

# *The Distance Educator's Opportunity for Institutional Leadership*

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**his year's 2010 University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) Annual Conference had something in common with the 35 previous meetings of the association I have attended. A consistent theme is that continuing education is facing greater opportunities and challenges than at any other time in history. Perhaps it is our perennial optimism and pro-active natures that keeps this theme alive from year to year—it is clearly a persistent phenomenon of university continuing education.

I have adopted this theme as the basis for this paper, focusing on the unique and identifiable circumstances that are presenting distance educators with unprecedented opportunities to assume greater leadership roles in their parent institutions. These opportunities are largely driven by outside forces acting on institutions of higher education, and by the inherent advantages that distance (and continuing) educators have over others in academia. I will describe these outside forces, list the advantages that we possess, and then identify practical ways in which we can take advantage of this situation.

## EXTERNAL FORCES

I have selected three of the many forces acting today on US higher education institutions as examples from among several more that I could describe that provide distance educators with opportunities: the increasing demand

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for transparency and accountability, the intense competition in higher education, and the rapid development and growing acceptance of new instructional technologies.

*Increased demand for transparency and accountability*

Institutions of higher education worldwide are being bombarded with demands from governments, parents, students, and taxpayers for higher standards and accountability. These demands are pushing institutions toward greater attention to outcome measurement and transparency.

The US federal government, which supports higher education primarily through the distribution of student financial aid, has become concerned about the increasing cost of higher education and has been aggressive in seeking authentic measures of accountability from US institutions, going so far as to threaten to impose its own rules. In answer to this threat, wishing to preserve their own autonomy and avoid the worst of what they consider intrusive and misguided, US institutions have accepted strong, new regulations from the regional accrediting bodies, in which membership is considered "voluntary." A logical extension is the requirement that institutions create and publish "desired student outcomes" (DSOs) for every degree they offer, and establish and publish their results in accordance with their standards. Further, accrediting agencies are requiring these same institutions to map the DSOs into the learning objectives of individual courses in the curriculum.

In addition to rigorous standards, increased accountability, and transparency, accrediting agencies also are demanding processes for continuous improvement. The measurements and results must not only be published, but also must lead to program improvement according to an established procedure.

However, the demands for accountability go beyond those imposed by accrediting agencies. For example, the Texas legislature passed a law requiring instructors in all state public higher education institutions to post a public website for every course they teach. With the exception of medical and dental units, the law requires institutions to make the course syllabus, departmental budget (if available), and curriculum vitae of each regular instructor available on the institution's website for each undergraduate classroom course offered for credit. The information must be available no later than seven days after the academic term begins and must be updated and maintained for two years.

*Increasing competition in higher education*

The higher education marketplace is characterized by increasing competition among institutions—for faculty, students, and financial resources. Globalization is one factor. National governments around the world recognize the economic significance of the “brain drain” and the need to have universities promote economic and workforce development in knowledge-based economies. This national recognition, for instance, has placed Harvard University and UC Berkeley in direct competition with the top Chinese universities for the best faculty.

Another factor is the meteoric rise in the for-profit sector, which not only puts more players in the game but also introduces more aggressive and sophisticated marketing techniques. This comes at a time when public support for higher education is dwindling, forcing public institutions to increase their fees, thus narrowing the gap between the cost of public sector and the for-profit sector alternatives.

Finally, the rise of online education and its promise of greater access to students both expand the potential target market and introduce new competitors to every local market.

*Increased acceptance and rapid introduction of new instructional technologies*

It may seem that higher education has been slow to adopt new instructional technologies, while in fact their introduction has been rapid and widespread. Most US institutions today already utilize advanced technologies to capture and convey content, assess students, and improve the learning process. Video capture has seen the most recent surge, prompted in part by YouTube and iTunes. YouTube recently announced that it had surpassed 300 million downloads of its university-related material.

The Sloan Consortium survey, using results from more than 2,500 colleges and universities nationwide, documents the rapid growth of online education, a form of delivery that depends on and rapidly adopts new instructional technologies. According to the current Sloan C report, “Learning on Demand Report: Online Education in the United States, 2009,” more than 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term, a 17 percent increase over the number reported the previous year. This rate of growth far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population.

Even the most traditional institutions are now either offering or considering offering online education. Recently the University of California

announced it was thinking about offering a full undergraduate degree online (J. Keller and M. Parry, "U. of California Considers Online Classes, or Even Degrees," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 9, 2010).

### **DISTANCE EDUCATOR LEADERSHIP ADVANTAGES**

We have a tradition of being learner-centered, understanding learner motivations, and structuring our programs to serve those motivations. Many of our units are either fully or partially self-supporting, so we have to be sensitive to the needs of our markets by communicating with students about our programs and by offering educational treatments in user-friendly formats that are convenient for our students' busy lifestyles.

In this context we have freed ourselves from the traditional distractions and abstractions of academic freedom that seem to characterize more traditional forms of higher education and raise barriers to openness ("No one should know how I teach my class because they might intrude on me") and accountability ("I have tenure, so don't bother me"). Also, we have been very willing to adopt new and effective instructional technologies and have an internal reputation for technologically-based innovation. And finally, we usually have enough institutional autonomy to experiment with and purchase new technologies.

### **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

External forces are providing us with the opportunity to exercise our existing strengths and unique perspectives. But what should we do to seize this opportunity? Here are four specific activities that we can pursue to gain legitimacy and leadership responsibilities.

#### *Establish a continuous improvement process*

At the heart of leadership is the institutionalization of the continuous improvement process. While individual faculty will continue to produce high-quality educational treatments, institutionalized processes of continuous improvement programs will provide a competitive advantage to those who adopt them.

