Chapter 3
An Inquiry into the Policies and Practices for Online Education at One U.S. Doctoral/ Research–Extensive University:
A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case study examines the policies and practices for online education at one doctoral/research-extensive university. It uses interview findings from the Chief Information Officer (CIO) as well as key secondary sources to better understand these policies and practices. The context for the study is one of dynamic interest in online education and reduced funding for public higher education nationwide. There were six recurring themes throughout the primary and secondary data. These were: 1) students; 2) technology; 3) teachers; 4) services; 5) resources; and 6) costs. These emergent themes are analyzed using the standards for online programs established by the agencies that accredit all American universities. The participating university was found to be a leader and innovator in the application of online and technology-mediated higher education. The case study methodology is offered as a template for the further study of online higher education. Applications in secondary and transition programs are also noted.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Issues in Online Higher Education

There is currently a lack of evidence-based research to build a well-informed understanding of the critical institutional components and leadership choices that shape the policies and practices for online education at American universities. In 2007, the Commission on Colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) that accredits all U.S. colleges and universities created the components for the document, Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2007). The Commission addressed the need for planning and assessing high standards of quality in U.S. university online programs, and defined the critical areas of concern in U.S. online higher education programs. These consist of: 1) institutional context and commitment, 2) curriculum and instruction, 3) faculty support, 4) student support, and 5) evaluation and assessment. In drawing its conclusion, the Commission called for a reexamination of the online practices of U.S. universities in light of the newly established best practices for quality online higher education programs.

Within an extensive body of research in online education, research on best practices as defined by the Commission on Colleges of the U.S. Department of Education is scarce (Bruce, 2010). This lack of research has increasingly affected program delivery in terms of the quality of the curriculum, pedagogy, and the assessment associated with online education. According to a recent report of more than 2,500 colleges and universities surveyed nationwide (Allen & Seaman, 2008), approximately 3.94 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in fall 2007. The growing number of students needing higher education has also placed increasing pressures on the university community to respond. Statistics indicate that online distance education has grown at all levels. A recent study by Bruce

(2010) indicated that almost all higher education institutions described online education as important to their long-term strategic planning. Evidently, the advance of online education has radically redefined higher education in terms of its curricular boundary and student composition. In the meanwhile, it has significantly changed the landscape in higher education with respect to its learning concepts, strategies and applications (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Zheng, 2009; Zheng & Dahl, 2009). Amidst the rapid growth of online higher education, there is a lack of general knowledge about the existing policies and practices pertaining to online learning in higher education. Therefore, the study of the existing policies and practices in higher education distance learning is warranted.

The purpose of this study is to inform the online learning community, especially secondary and post secondary institutions, of the status of online learning in terms of policies and practices in higher education by presenting a case study on one U.S. doctoral/research-extensive university. The case study uses a metrics containing standards of quality online education recognized by the United States (U.S.) Department of Education. The focus is on investigating: 1) institutional context and commitment, 2) curriculum and instruction, 3) faculty support, 4) student support, and 5) evaluation and assessment. The case study represents the first qualitative research that investigates the institutional policies and practices in online education, specifically in the five areas mentioned above. Further, it examines the existing institutional policies and practices and its self-reported compliance with the U.S. accrediting agencies' standards for quality. As such, it is an important introduction to our understanding of a leading U.S. public university's relationship to compliance with accrediting institution requirements across the five key areas of online policy and practice. It also represents a comprehensive and targeted template for further study in this dynamically growing area of higher education.

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