

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

The need for qualified distance education administrators is growing, mirroring the growth and success of e-learning programs. The role of distance education administrator requires specific competencies that, once developed, will qualify one to address the challenges facing distance education. This paper identifies the competencies and knowledge areas that are most important for administrators to develop. It also examines techniques and strategies that administrators can use to successfully build and maintain an e-learning program that serves the needs of the learning organization and, more importantly, the students.

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Introduction

Distance education in the form of e-learning continues to demonstrate that it is a viable alternative to traditional classroom-based education. Research shows that learners in distance education learn as much and perform as well on tests as students in traditional classrooms. What was once considered an experimental trip into technology-based education is now becoming part of the establishment. "Open and distance learning is approaching a state of acceptance within mainstream education and training that will in the future make it part of the repertoire of most educational institutions" (Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999, p. 17). Simultaneously, distance learning is becoming more widely accepted in the corporate sector. Organizations are adapting to accommodate the growth of distance learning, and recruiters and hiring managers are warming to the idea of online degrees (Howell, 2003). These signs seem to point to an ongoing period of growth in demand for e-learning.

As a result of this growth, academic institutions and other learning organizations will need qualified administrators managing their distance education programs. Education has always needed administrators, but the fast-paced growth of e-learning has complicated the task of traditional education administration. E-learning is rooted in rapidly evolving technologies, an element that traditional administrators are not accustomed to managing. E-learning also caters to a diverse, geographically dispersed student population. Once again, traditional education administrators are not accustomed to providing adequate support services for a growing group of diverse, geographically dispersed students. These new administrative challenges can best be met by administrators who possess four traits: they have developed a specific set of competencies that qualify them to manage distance education programs; they understand the learning theories

that support distance education; they have the ability to effectively manage change; and they are able to guide their organization toward a future that is being shaped by advancing technology.

Important Competencies for Distance Education Administrators

According to the International Board of Standards for Training and Performance Instruction, a competency is "a knowledge, skill, or attitude that enables one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment" (International Board of Standards for Training and Performance Instruction [IBSTPI] 2003). Professions such as doctor, lawyer, and accountant have long been recognized as elite professions largely because of the extensive, universally recognized competencies that must be developed for one to practice in those fields. The field of distance education administration might never be defined or recognized as clearly as one of the "elite" professions, but universities and organizations like IBSTPI and the American Society for Training & Development have worked to identify and define specific competencies for the distance learning profession. By acknowledging and developing these competencies, administrators can prepare themselves to address some of the common obstacles facing distance learning programs: lack of technology infrastructure, lack of expertise, lack of strategic planning and coordination, and lack of support during and after implementation (Williams et al., 1999).

The American Society for Training & Development's competency model identifies three areas of foundational competencies that the organization believes all learning professionals should develop: interpersonal competencies, business/management competencies, and personal competencies. Within each area are specific competencies, all of which can be directly applied to the role of distance education administrator. The interpersonal competencies identified by the

model are building trust, communicating effectively, influencing stakeholders, leveraging diversity, and networking and partnering. The business/management competencies are analyzing needs and proposing solutions; applying business acumen; driving results; planning and implementing assignments; and thinking strategically. The personal competencies are demonstrating adaptability and modeling personal development (American Society for Training & Development [ASTD], 2004). Each of these competencies could be analyzed further and the value of each one explained, but given the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to simply identify them and say that a distance education administrator should possess some measure of all of these competencies.

A study of 15 distance learning experts conducted by Peter E. Williams (2003) identified the following skills as "very important" to possess in support of a distance education implementation: leadership, change agent abilities, interpersonal skills, communication skills, managerial skills, budgeting skills, marketing skills, strategic planning skills, policy-making skills, and knowledge of education theory. Ideally, a distance education administrator must possess knowledge in all of these areas. The same study also identified thirteen distinct roles that support the implementation and management of distance education programs including instructional designer, trainer, instructor/facilitator, technology expert, graphic designer, media publisher/editor, evaluation specialist, librarian, and support staff. A good program administrator should be aware of the duties of all of these roles and should understand how to properly staff them.

