Administrative Concerns for Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a distance learning program is a significant effort. The prepossessing condition for such an undertaking is that distance learning be consistent with the mission and vision of the institution. Institutional endorsement is critical.

The principal concerns for the implementation of a distance learning program are suggested by Gilbert's (1978) model of human competence (Chevalier, 2003). The model proposes three co-requisite conditions: information, equipment, and motivation. Each of these has both an external and internal complement. The administration of an institution represents the external complement, while the faculty represent the internal complement. The two constituencies are mutually dependent in their respective contributions to meeting the three co-requisite conditions in order to achieve a successful distance learning experience. The three co-requisite conditions and their complements must be met to achieve successful program implementation.

It is useful to examine each of the co-requisite conditions and how they relate to both the external complement (the administration) and the internal complement (the faculty). Use this framework to manage the administrative concerns that must be addressed in a nascent distance learning program.

INFORMATION

The administration must have clear goals, purposes, and expectations for its DL program and must communicate them to the faculty. Information from the administration should express the institutional vision for the distance learning program and how the pro-

gram is related to the institutional mission. It should also communicate expectations for how the vision is going to be achieved and what the role of faculty is expected to be in achieving the mission.

The faculty in turn must be aware of, understand, and acknowledge the information from administration. Beyond receiving the information, faculty must also understand and share in the institutional vision in order to integrate this new pursuit into the existing culture. In short, communication must be successful within and between the respective groups. Communication exists in various forms; understanding them helps in the management of communication and program planning.

Types of Information

Beneath the umbrella of information, the mission is the basis for the administrative expectations upon the faculty. The expectations, in turn, are the bases for policies and procedures that need to be established as they are for residential instruction. It is useful to organize the areas of information and policy by matching these matters to the cultures that typically comprise an institution. The areas and examples of the topics that need to be communicated follow.

Bergquist (1992) suggested a model of institutional culture comprising four areas: "negotiation", "collegialism", "management", and development. This model is useful for categorizing the types of communication that occur within an organization. The subculture of negotiation concerns the ways in which constituencies within an organization work toward common goals. The collegial subculture concerns matters related to the social and professional status that will be assigned to the new program. The managerial subculture concerns the administrative

decision making required during program planning. The subculture of "development" concerns the new demands the emerging program will place on the status quo, and how these demands will be managed through professional development, support services, and ongoing evaluation.

The four subcultures, and the respective stakeholders in each, should be engaged during initial planning for distance learning programs to assure consistency of message and mission. It can be expected that institutional context may govern the specific examples within each culture. Meeting the condition of communicating information is critical in achieving competence in a distance learning program. Another condition is equipment.

EQUIPMENT

The choice of delivery medium directly influences the equipment used including hardware, software, and strategic planning or methodology for DL. The administration is obliged to provide all relevant types of equipment, beyond which the equipment must be readily available, accessible, and usable. Equipment is obtained either by purchase or donation, maintained, and replaced per a schedule based on usefulness, novelty of features, and life expectancy.

In addition to the equipment, there must be personnel to support it. These include technical staff to repair and maintain equipment and staff who interact with vendors, test software, maintain license agreements, and upgrade software. There must be personnel who will not only train for operating equipment, but will also teach the effective use of equipment for instruction.

Use technology in support of instruction. Do not design instruction to use technology. Guide faculty to focus instruction and the decisions to use technology upon the characteristics of their learners, the availability of distance media, effective methodologies for distance instruction, and their approach to assessment.

Just as administration must provide human capital to manage the equipment, faculty themselves serve as their own human capital. Instructors teaching at a distance must have the ability; the physical, emotional, and practical capacity; and the inclination to teach in this medium. They must also participate in the training.

MOTIVATION AND INCENTIVE

Change is linked to motivation, and incentive is the external complement to the internal phenomenon of motivation. In its most general sense, incentive and motivation refer to the reasons why individuals dedicate their time and effort to what they do. As with most human behavior, faculty members' engagement in distance learning initiatives are both internally and externally motivated (Wolcott, 2003). In order for incentives to work, apply the ones to which individuals will respond.

Faculty members most often respond to and are motivated by incentives that address their internal needs. The incentives that are relevant to faculty adopting distance technologies include intellectual challenge, personal motivation to use technology, the opportunity to reach new student audiences, and the chance to develop new ideas.

Betts' (1998) examination of faculty opposed to participation in distance education found that compensation, recognition, and credit toward tenure and promotion were deemed important. Several participants concluded that the presence of such incentives would move them more favorably toward distance initiatives. Salary increases were noted highest among respondents. The least motivating extrinsic factors were the requirement to participate (Kirk & Shoemaker, 1999) and pressure from administrators (Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx 1999).

In general, faculty who teach at a distance regard it favorably, and faculty attitudes improve as experience with distance education increases (Betts, 1998; Wolcott, 2003). As faculty members find their skills improving, concerns are reduced and the intrinsic rewards of online instruction become influential. Some faculty members also discover the added benefit that the quality of their residential instruction improves as their distance instruction skills improve. It may be easier for a distance program to retain faculty than it is to attract them, and this should be considered when deciding where to allocate resources and time.

An incentive is successful—it motivates—when individuals respond to it. Institutional vision must reflect an awareness of the appropriate incentives and faculty motivation, and plan for them accordingly.

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