Distance Education Success Factors

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INTRODUCTION

While effective distance education has been practiced and studied for centuries, it has been in just the last decade that networked digital technology has been employed. Technologies and teaching techniques continue to evolve, and the options continue to expand, emphasizing the need for information that will assist distance education planners and participants in making decisions that will result in optimal learning experiences.

BACKGROUND

The process of developing and implementing effective distance education happens in an iterative cycle. Broadly considered, the three stages in the cycle are (1) procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals; (2) delivery of instruction using the best practices from education, business, and research; and (3) analysis of the results of distance education to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the Resources-Practices-Results (RPR) cycle continually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages. Each stage requires participation of all stakeholders, including students, instructors, support and design professionals, administrators, and the community. The success factors discussed in each stage are based on decades of research and experience with learners from professions, higher education, and K-12 education (Barker, 1999; Bruce et al., 2000; Cavanaugh, 2001; Educational Development Associates, 1998; Fredericksen et al., 2000; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Mantyla, 1999).

THE RESOURCES PHASE OF THE RPR CYCLE

The resources required to sustain a quality distance education program exist to support students, faculty, and the program or institution toward achieving the goal of effective and appropriate learning. Responsive and flexible human resources, knowledge, skills, policies, procedures, and technical infrastructure enable quality prac-

tices and contribute to quality results. Procurement, development, and adaptation of resources are ongoing processes.

Institutional and Program Resources

To provide a vigorous quality distance education program, an institution begins with a policy that values distance education as an endeavor that integrates seamlessly with the institution's mission and goals. In creating a strategic plan, distance education administrators and instructors engage in continuous dialogue with a broad range of stakeholders in specifying quality benchmarks (Vaughan, 2000). The strategic plan is a financial and philosophical commitment that gives direction to personnel who make specific decisions regarding program implementation. It is a commitment to team support for distance educators and students, technology led by the program's current and future goals, and the development of program standards. Course developers and instructors need target standards to guide course design and delivery. As a partner to the standards, program review procedures must be developed, implemented, and revised frequently to ensure that all components of the program meet standards, and to ensure that the standards contribute to program goals.

Administration of a quality distance education program depends on clear and accurate communication to students. Qualified instructors and support staff must be recruited; they must be provided with development opportunities related to instruction, content knowledge, and technical skill; and they must receive feedback on their teaching. Qualitative input about student performance, satisfaction, and success is at least as important as quantitative data such as enrollment, costs, utilization of technology, and hiring rates. The elements of the comprehensive program evaluation process should be communicated to all stakeholders in advance, and the results should be reported completely and efficiently.

Faculty and Course Support Resources

Qualified and experienced distance education instructors are likely to have the desired attitudes and understanding

of the distance education teaching and learning process. For faculty members to succeed in distance education, they need to be supported with accurate and complete information and training in order to develop their skills and understanding. Successful distance educators understand the distance learning environment and the options that exist for instruction.

In support of the design and delivery of quality courses, institutions are responsible for providing training and resources for instructors. Instructors need continual access to the physical resources and human support that will enable development of high quality teaching materials. The best distance learning courses use complete and up-to-date materials to increase the information literacy of students, while allowing opportunities for creative expression and mastery of concepts.

Student Support Resources

The focus of distance education is the students, whose work is made better when they receive well-designed instruction in a well-planned program. For students to maximize the time and effort they spend on their learning, they must minimize the time and effort they spend on solving non-academic problems and on seeking answers. Some students need hands-on technical training using the tools employed in courses and using general learning tools such as libraries and information archives. As students begin the work of learning, they need continual access to instructors, libraries, and other student resources. Students must have adequate access to resources appropriate to support their learning. The institution must assess the student's ability to succeed in online learning (SREB 2000).

Technical Resources

Even given the best plan, program, instructors, materials, and students, distance learning does not occur without the technology for delivery. Technology selection decisions involve all stakeholders. A technology plan guides decision makers in considering student outcomes, program goals, and technical feasibility (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2000). Support extends to all users of the technology for all facets of the learning process. Users require assistance with hardware and software uses.

Success Factors for the Resources Phase

- Institutional policy that values distance education
- Strategic plan for delivering distance education to students

- Stakeholder analysis to determine needs of graduates
- Financial commitment that gives direction regarding program implementation
- Team support for distance educators and students
- Appropriate technology infrastructure
- Program standards to guide course design and delivery
- Program review to ensure that all components of the program meet standards and to ensure that the standards contribute to program goals
- Effective communication of policies and expectations to students
- Student services: information, advising, orientation, and security
- Information privacy
- Qualified, experienced staff and faculty
- Community involvement in the program's goals, policies, and outcomes
- Information provided to faculty about teaching in the distance learning environment
- Instructor release time for course development
- Instructor training in distance education pedagogy and technology
- Course design and delivery assistance
- Well-designed and appropriate learning materials
- Student orientation and training
- Student access to learning resources and instructors
- Technical support for instructors and students
- Technology plan to communicate goals to all users

THE PRACTICES PHASE OF THE RPR CYCLE

With the right resources in place, the stage is set for dramatic distance learning performance. At this point, the spotlight shifts from the institution to the instructor. Quality distance teaching begins with the careful design of courses, materials, and learning activities. Next, the instructional practices employed during instruction will aim at developing independent learners with the ability to transfer their learning to novel situations. Throughout the course, effective communication and community building are essential foundations for all events.

Course Design Practices

Course design is a series of decisions regarding objectives and the most effective methods to ensure that students accomplish the objectives. Distance course design requires the methods to be effective in a technology-mediated environment. The requirements of the cur-

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