Understanding the competencies identified by professional organizations and distance education experts is important, but it is equally important to understand the skills and abilities employers look for in a director of distance education. An informal study of Internet job postings

revealed that employers are seeking candidates who can effectively build relationships and manage people; apply sound project management and strategic planning skills; lead change; analyze customer needs and react accordingly; consult partners and clients on the use of e-learning technology; create and implement course development processes; and negotiate effectively. In addition, employers want an administrator who is familiar with current e-learning technologies, platforms, offerings, and trends.

When all of the expectations are totaled, it seems clear that a distance education administrator must possess a broad range of people skills, business skills, and technology skills with an underlying knowledge of educational theory. The level of expertise needed in each area will probably depend a great deal on the organizational setting in which the administrator is working.

Learning Theories That Support Distance Education

To be successful in an educational setting, an administrator must have an understanding of learning theories that support distance education. One such theory is Knowles's theory of andragogy. It advocates the idea that courses must have clear descriptions, learning objectives and timelines (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). An administrator can apply this theory by planning courses to last a specific length of time, usually measured in hours or weeks depending on the type of program. Modules within a course should begin with specific learning objectives that focus the students' attention on what they are expected to learn throughout the course.

A second theorist, Perraton, advocates the use of a multimedia program over one that uses a single medium, asserting that the use of multimedia promotes more effective learning.

Perraton also states that distance learners must receive feedback and engage in activities other than reading, watching, and listening (Simonson et al., 2003). To apply these theories, an administrator could plan a program that includes a mix of video, audio, print materials, and interactive components. The program could incorporate constructive feedback for each student from a live instructor or from some kind of automated learning agent. It could also incorporate the use of exercises and activities to reinforce key concepts and to break the monotony of what would otherwise be an almost entirely receptive learning experience.

Holmberg's theory of distance education covers many important aspects of learning that administrators should consider. These aspects include the importance of student interaction with course content, the impact of emotions and motivation on learning, and the characteristics of a distance learning system that impact its overall effectiveness (Simonson et al., 2003).

Distance education has often been criticized because the interaction that occurs between teachers and students in a traditional classroom is allegedly absent in an online learning environment. According to Keegan's theories, steps should be taken to reintegrate the act of teaching with the distance learning environment (Simonson et al., 2003). For example, the presenter in a video lecture could use a conversational style that attempts to emulate interpersonal communication, and students could be supplied with handouts that would help them take notes during the lecture as they would normally do in a traditional classroom. Another approach could incorporate the use of a synchronous virtual classroom to provide greater opportunities to merge teaching acts with learning acts. A distance education administrator should be aware of these and other approaches that can be used to optimize the overall learning experience for students.

An administrator should understand how behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist learning theories can be applied in distance learning. To support a behaviorist approach, course materials should be sequenced to promote learning, from simple to complex, known to unknown, or knowledge to application. In addition, learners should be given feedback that indicates how well they are doing, and they should be tested to determine whether or not they have achieved the established objectives. For a cognitivist approach, the program could be designed to present students with questions before each lesson to encourage the recall of existing knowledge. The pre-lesson questions would help learners apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information to promote higher-level learning. In addition, online learning materials would be designed to accommodate different learning styles and different ways of processing information. To apply constructivist strategies, an administrator would plan a program that offers interactive online instruction so the learner takes the initiative to learn and interact with other learners and the instructor. Collaborative and cooperative learning could be used (Ally, 2004). Learners would be given time and opportunity to reflect on what they had learned. Lessons would include examples that students could relate to, such as assignments and projects that allow them to apply and personalize what they learned (Ally, 2004; Williams et al., 1999).

