to illustrate the positive and negative forces at play when attempting to integrate distance education into conventional universities (1996). For opinion leaders in distance education, this particular issue can be one of the most critical, and their insights and advice on the best option will test their credibility and influence within their organizations.

To succeed in any of these contexts, a macro view is critical. Distance education leaders must not be overly preoccupied with nurturing their own existing programs, and providing the horsepower for only their initiatives; they must also insinuate themselves into the academic mainstream and the inner circle of decision makers responsible for bringing the entire

organization to a new place. Distance educators should no longer see themselves as protectors and survivors of isolated programs for which they have labored mightily, but rather as valued strategic partners who can enable the larger institution, often long seen as the enemy, to catch up with them and emulate their practices and successes. In short, distance education managers must see themselves, and be seen, as educational leaders who, through less directing and more motivating, facilitate the articulation, development, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by a wider academic community.

But leaders must disabuse themselves of the idea that their programs, however more widely accepted and adopted within their institutions than in the past, are now seen as more legitimate (i.e., more equivalent to classroom-based instruction). It is more likely that, in most instances, these alternative delivery methods are now more widely recognized as effective means of capturing a larger market share of prospective consumers and generating additional revenues. Distance education activists can be convincing advocates because colleges and universities, as in the past, must still plan their future in a continuing context of uncertainty. Since much of that uncertainty in this era has been brought about by the rapid emergence of instructional technology, this phenomenon positions experienced open learning practitioners to be far more influential in shaping a strategic agenda for the next decade than was usually the case in the past.

If their institutions still do not “get it”, then distance education planners must diligently seek opportunities to convey a sense of urgency that what they currently are doing, perhaps somewhat unnoticed and serving a relatively small proportion of overall enrollments, nonetheless represents a model for replication elsewhere if further institutional growth and success is to be realized. But this requires that past successes be touted. By doing so, distance education can now, more convincingly than ever before, be cast as an activity to be emulated elsewhere in the organization. This is already happening in the area of instructional design, where many faculty may be unaware of just how much learning from a distance is taking place through their own institution, and who could perhaps care less about it, but are nonetheless eager to acquire new technology tools and training to augment their classroom-based courses.

Much of higher education is still characterized by “Old Millennium” thinking that has functioned for a long time in an old economy in which decisions are made regarding the number of sections required for a particular course to optimize faculty workloads. In the new economy, where information is the product to be delivered to a broader market in less time and at lower cost, distance education activists must help their organizations ask the right questions and to see that both the institution and its teaching personnel can thrive if they are willing to find their appropriate niche through “New Millennium” strategic thinking. In an earlier era, distance educators typically assumed a warrior mentality to advance their cause; today, they can be more effective as brokers facilitating the expansion or replication of programs and services they championed during more contentious times.

Although effective distance education leadership requires a presence and participation in a wider arena, playing a role in the macro environment cannot be at the expense of attending to the details of this complex enterprise. The tasks to be overseen by managers of both small and large, new and established distance education projects, represent a formidable repertoire of skills which need constant attention and refinement. To identify but a few areas: needs assessment, market analysis, strategic planning, fitting technology to needs, operationalizing ideas, resource mobilization, introducing online infrastructure, policy formulation, training and support for

faculty, collaborating with partners, program evaluation and accreditation, and mentoring the next generation of leaders- all are tasks requiring vigilance and guidance.

The presumed dominance of online teaching-learning environments for the foreseeable future raises a further question: will a particular style of leadership be more effective in this milieu than in earlier ones? Are there any “best practices” for leading distance education initiatives and activities in the online domain? Are some of the complex roles exercised by the previous generation of leaders less relevant now than in earlier periods of the movement? Regardless of the medium in use, it would seem that the roles of conceptualizer, implementor, and evaluator are still viable ones to play. Perhaps less critical in the repertoire of today’s leaders are the roles of advocate, reformer and technician that occupied so much time in the past. Too often, those presiding in decision making forums engage in deliberations long on complex technological options and bereft of fundamental pedagogical issues. The distance education leader, whatever other roles he or she may assume, must always maintain the essential role of educator.

A final caution is perhaps appropriate for those who may feel best equipped to provide the creative new leadership the field warrants. Paradoxically, it seems that the past experience and longevity of some distance educators actually works against them in providing leadership for a new age of learning. Ever more powerful interactive technology has resulted in the diminution of distance, and it has reduced the decision making window demanded of institutions to respond to a new class of educational consumers who are willing to spend money to save time. Yet many who may have pioneered distance education at their institutions may still be preoccupied with bridging the distance gap which effectively no longer exists. Distance education advocates who, in the past, put their energy into debating the virtues of out-of-classroom learning, must now play a more valuable role in facilitating discussions and decisions of much wider scope and more profound consequences for the future of their institutions. There must now be a shift in leaders’ focus from the micro issues around technology and its impact on learners to a more macro view of institutions and the impact of technology in this larger context. Thoughtful attention to issues in this wider arena will contribute to appropriate action that will ultimately impact the teaching-learning process, regardless of what technology is utilized.

It is essential that veteran as well as emerging leaders be prepared for these new roles, not just by relying on instinct derived from past experience, but also from new insights acquired through greater attention to leadership as a discreet area of study and practice for the important work ahead. The potential contribution of distance educators in a widening sphere of influence is too significant at this juncture to relegate to the periphery of others’ thinking, and of our vision of where we want to go and where we want to take others.

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