A key step in the process is to capture learning data. Most course management systems (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) make this possible and easy. Creating a routine and consistent process to mine these data and relate them to specific parts of the learning process is the challenge.

A continuous improvement process will work only if there is something to improve. That is, the learning data must refer back to some “thing” (learning asset) that can be changed. This part of the process in any operation of scale is impossible without some form of database in which to store these assets. In addition to the capacity for storage, the assets must be easily identifiable, retrievable, and modifiable. Establishing a database is thus indispensable for the process. Of course, the database exists to be operated upon so the process must result in actual and measurable changes to the assets. This again involves an institutionally sponsored work flow process that results in improvement.

*Be a leader in the use of new instructional technologies*

Using new instructional technologies effectively is clear evidence that you are a leader in the field and has a symbolic meaning well beyond the actual effect of the technology adopted. Here is a list of suggestions about being a leader in the use of new instructional technology:

- Stay aware of new developments in the field.
- Copy others—quickly.
- Adopt an “evidence-based” approach.
- Perform limited pilot projects.
- Make budgetary provisions.

The first requirement of this suggestion is that you stay alert for new developments in the field. You can learn this from your colleagues at conferences, both in formal sessions and in the hallways or exhibitor booths, and you can stay abreast of the literature in the field. One very good annual report—the “Horizon Report” (<http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2009-Horizon-Report.pdf>)—is particularly aggressive in predicting new developments. For instance, it has predicted for several years that social networking technology and mobile devices would be important to higher education.

Look to early adopters when you learn of a new technology to benefit from their experience. It is usually best to be the “almost early adopter,” so that you can take advantage of the experience of others and perhaps dodge some of the pitfalls.

As you introduce new technology you inevitably will be asked to justify its use and expense. It is therefore a good idea to consider how you will measure the technology’s effectiveness. User satisfaction and scale of use are important metrics. But do not get forced into the comparison game—comparing one technology or delivery system with another leads

to confusion and controversy. The question should be: Is the new technology effective in its own right?

One way to limit exposure on the adoption of new technologies is to use the limited, pilot project approach. Using this experimental approach is consistent with the calls for accountability and transparency described above.

Obviously, introducing new technologies will require some investment and it is prudent to put some money aside for such introductions to ensure success.

#### *Develop an open website*

Developing an open or OpenCourseWare (OCW) institutionally-branded website accomplishes many objectives, all of which contribute to the reputation of the distance educator as a leader. Here are the top 10 reasons to establish and maintain such a site.

1. Public service: Institutions are seeking to stake out some of the high ground that MIT claimed in starting the OCW movement. Clearly, underserved populations, including those in developing countries, are desperately in need of educational materials. Most universities see that providing OCW is consistent with their traditions of public service.
2. Showcase for institutional programs: Universities view OCW as a way to attract favorable scholarly attention to their institutions by showcasing their high-quality instructional programs, offering them for adoption by institutions around the world.
3. Attractiveness to prospective students: Students use OCW to seek information about the format, content, and pedagogical approaches used by an institution.
4. Repository for instructional material: Such a repository allows the sharing and reuse of material and, when open to the wider public, can be the basis for a teaching / learning community.
5. Dissemination of research results: An active OCW site can be a very attractive and effective way of organizing research results for inclusion into the instructional process. OCW's capacity for large-scale, free instruction can be a highly valued dissemination technique.
6. Funding target: While the MIT model focused on degree courses designed for MIT undergraduate and graduate students, the potential for OCW to serve selected and deserving target populations can attract funding from extramural sources.

7. Service to current students: Currently enrolled students of an OCW participating institution can view open courses to decide whether to include them in their courses of study and can refer to them for help in other courses.
8. Staff training and development: Institutions can save time and money by creating training courses and making them highly visible and instantly available on an OCW site. However, even more important are those training programs that may not be mandatory, but are highly desirable, such as training in institutional policies (copyright, research administration, consulting) that are often considered too expensive and inconvenient to conduct in face-to-face settings.
9. Receptivity to OCW-in: The OCW-in movement is based on the fact that offering OCW courses may make the institution and its faculty more receptive to using OCW created in other institutions, thereby increasing quality and reducing costs. US institutions largely overlook this trend.
10. Membership in a world-wide community: By becoming a contributor to the OCW movement, institutions and their faculty become members in a worldwide community of like-minded professionals willing to share their experiences and increasingly organized for their mutual benefit.

*Publicize successes*

Your status as a leader in this area must be communicated and reinforced as frequently as possible (within certain bounds, of course). If nobody knows you're a leader, you aren't a leader.

The first principle in publicizing is to make sure you have the most strategic internal relationships managed. Usually the most important relationships are those with campus units that might view your operations as a threat. Also, it is important that the faculty governance structure (Academic Senate) be involved and informed of your projects. And, of course, it does not hurt to have faculty champions along the way, in addition to the institution's senior management. Internal newsletters, announcements, and regularly scheduled meetings can be used to get the word out internally.

With the internal situation covered you should consider the strategic placement of information and stories about your successes in external

publications. Often these help confirm internally the importance and impact of what you are doing. For instance, an OCW website and the posting of free material online provide a constant source of positive publicity for the institution. This source of good public relations should be exploited frequently and then noted internally.

Finally, don't be afraid to toot your own horn and to be a personal representative of all the good things that are going on in your units.

## **CONCLUSION**

Higher education around the world is faced with several imperatives—trends that will inevitably have a significant impact on institutions, learners, and teachers. Globalization (resulting in increased competition, emphasis on economic development, increased communication) and technology (online learning, information access) are two of these imperatives—with many consequences. Fortunately distance educators are at the nexus of these imperatives and what we do now, over the next few years, will determine our role in the institutional future that is being defined for us. Act now, or watch these imperatives roll over us. 🌐