Learning Models

An administrator should understand various learning models that can be applied to distance education. Four learning models described by Simonson et al. (2003) are linear, branched, hypercontent, and learner-directed. Each of these models has specific characteristics that impact not only the learner, but also the entire learning organization. An administrator must be aware of these characteristics and their effects so the most appropriate model can be chosen. Ideally, the choice of model would be based solely on the course content, the needs and

characteristics of the learners, and the desired learning outcomes. In reality, an administrator must also consider the amount of resources available within the learning organization. Choosing a model that cannot be supported by the organization would surely lead to failure. For example, suppose an administrator is managing a distance education program for wilderness firefighters. From a purely educational perspective, the ideal program might be a learner-directed, computerized simulation that enables trainees to choose from a wide range of realistic wildfire scenarios that burn according to variable topographic layouts, weather conditions, and the firefighting tactics employed by the trainee. Trainees would attempt to deal with changing fire conditions to control the fire and minimize acreage burned and/or property damage. Such a program would do an outstanding good job of training firefighters, but the complexity of the program might make designing and developing it too expensive and time-consuming for the learning organization to support. In this situation, an administrator must realize the limitations of the organization and choose a simpler learning model that demands fewer resources to develop and support, such as a linear model.

Administrators must understand how learner characteristics factor into the choice of learning model. When considering the best learning model for a specific group of learners, Clark (2003) places learners into two general categories: novice learners or expert learners. Novice learners have very little prior knowledge of the content and learn more effectively when behavioral strategies or very basic cognitive strategies are used. Anything more complex is likely to overwhelm novice learners. It is important that novice learners are given opportunities to build mental models that they can continue to build upon. Expert learners have a lot of prior knowledge or experience and are able to draw on mental models stored in long-term memory. They can absorb new information and construct new knowledge based on what they already

know. Advanced cognitive strategies and constructivist approaches are better for expert learners because they learn more when they are challenged and when they have more control over the learning experience. If an administrator is unaware of the prevalence of these and other learner characteristics, it is unlikely that the program will satisfy the needs and preferences of the target audience.

Managing Change

Distance education experts have identified the role of change agent as an essential role in the implementation of distance education programs (Williams, 2003). In many learning organizations, the program administrator will be required to serve as the lead change agent. This role may consist of several tasks including identifying technologies, organizational structures, processes, and strategies that need to be changed; developing a plan for change; and inspiring others in the organization to implement and accept the prescribed changes.

Identifying Opportunities for Change

An administrator must be able to determine if and when changes are needed. Consider the fact that distance education often involves the use of hardware, software, and web-based applications that are continuously evolving. When is it beneficial to adopt a new form of technology and at what cost? When is it appropriate to redesign a user interface, and will the work be outsourced or done in house? Technology-related changes are just one example of change opportunities that an administrator must be able to identify. Other examples of changes that might occur are changes to curriculum plans, staffing needs, available funding, and course development processes. Of course, in some instances opportunities for change will present

themselves in an obvious way. Whether the opportunities are obvious or difficult to find, an administrator must be on the lookout for changes that will improve the program.

Managing Change Efforts

While it is true that change is constantly occurring, people are known for resisting change, especially when it impacts them directly. Most people do not object to positive changes, of course, but changes in an organization are often accompanied by uncertainty and a fear of the unknown. Even when people are reassured that changes will bring positive effects, many are skeptical and reluctant to participate in the change effort. The potentially negative effects of change inevitably lead to resistance.

A distance education administrator must be able to overcome resistance and generate support for change efforts that are in the best interest of the learning organization and its students. To successfully initiate change, an administrator must assess the environment and determine the level of resistance to change. The goal is to make individuals interested in change by demonstrating the problems and risks involved with maintaining the status quo. Not performing this first step is a major reason that change efforts fail (Harper, 1989). Administrators can combat the resistance to change by transforming the attitudes of team members from avoidance to acceptance. To accomplish this, administrators should focus on the benefits and opportunities the change will provide; focus on the problems the change will solve; explain how employees will be involved in the solution; demonstrate the new way of doing things to show that the old way is not the only way; and actively involve team members in implementing the change so they become part of the solution (Clark, 1997).

