

The Administration of Online and Distance Education

Gary E. Miller

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The advent of online learning has transformed dramatically the administration of distance education in higher education. As online learning becomes ubiquitous in both campus-based and distance education—and also becomes a tool to facilitate inter-institutional research collaboration and relations with industry—online distance education has moved closer to the mainstream of the academic community. This raises a variety of challenges for the institutions and for online and distance education administrative leaders.

BACKGROUND

Distance education in the United States began as correspondence study, taking advantage of the 19th century “information highway”—Rural Free Delivery—which was still experimental in 1892 when The Pennsylvania State University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin launched the first correspondence study programs. Throughout the 20th century, a variety of new media were added to the correspondence study model. Broadcast radio and television, film, audiotapes, and videocassettes all served to enrich the delivery of content (often at the cost of limiting access), but these media types did not change the basic model of what came to be called independent study by correspondence. Video conferencing, which began in the 1980s, allowed academic units to reach into industry to deliver graduate programs in engineering and other professional fields, but it was mostly seen as a separate kind of distance education.

Throughout the last century, distance education tended to be situated in two types of institutions: large public research universities, especially land grant universities, and, since the 1960s, community colleges. Within these institutions, distance education typically was administered by the Continuing Education unit.

Online learning, however, has transformed distance education, largely eliminating or dramatically changing all other forms of distance education as it has grown.

TRANSFORMING THE ADMINISTRATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Driving Forces

Several variables have driven change in the administration of distance education: (1) the increasing number and diversity of institutions that offer online distance education programs, (2) the blurring of distinctions between distance education and campus-based instruction, and (3) the growing importance of inter-institutional collaborations in online distance education. These factors have moved distance education into the mainstream of academic life.

Expansion of Distance Education

With the advent of online learning, the number of institutions engaged in distance education has increased dramatically, especially among public institutions and the largest institutions of all types. Allen and Seaman (2006) report that more than 96 percent of the largest colleges and universities (those with more than 35,000 total enrollments) offered some online courses in 2006; about two-thirds of those institutions had fully online programs. The impact has been greatest on doctoral/research institutions, more than 80 percent of which had some online offerings (courses or programs) in 2006 (p.2). This expansion can be attributed to several factors. First, the ubiquity of the World-Wide Web has greatly lowered the cost of entry for institutions allowing many institutions to enter the field by focusing on smaller, targeted programs and student populations. Second, online learning provides for a level of student-student and student-faculty interaction that makes it

attractive as a way to extend the impact of graduate degrees and post-baccalaureate certificates. Third, the adult learner has become a more important constituent for higher education because of changing demographics (smaller numbers in the 18-to-22-year-old cohort). Fourth, globalization has increased pressure to prepare the current workforce to compete in a knowledge-based economy. These factors have made online distance education a strategic tool for large colleges and universities, bringing into the mainstream what once was a peripheral activity.

Blurring Distinctions Between Distance Education and Campus-Based Education

Unlike earlier forms of distance education, online learning is also finding its place campus-based instruction. Many campus-based curricula now include three types of courses using online instruction: (1) fully online courses, (2) hybrid courses that use online components to significantly reduce the need for classroom meetings, and (3) traditional courses enhanced with web-based components. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) has worked with more than 30 institutions to demonstrate how online learning can improve both the cost-efficiency and instructional effectiveness of courses on campus (Twigg, 2005, p. 34). At the same time, institutions are also mixing campus-based and distant students in the same online classes. Other institutions are experimenting with “blended” degree programs that mix face-to-face courses with online courses in order to better serve commuting and adult students in their local communities.

New Academic Collaborations

Just as online learning is blurring the traditional distinctions between distance and resident instruction, it is blurring the traditional boundaries that define the academic community. Institutions are using online learning to collaborate to serve both distant adult learners and traditional campus-based students. One example of inter-institutional collaboration for on-campus students is CourseShare, an initiative of the U.S. Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), comprising twelve major public research universities. Founded in December 2005 by the CIC Deans of Liberal Arts & Sciences, its

goal is to use online learning technologies to develop a voluntary, systematic method of sharing courses across the curriculum to enhance access to specialized graduate and low-enrollment offerings for all participating CIC universities and their students. Initially, the project has focused on less commonly taught languages, cultural and area studies, and other specialized seminars in the social sciences and humanities (<http://www.cic.uiuc.edu/programs/CICCourseShare/index.shtml>). The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA), a collaboration among eleven state land grant universities, is taking a different approach. This Alliance is developing online graduate programs that use the academic resources of all members to serve students throughout the multi-state region (<http://www.gpidea.org/alliance/index.html>).

Impact on Academic Policy

The above-described changes also have stimulated change in academic policies. Most colleges and universities operate on longstanding policies that assume that students are co-located with their instructors and with support services (registration, advising, libraries, etc.). The expansion of online learning requires that institutions remove geography as a defining factor in their relationship with students—that institutions adjust their policies to assume that students are not necessarily co-located with faculty members and academic services. In many institutions, where distance education is segregated into a separate continuing education unit, this traditional separation is no longer valid. Faculty members, for instance, simultaneously teach on-campus and distant students in the same online course. As the blurring of distinctions between distance education and campus-based education continues, the traditional administrative distinctions are being reconsidered.

Implications for the Administration of Online and Distance Education

The rapid expansion of online distance education has created many new administrative models for distance education. Just as there were multiple starting points for online learning innovations, there is now a diverse array of administrative arrangements. However, whether the innovation began in a Continuing Education unit, in the Information Technology unit, or in a

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