

Chapter 16

Quality Assurance for Online Programs: Roles, Responsibilities, and Leadership Styles of Higher Education Administrators

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ABSTRACT

Roles of administrators are often overlooked when discussing the quality of online education. Administrators have long asserted the pivotal influence on school policies, faculty members' morale, and learning atmosphere. This chapter examines the challenges administrators face in ensuring the quality and viability of online programs. In the chapter, we suggest that the responsibilities of an effective higher education administrator encompass roles as strategic planner and manager, effective motivator, aggressive promoter, and strong supporter of others. We also put forth recommendations for administrators that might help them improve the quality and success of online programs.

INTRODUCTION

With the mounting pressure for continued training of those in the workforce as well as the parallel requests for more convenient and flexible forms of learning delivery for traditional as well as non-

traditional college students, online and blended learning programs in higher education are rapidly expanding (Bonk & Graham, 2006). At the start of the twenty-first century, higher education administrators are facing multi-faceted challenges. Among the more prominent of these issues are increasing student enrollment, growing global competition as well as opportunities, demands

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for greater integration of emerging technologies, and increasing demands from the workplace. At the same time, administrators are being asked to provide more affordable and increasingly higher quality learning opportunities for students. Not surprisingly, many stakeholders remain apprehensive over the quality of online and blended learning compared to traditional face-to-face education (Chua & Lam, 2007).

Administrators should realize that if the quality of online education declines, online programs will not evolve into the “cash cow” venue they dream about. The myriad forces of a fast changing society with never-ending waves of technology, as well as changing student populations and associated expectations necessitate that higher education administrators embrace those challenges and embark on new leadership directions. However, many administrators often are not aware of the impact they have on creating a positive culture and making changes in online programs (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative for administrators to realize the roles they play in new online initiatives and the responsibilities they must accept to ensure the quality of the institution’s online programs. Suffice it to say, it is vital today to expect the types of leadership skills higher education administrators need to exercise to be effective.

ADMINISTRATORS AS STRATEGIC PLANNERS AND MANAGERS

A host of factors and pressures have had a profound influence on how institutions of higher education are now managed (Yielder & Codling, 2004). For example, many such institutions are experiencing a significant shift from a collegial to a managerial structure. Neave and Van Vught (1991) depict three key features for managerialism in higher education institutions. These components include: (a) the increasing influence of external stakeholders (e.g., the government), (b) a strong emphasis on

strategic planning at an institutional level, and (c) the adoption and adaptation of corporate management concepts and techniques. The managerial environment requires higher education administrators to take active roles in strategically planning and managing online programs. Strategic planning is “an essential management activity where high quality can be expected” (Kettunen, 2008, p. 323). When effective, it includes the integration of the institution’s mission, an inventory of available resources, a financial and market assessment of various programs, and an academic evaluation of those programs (Berge & Schrum, 1998).

According to McKenzie, Ozkan, and Layton (2005), to make online programs successful, administrators need to understand the importance of planning, implementation, and quality control. When planning and managing online programs, administrators might consider techniques that are aligned with quality online learning. Alley (2001) suggests the following specific techniques:

1. Encouraging faculty members to design Web courses for knowledge construction—not just the transmission of information.
2. Requiring faculty members to develop more detailed online course syllabi which include timetables, learning tasks, learning outcomes, and associated course management and completion information.
3. Planning for online and remote assessment sites involved in formative and summative course assessments.
4. Accommodating varied teaching styles among online faculty members and the varied learning styles among the students in these online environments.
5. Promoting social interaction between faculty members and students. (p. 12)

When planning and implementing online programs, higher education administrators will be faced with challenges such as pedagogical changes, institutional issues, and changing orga-

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