In addition to understanding and following the right steps, administrators must possess an effective leadership style. Studies show that the most preferred leadership style is one that employs high levels of two factors: consideration and initiation of structure. Cushman (1997) explains these factors:

Consideration refers to a leader's regard for the comfort, well-being, status, and contributions of followers. Initiation of structure refers to clearly defining one's own and others' roles and setting clear expectations of performance (Stogdill, 1979). These two dimensions of a leader's functioning toward subordinates were found to be highly correlated with employee turnover and grievance rates, two measures of employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness (p. 36).

Administrators should also be proactive. Proactive leaders are always looking ahead, they accept change as a way of life, they prefer to initiate change rather than be subjected to change, they prefer to influence the environment around them, and they realize that change can be a positive, energizing force. According to Harper (1989), adopting a proactive approach is the best way to handle change because becoming an active participant in change causes less anxiety than being a passive bystander.

Change is disturbing to people when it is done to them, but it can be exhilarating when it is done by them. Managers need to create an environment where the people affected by the change are participants in the process as opposed to being just the recipients of it (p. 10).

Transformative Leadership

A transformative leader uses his or her own values, attitudes, and skills (Rodriguez & Villarreal, 2001) to harness the power of other people and collectively accomplish fundamental

change in an internal group, external group, product, or process (Jahan, n.d.). A transformative leader does not act alone; he or she empowers others to serve a common purpose (Moe, 2004).

Lolly (1996) offers 10 principles of transformative leadership development, all of which can be put to good use by distance education administrators.

1. Let go of things others can do.
2. Encourage initiative, ideas, and risk taking.
3. Ensure that people have goals and know how they're doing.
4. Delegate to challenge, develop, and empower.
5. Coach to ensure success.
6. Reinforce good work and good attempts.
7. Share information, knowledge, and skills.
8. Value, trust, and respect each individual.
9. Provide support without taking over.
10. Practice what you preach.

When an administrator identifies and chooses change opportunities wisely, manages the change effort effectively, and employs a considerate, transformative leadership style, people within the organization can be inspired to participate in change for the good of the learning organization and its students.

Managing the Learning Experience for the Benefit of Students

Administrators should be actively involved in conceiving and shaping the overall structure and configuration of the program. In this way, they become responsible for managing a significant portion of the experience students have during their participation in the program.

Administrators should be able to address issues related to the design of the learning environment, the course content, the level of communication and interaction available to students, academic policies, and the faculty. They should also be able to contribute to a marketing plan designed to attract students. After all, even a well-designed, fully-supported program will fail if it cannot attract students. Ultimately, administrators must be open and responsive to feedback from students and faculty, particularly when the feedback identifies shortcomings that should be improved upon.

Designing the Learning Environment

If the program is web-based, a web site will be the heart of the learning environment. An administrator should consider how the site will look, feel, and function. The key is usability. A learning environment that confuses or frustrates users will inhibit learning, not promote it. Content should be well-organized and easy to access. Extraneous features and functions should be kept to a minimum, and careful consideration should be given to the navigation system, particularly in areas of the site reserved for course content and learning activities. An administrator need not be an accomplished web designer, but one should be able to visualize and oversee the design of a learning environment that is easy to use and conducive to learning.

Course Content

An administrator should be able to help identify what content is needed based on the program's overall goals or desired learning outcomes. Once a range of courses or topics has been identified, the nuts and bolts of the course content can be pulled together by curriculum developers, subject-matter experts, or qualified faculty members.

Communication and Interaction

Administrators need to understand the various types of communication and interaction that can be incorporated given the technology and development resources that are available. Typically, distance education programs incorporate one or more forms of correspondence. For online courses, correspondence via e-mail and message board is essential. These methods of communication provide students and instructors opportunities to engage in discussions and exchange ideas asynchronously, but do not allow for immediate interaction between students, instructors, and the course content.

Another form of communication is prerecorded media such as video files or audio files. This type of communication is ideal for delivering course content. Administrators should consider the benefits of using prerecorded audio or video:

1. The message only needs to be delivered and captured once which makes efficient use of resources (provided that the information being recorded will be relevant and accurate for a reasonable period of time).
2. All students receive the exact same message delivered in the same way. The content of the message and style of delivery do not change each time the message is delivered. This results in an equivalent experience for all students.
3. Students can replay recorded media over and over again until they understand the content. They are not required to absorb everything the first time it is spoken as they would be in a live setting.

Administrators should be aware of authoring tools like Macromedia Flash and Macromedia Authorware that allow the creation of interactive multimedia content. They should also consider the use of applications that enable synchronous communication over the Internet,

but only if the applications allow synchronous sessions to be recorded and archived for playback. These more advanced forms of communication and interaction can significantly enhance the overall learning experience, but administrators must remember that not all students will be able to experience them in exactly the same way because of variations in the performance of personal computers.

Faculty Issues

If teachers or facilitators are needed, administrators must know how to find them, how to evaluate them, and how to prepare them for an online learning environment. Decisions must also be made regarding compensation for instructors, particularly if they are already full-time employees serving in an established role. Many faculty members and administrators are currently debating the specifics of compensation for developing and teaching online courses (Carnevale, 2004).

Attracting Students

Before students can learn anything in a distance education program, some sort of marketing message must reach them and attract them to the program. Although administrators do not need to be well-versed in marketing strategy, they should participate in the planning phase of the marketing effort. There must be a solid plan in place for marketing the program and finding students who will enroll and, hopefully, stick with the program from start to finish. If nothing else, administrators can help by identifying the program's target audience and developing a profile that describes the characteristics of the learners.

Supporting the Needs of Distance Learners

Although administrators may never directly interact with students in a distance education program, many of the decisions administrators make will directly impact every student enrolled in the program. Lowe (1997) identifies three types of support that must be provided for distance learners:

- Institutional – Qualified faculty, quality materials, reliable technology infrastructure, and support staff and resources.
- Instructional – Well-designed courses, regular interaction with faculty or instructors, and assistance from tutors or academic support staff.
- Relational – Encouragement, motivation and moral support.

Administrators play no substantial role in providing relational or instructional support, but their role is crucial when it comes to providing institutional support. Administrators may be directly involved in hiring and managing faculty, decisions about the types and quality of course materials, decisions about technology, and the organization and implementation of departments related to academic support, technical support, sales, marketing, enrollment, and customer service. Whatever their role, administrators must give thought to how all of their decisions and policies impact students.

Academically, administrators should be concerned with the quality and integrity of the educational experience. Whenever necessary or appropriate, administrators must make sure the program complies with all applicable regional, state, and professional accreditation guidelines (American Council on Education, 2000). They must also be concerned with the ability of students to manage their own learning. The majority of students who enroll in distance learning programs come from traditional educational institutions. Unfortunately, traditional classroom

settings tend to promote dependent and passive learning, two attributes that lead to poor academic performance in a distance learning environment. Traditional classrooms often fail to teach skills that enable self-directed learning. Therefore, administrators should actively support an orientation program or academic services department aimed at helping new students acquire and develop the skills they need to succeed at distance learning (Lowe, 1997).

Administrators must look beyond the design and development of the program. They must make sure there is a support structure in place to provide training, technical support, and customer service to learners and instructors. They must always keep in mind that it is very easy for distance learners to walk away from a program if they become dissatisfied.

Forming a Vision of Distance Education in the Future

Clearly, distance education administrators must understand the current state of distance education if they hope to successfully manage a program. To improve the chances of long-term program success, they must also be able to envision trends and developments that will shape the future of distance education.

Distance education will continue to grow and become more prominent in the future than it is today. Current trends that support this idea are a growing demand for higher education, continuing education, and just-in-time education; the globalization of technology; the development of more affordable, flexible, and reliable technology; and the concern that students have for controlling when and where they learn (Williams et al., 1999; Simonson et al., 2003).

Distance education programs will be used to teach all types of content. As much as possible, learners will have the ability to select customized content to suit their needs, but degree-level programs would still be subject to standards set by independent, recognized

accrediting agencies. Technology will continue to evolve until ultra-portable personal access devices (PADs) are affordable, reliable, and accessible (Downes, 1998). These devices will enable users to wirelessly connect to the Internet from almost anywhere. The devices will provide access to voice, video, print, and graphics complete with robust navigational controls. Virtual libraries and vast electronic databases will also be available to students (Goldberg, 2002).

The distance education program of the future will adopt a new educational philosophy in which individual learners must master the course content, not simply receive a passing grade and move on to the next higher level of instruction. In this model, advanced, intelligent software applications and live subject matter experts would be used to tutor individual learners based on the needs of each student. All learners would be able to progress at their own pace toward the goal of mastering the subject. Traditional grades would be abandoned so learners would either earn an A+ or receive no credit. No one would advance to a higher level until the lower level was mastered (Strauss, 1999). Exactly how students would demonstrate mastery of a subject would vary from course to course, but most assessments would be project-based.

This vision for a future education program is based on further advancements in technology. According to Downes (1998), further advancements in technology will enable the way we learn to evolve into a more personalized, customized model. Individual learners, school districts, academic institutions, and corporate training departments are increasingly interested in customized learning opportunities. In the future, e-learning will be an ideal medium to support customization.

Because the learning experience will be more customized and learner-focused, individual learners will be expected to master the material, not simply receive a passing grade before being promoted to the next higher level of instruction. Advanced software applications and networks of

subject matter experts will be used to tutor individual learners. All learners will be able to progress at their own pace toward the goal of mastering the subject. This model will also support a change in how we evaluate student achievement. Traditional grades will be thrown out so learners would either earn an A+ or receive no credit. No one will advance to a higher level until the lower level is mastered. Hardware devices, software, and other new technologies will evolve to become intelligent devices that support this model (Strauss, 1999).

This model has been called ubiquitous learning by Goldberg (2002). "Ubiquitous learning is student-centered and personalized, based on discovery activities. It is both collaborative and self-directed. In a ubiquitous model, students must become adept at information retrieval, management, and synthesis, from a variety of sources." In this model of education, students will have powerful computers that can connect to the Internet with voice, visuals, video, print, and graphs, and they will be wirelessly connected from almost anywhere. Virtual libraries and vast electronic databases will be available to the students. Students will be empowered to make choices and solve their own problems.

This vision of the future will also be supported by an underlying shift in how we perceive the role of education in our lives. "Technology and globalization have changed the way we do business; as a result, we have seen the emergence of a lifelong learning culture, one in which education allows us to keep pace with change. Moreover, it goes beyond extending our notion of education from four years to a lifetime. In fulfilling the expectation for lifelong learning that it created, technology changes both the ways in which we learn and the ways in which we conceive of the learning process" (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the primary goal of a distance education administrator should be to create and maintain an environment that offers students everything they need to enjoy a positive, successful learning experience. In today's e-learning climate, educational value consists of more than just good content and a functioning web site. Depending on the specifics of the program, administrators might be expected to provide qualified instructors to facilitate courses, synchronous and asynchronous technology, technical support services, financial aid services, library services, and other forms of customer support. Administrators might need to drive change to help the organization become more efficient, more successful, or improve its ability to serve students. Managing a proper distance education program requires that administrators possess a broad range of skills related to education, technology, business management, change management, marketing, customer relations, and human resources development. By developing skills, techniques, and implementation strategies related to these areas, administrators can ensure that they are qualified to serve the needs of the learning organization and, more importantly, the needs of students.

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